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What Was the Primary Use of 'Low Side Windows'

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WHAT WAS THE PRIMARY USE OF "LOW SIDE WINDOWS."

By ILTYD GARDNER.

AS several utterly different things have occasionally been called by this name, and as a gentleman who certainly would feel insulted if I called him anything but "a learned antiquary" recently told me that a large, glazed, two-light, late perpendicular window, north-west of his chancel arch was one, because it was at the side of the church and lower in the head than its neighbours (having been under the Rood Loft), I should perhaps begin by a definition.

By "Low Side Windows" I mean those smallish openings of which the distinguishing features are, that they are nearly always quite near the ground, that they were not originally glazed, that they were closed by a wooden shutter with iron hinges and fastenings, on the inside opening inwards, and often covered by an iron grating on the outside, were often below a larger window, were generally parallelograms, and most frequently placed just inside the screen at the south-west corner of the chancel.

Teste M. H. Bloxam (Gothic Architecture 11th ed., vol. ii, p. 127) and the observation of myself and my friends the whole bulk of these windows are of the 13th and early 14th centuries, and we also find most of them in small parish churches, most of which have no *original* doorway near their eastern end.

Many theories as to the purposes for which these windows were made have been most seriously advanced. Of these I will recapitulate the most important.

1 That they were for the purpose of enabling pilgrims, lepers, or other passers-by to view the altar, or the elevation of the Host.

- 2 For the watching of the paschal lights.
- 3 To enable the priest to watch for belated funerals.
- 4 To place lights in to scare evil spirits from the churchyards.
- 5 To give light to the person reading the lessons.
- 6 That they were " Offertory windows."
- 7 For distributing alms through.
- 8 For the communicating of lepers or others suffering from contagious diseases.
- 9 For the ringing of the Sanctus Bell.
- 10 For ringing a bell to give warning of the arrival of the priest.
- 11 That they were emblematic of the wound in Our Saviour's side.
- 12 For excommunicated persons to do penance at.
- 13 (And this has for long been the most generally accepted opinion) that they were for the purpose of hearing the confession of all comers, often called " Outward Confession."
- 14 For the Thurible to be passed through so as to avoid the fumes caused by lighting the incense with charcoal.

Destructive criticism is ever easy, but as (while quite believing that some of these windows may have occasionally been used for several of these purposes) I cannot believe that either of them was their main or primary purpose, I must give the reasons for my disbelief.

Numbers 1 and 2 are utterly disposed of by the facts that, owing to the thickness of the walls and the situation of most of these windows, there are very few indeed from which the altar or even the *inpace* can be seen; to add that most of them are far too low and a few far too high to be conveniently looked through, is only " to wound the slain."

Numbers 3, 4, and 5 are equally affected by the very inconvenient position, and surely a *glazed* window would

be more suitable for looking through in either direction, for shewing a light through, or for giving light to a reader than an opening normally closed by a wooden shutter, while I know of no evidence that the "scaring" light was ever an English custom.

Paley, the authority for number 6, thought that these windows were for offering food or the like to recluses, but these were always shut in separate chambers or "anchor holds" (often over the porch), and clearly no such chambers existed on either side of most "low side windows."

Number 7, that they were for the distribution of alms, was suggested by a writer in the *Ecclesiologist* in 1847. The editors were even then against him, and the size of the gratings outside some of these windows, and once more the depth through the wall and their situation render this theory quite untenable.

As to number 8, if their main purpose had been for communicating anyone through, surely they would have been alongside the altars and at a convenient height for passing the elements to a kneeling communicant. The late rector of Merthyr told me that "Somewhere in England," he had seen an ancient wall-painting of a priest holding a chalice and passing a sponge on a reed to a communicant through one of these openings. The rector promised to send me the reference to this, but failed to do so. It is evident that this priest did not practice "the communion of one kind;" but granting that there is such a picture it would not shew that this was the main use of these windows. As a rule they were the *only* openings through the chancel-wall, and would therefore be used for any purpose for which an opening was necessary.

The small size of some of the outer gratings (at Hartley, Kent only 5 inches by 5 inches) added to the situation and wall-depth, quite precludes all ideas of bell-ringing, whether from without or within, by rope or by hand.

It is, of course, well established that the whole body of

our ancient churches was regarded as symbolical of the body of our Lord upon the cross ; hence came our cruciform churches and the "weeping" chancels, so common in the west, symbolical of the drooping of His head ; but the wound suggested in number 11 was in our Saviour's *side* ; and, if we accept the evidence of our more ancient altar-slabs, some of which were having their consecration "wound" marks cut, at the very dates these windows were being made, low down upon His side. Is it, then, credible that our forefathers made openings in the *chancels*, *i.e.* in what were symbolical of the head and neck as emblematical of this wound ?

As to number 12, if we had any evidence that lying prone in the churchyard-grass was an ordinary penance, this would be, at least, possible ; but all our information is to the contrary.

The popular theory as to these window being confessionals was, so far as I am aware, first put forward by "Plantagenet" writing to the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1844, replying to a letter from E.J.C. (Mr. E. J. Carlos) enquiring as to the now well-known letter from Thomas Bedyll to Thomas Cromwell, which complains of certain irregularities in confessions taken by the friars, and goes on, "We think it best that the place wher these Frires have been wont to hire outtward confessions of al commers at certen tymes of the yere be walled up and that use to be fordoen for ever."

Plantagenet, in the beginning of his article draws the incorrect conclusion that these confessions were called "outtward" because the penitents were placed *outside* the church during confession, "to distinguish them from places within the church," and that what Bedyll meant were "low side windows." But, as Plantagenet seems to admit in the same article, and J. R. writes in the same magazine in the same year, "Outtward" confessions were those of the public, as distinguished from those of the

friars themselves, and, in fact, were and are *always* taken *within* the body of the church, though sometimes in recesses or the like ; and J.R. thought that it was entirely to do away with these and their memory that Bedyll wished them walled up.

Plantagenet's view was, therefore, based on an error as to the meaning of a word, but, notwithstanding this, was afterwards accepted and enlarged upon by Mr. Carlos in the same magazine, and in 1847 was adopted by the Cambridge Camden Society (who had before that been supporters of the paschal-light theory and had christened these windows *Lychnoscopes*), and most modern writers seem to have followed these authorities.

But Bedyll wrote of the Dominican Friars who had in 1265 been empowered to hear confessions without the consent of the parish-priests, and I do not personally know of a single "low side window" in a friars' church, while there are very few in collegiate churches of any kind. Mr. Carlos admits that he has only found them in parochial churches, but suggests that ordinances would soon be made for these also to be blocked up. However, no such ordinances exist, and we all know that the interference of the monks and friars in this very matter of confession was one of the main causes of the constant struggle between them and the parochial clergy, so that it is beyond belief that the friars would be allowed to use the parish churches for this purpose.

Further, the very high situation of a few of these windows (at Ely and Winchester, ten feet above ground) and the very low situation of most of them, render the confessional theory impossible, and most of its leading supporters seem to have tried to deal gently with this difficulty. Bloxam says they are "at no great distance from the ground," and Parker, that they are "always very near the pavement," while the Cambridge Camden Society's book, *English Ecclesiology*, puts it that, "they are never too

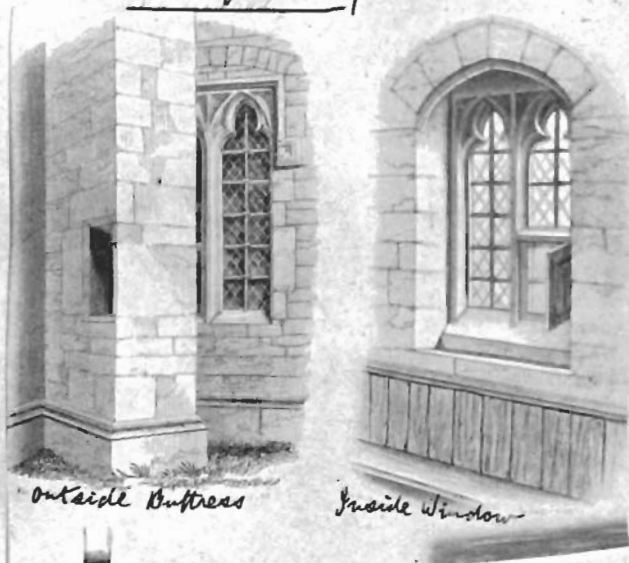
high from the ground to admit of the shortest person looking in from the outside." Had they said that a large proportion of these windows are too low for any penitent who does not confess lying upon his stomach, and a few too high to be reached without a ladder, they would have been more accurate; and the crowning absurdity is reached when they, on p. 206, call to their aid St. Mary's, Othery, for, as reference to the accompanying pictures and plan will shew, the angle between the tower-buttress and this "low side window" is so narrow that no one can possibly stand in it, and it is, therefore, not only quite impossible that it can have been made for any of the purposes numbered 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or 14, but also it would be most unsuitable for numbers 3 and 4; while if used for confession the penitent would have to shout his sins through a passage some 9 feet long, midway through which is an opening to the churchyard. The squint to the south transept of this church is, though near, quite independent from this "low side window."

In addition to all these arguments comes the striking fact that very few "low side windows" were made during the perpendicular period, during the whole of which confession was most regularly practised.

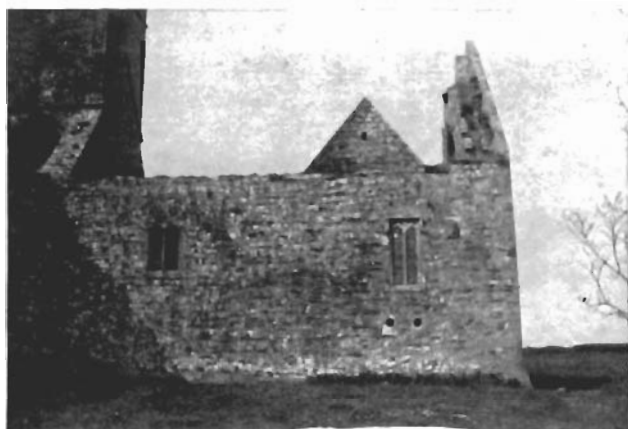
For these reasons I think that although *some* of these windows may have, as such openings as the round holes at the back of the sedilia at Roserk and the foliated two-light opening in the same situation (but in an inner wall) at St. Mary de Crypt, Gloucester, probably were, had been made or altered to serve as confessionals, that cannot have been their main or primary purpose.

All the arguments for this usually accepted view seem to have been founded upon Plantagenet's mistake as to the meaning of "outward confessions" for though *English Ecclesiology* does endeavour (at p. 202) to support this by what they themselves call "an obscure tradition" that these windows are confessionals, that very book at p.

St Mary Othery



OUTSIDE AND INSIDE VIEWS, AND PLAN, OF LOW SIDE WINDOW AT S. MARY OTHERY.



ROUND HOLES AT BACK OF SEDILIA; ROSERK ABBEY, MAYO.

197 says, with much truth, "Whatever slit, recess, hole, or opening, of any kind occurs in ancient churches is almost sure to be traditionally known as a confessional."

Support for the confessional theory is also drawn from the fact that many of these windows have been blocked up "anciently." But we have ample evidence that a number of north doors and other openings were also blocked up even before Bedyll's time, the simple reason being that, as glazing became common and houses grew warmer, our forefathers dreaded draughts.

Many of the blockings, however, are *not* ancient, and a fair instance is the church of Rhosilly in Gower, which, when I visited it had a perfect "low side window" only reaching about a foot above the ground, with its ancient shutter-hinges and bolt complete. Alas! when I wrote to the rector for a photograph and measurements to illustrate this article he replied: "I have never heard of such a window, the church was restored and modernised about 30 years ago; no wooden shutter is available now, nor trace of any;" and this piece of ruthless vandalism was perpetrated in the nineties!!

Reasons already given, with the depth of some of the walls and sizes of some of the gratings, render the charcoal-fume theory (number 14) quite untenable; but I think this suggestion probably leads us towards the truth.

As I have already stated, the whole bulk of these windows are of the Early English or beginning of the Decorated periods, and certainly most of them are in our smaller parish churches, which, in the 13th and early 14th centuries had no doors near their eastern ends, even if they have them now. Now, in the Saxon and Norman periods many of the windows were always unglazed, and in the perpendicular period, casements in glazed windows were quite common, but in the periods to which most "low side windows belong, the glazing of church windows had practically become universal; but casements in them were

certainly unusual, indeed I have never seen one. Therefore, daring as it may be to start a brand-new theory on such a subject, I venture to suggest that these shuttered openings were made for ventilation.¹

In support of my view I urge that, as these windows were made to open, it must have been for the purpose of passing *something* through, yet their gratings and situation are all against that something being solid ; while, if to-day we wished to ventilate a chancel by a single simple opening we could hardly do it better than by one low down on the south side, far enough west to prevent it from blowing direct upon the altar candles, or a celebrating priest.

It has been suggested to me that our forefathers cared little for ventilation ; but at the dates suggested they lived much in the open air, most of the windows in their own houses and castles were unglazed, and such fireplaces as they possessed had very lofty openings, therefore, it is clear that they would feel the ' stuffiness ' of small churches without window openings even more than we do, and when we add that incense before the altar " in a standing pot " and fired by charcoal was then universal, some means of admitting fresh air to the east end of the churches must have been a necessity.

¹ Alas, there is nothing new under the sun ; since I wrote this article my attention has been called to the fact that a writer in 1847 mentioned the ventilation idea. He, however, dismissed it in three lines on the ground of its "evident improbability" (with which view I quite disagree), and does not seem to have in any way considered the most important question of the periods of these windows. I am sorry to have claimed that my theory was brand-new ; but, though I have often publicly discussed it, I never heard the contrary until now, and am still, after years of study, convinced that the ventilation theory is the right one.—I.G.