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A Seating Plan for North Nibley Church in 1629

by J. Popplewell
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By JOYCE POPPLEWELL

Introduction

When a descendant of John Smith of Nibley married a Shropshire heiress in the late 18th century, the Gloucestershire estate was sold and a vast documentary accumulation dating from Elizabethan times transferred to Condover Hall, near Shrewsbury. Most of this material was acquired by Gloucester City Library in 1922 and is included in the Gloucestershire Collection.¹ Amongst some few further documents presented in 1952 is the paper here transcribed.²

Written mainly in the same clear 17th-century hand and endorsed on the back cover 'scat Roomes./ the first draught', this document is something of a rarity. Richard Gough, writing rather later, in 1706, based his *History of Myddle*³ on just such a plan, and another example, for the Somerset parish of Brompton Regis has recently been found.⁴

The Nibley draft is especially rich in detail and provides an unusual range of information. It names some 120 inhabitants, mainly men, who own or occupy the house which entitles them to a seat. Family relationships, earlier owners, names of individual houses which are retained to this day, and the named hamlets (which indicate the dispersed pattern of early settlement in woodland), all are immediately useful.

Much incidental information can also be obtained from this seating plan. For instance, it appears that the church had a stone pulpit; this has vanished, possibly torn out in the Civil War. The 'new Ile', the south aisle in perpendicular style still bearing Grace Smith's monument, is now the oldest part of the building. Pillars mentioned as markers are still *in situ* and enable a reconstruction of the planned seating to be made. If the special 'place to read prayer in' was ever built it has not survived; and the font has been moved at least twice since 1629, the last time being in 1978.

The Smith pew evidently presented a considerable problem. Two versions are given and both attempt to substantiate John Smith's claim to the most prominent position in church whilst encouraging the elderly lord of Pitcourt to release his wainscot seat for re-allocation. The first version draws attention to Smith's expenditure *c.* 1599 for his Warrens Court pew, and now in 1629 for Smallcombe Court, soon to be bestowed on his eldest son John at his marriage.⁵ In his will, made in 1640, John Smith the elder expresses a wish to be buried 'near to the pews or seates by mee hereetofore builded where my selfe wife and family doe sitt'.⁶

Interesting glimpses of social regulation appear. The 'seat for youth' is about to be re-allotted, and bachelors are firmly directed to their seat 'next the wall'. The position of women is not clear. The 'weomens seat' mentioned at the back of the central block is surely quite inadequate for parish needs. Possibly they shared their husband's seat; only James Gibbs' wife is particularly noted as sitting separately. Three named widows are probably copyholders. Pitcourt seat was also formerly used by women awaiting churthing after childbirth.

Multiple property owners in the parish are revealed, led by John Smith with eight houses and closely followed by William Curnock and the Purnells. However, even a cursory study of the

contemporary parish register shows a number of prolific inhabitants who did not qualify for a place. Probably those who lacked status or were not sufficiently wealthy to rent a pew in the nave found seats on the 'formes in the body of the church' or in a gallery, both of which alternatives are known to have been present at a later date.⁷ The same mens' names from both groups are found in *Men & Armour for Gloucestershire*,⁸ compiled in 1608, where social niceties are irrelevant and fitness for military service is the sole criterion.

Amongst the named houses, three arouse particular curiosity. The almshouse is described in considerable detail in earlier documents and it was to be 'maliciously burned to the ground by one of the Almspeople there' on 29 January 1629/30.⁹ Parish registers contain infrequent references to repairs to the churchouse, but of the 'colladg Houses' no explanation has yet been found. None of these buildings survives.

The draft is in booklet form, consisting of ten numbered pages in sequence followed by two without numbers, here designated pages A and B. Seats are arranged in three blocks: the north side with eleven rows, the middle of the church with seven and the south side, the 'new Ile' with nine rows. Each row is subdivided into 'seat roomes' attached by ancient, or former, right to the owner's house. Page A has been replaced by a neater, more coherent version included as page 5. Page B, in two hands, is a scrappy, near-illegible list of applicants with numerous corrections and the whole page is finally struck through, probably after places had been found for them.

The basic text shows many later additions and deletions in the same hand, but using a finer quill. It seems likely that John Smith himself was the main writer. The hand bears comparison with an example shown in *Antiquaries of Gloucestershire and Bristol*.¹⁰ Amendments have been retained for the added interest and information they provide. Deletions are in italics in brackets; abbreviations have been expanded within square brackets, and additions, though sometimes confusing, leave the draft as the writer wished it to appear. Original punctuation, spelling and numbering, the latter often quite wrong, have also been kept.

Transcription

- [p. 1] To what houses each seat Roome in the church of nybley belongeth by ancient usage & custome, taken by Authority from the lord Bishop of the Diocesse. the 23th [*sic*] of August. 1629. And by examinacon and advise, contynued for dyvers monthes after.
- The north side, wherin the stone pulpit is in the wall, begynnyng next the Chancell.
1. The seat called pitcourt seat, is intended to bee united to Pitcourt both for men and weomen, So yt [that] the lord of pitcourt doe disclayme or release all other seates in the church used to that house: the choice wherof is given to him.
 2. In the next seate downwards, towards the stone pulpit, noe house can clayme any ancient seat roome because till of late, it was a seate for youth, And therefore is to bee disposed of & ordered as the p[ar]ish shall please/ (*John ven first*) then 1 henry Hathway then 3 william Archard then (*Thomas may george James thelder*) 2 george James for smalwoods barne & 4 Thomas Dunnyng & 5 Thomas may constable
 3. In the next seate, theis 4 claime ancient seateroomes belongyng to their houses, vz, 1. Christopher the son of Thomas purnell for his house at Hadlyes grene now in the occupation of william purnell./ 2. Thomas purnell of woodmancote for his house at Swyney now in the occupation of Brice wikes the yonger in the third place 3. M[aste]r Smyth for his house at the great greene late in the occupation of David Rogers, and nowe of Roger selman in the 5th place/ 4. Richard Tyndall for the house wherin hee dwelleth, called Hunts Court in the second place. and noe other in this seate. And francis Jobbyns in the 4th place
- [p. 2]
4. In the next seate (which reacheth from the one Ile to the other, theis 8 clayme ancient seat roomes belonging at fforthey wherin hee dwells, somtymes smart, who sits next the wall./ 2 Thomas hill, now one of the churchwardens, for his house in forthey, somtymes Adryan Jobbins./ 3 william Dawe for his house in myllend somtymes Hugh bakers./ 4 william Hopkins for the house in southend, the inheritance of Christopher purnell, somtymes the land of Thomas Curnocke./ And noe other in this seate./ John hyman for goadyngsly in the 5th place
 5. In the next seate theis 5 clayme Ancient Seatroomes belongyng to their houses. vz. I mathew Legg of

weeke for his house there./ 2 Thomas Cole of forthay for his house there./ George Long of fordend for his house there./ 4 william Gybbens for his house at the little grene, now in the occupation of Robert Curnocke./ 5 Gyles Clarke for the house wherin hee dwelleth at the end of the great grene, the inheritance of m[aste]r Jesper Estcourt./ And noe oth[er] in this seate.

- [p. 3] 6. In the next Seate, which is next above the pulpitt, theis 4 clayme Ancient seatroomes belonging to their houses, vz. 1 william Curnocke for the house at the litle grene, wherin hee dwelleth called Burrows Court./ 2 Thomas Trotman for his house in forthey wherin hee dwelleth./ 3 John workeman of fordend for his house there./ 4 John Dunynge of Horend for his house there./ And noe other in this Seate./ In the 5th place is placed John the son of Thomas trotman for Binley house paying 6 l[ibr]ae p[er] an[um] to the church
7. In the next seate which leadeth into the pulpitt their are none that can challenge any seate roomes: which place is reserved by the p[ar]ish to erect a place to read prayer in, aswell for the minister & the clark as for any other Devine that shall come to preach. soe settled./
8. In the next seate, which is next below the pulpit, theis 6 clayme ancient seatroomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. John Baker for his house in Snitend./ 2. nicholas Andrewes for his house in stancombe./ 3. Thomas son of george longe for his house called Tedborrowe./ 4. Arthur Curnocke for his house at snytend./ 5. william purnell of the myll, for his house there sometime in the occupation of Thomas Jobbins./ 6. John Hale for his house late Robert taylors. And noe other in this seate./ thought to bee one too many
9. In the next seate, theis 5 clayme ancient seate Roomes. vz. 1. Adryan Dorny for his house in fordend./ 2. John leigh of wotton for his house in fordend now in the tenure of Arthur neale./ 3. John parsons for his house at (*woodyates by michaelwood*) woodalins well./ 4 william James the yonger, for m[aste]r Smyths house at the bottome of the great greene, called Crokers somtyme Dornyes land./ 5. Anthony may for his house in churchend. And noe other in this seate.
- [p. 4] 10. In the next seate belowe, theis 2 clayme ancient seate roomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. John munday for his house at horend./ 2. Thomas phelps for his house now held by gresyll his widow, who alloweth Thomas butcher to sit there. And noe other in this seate/. 3. Roger selman./ 4. John taylor./ 5. John woodward
11. In the next seate, which is next above the north dore, none but the house in horend called the blacke house wherin Thomas purnell de[ce]ased late dwelled, can clayme any seate roomes: & those that dwell there Richard nelme, Danyell harrison & Robert purnell (*And Edward bosier yt [that] is [illeg] short*) John sherman who hath used to sit there (*also Richard Duswell*) And 5. Robert Dawe./

[p. 5]

The seates in the midst of the church

1. Next to the Chancell is the seate of m[aste]r Smith alone, belonging to the house wherin hee dwelleth called warrens court united to that house 30 years agoe, when himselfe newe built the same, for him selfe, his wife, men & mayd servants, And then released the other seates that formerly belonged to yt [that] house
2. (*In the*) The upper halfe of the next seate, next the former, onely belongeth anciently to pitcourt house, which if m[aste]r Hungerford lord of pitcourt doe release, then is the wainscot seate or pewe form[er]ly mentioned, to bee united to Pitcourt, for man & woman, otherwise that pewe to bee disposed on w[h]ich about 30 years agoe was built at his and ye p[ar]ishon[er]s charge. And in the (*syde*) (*end of the pillar*) end of that seat southward theis (2 3) 2 houses clayme ancient seat roomes vz. 1. m[aste]r smyth (*next the pillar*) in thend next pitcourt seat for his farne house called smalcombs court released: now Robert Jones for m[aste]r smyths house at stretly 3. The parson or farmer of the tithes, now william purnell./ 2. Thomas kirkeman tenant to John purnell for his house in wike, sometime warners: And noe other in this seate.
- [p. 6] 3. In the next seate belowe, theis 4 clayme ancient seat roomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. william marten for his house in southend./ 2. william Curnocke for his house in churchend now in the occupation of Danyell Smith./ 3. Thomas Heskyns for his house in Fordend. 4. Thomas peers for his house in forthay. And heere was also a seate room belonging to Tydnam, which is nowe decayed, but likely to bee hereafter againe built by george longe And in the other end of this seate (*southward*) [parted from the former by the pillar] william beale onely hath ancient seatroom belonging to his house in forthay. & noe other.
4. In the next seate (which reacheth from the one Ile to the other, theis 8 clayme ancient seat roomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. william payne for his house at snytend next towards the stone pulpit./ 2 Thomas purnell of Fordend for his house somtyme Brutons./ 3. Jesp[er] Estcourt gent for his house next to James gybs his house./ 4. John Beale for his house in fordend somtyme william Dawes./ 5. George James the yonger for his house in Fordend./ 6. Thomas Cole for his house in forthay, now in the occupation of wid[ow] Goslyn./ 7. Edward Beale for his house in swyneey./ 8. Richard Hadley who sitteth next the new Ile: And no other in this seate./

- [p. 7] 5. In the next seat below, in that end or part thereof next the pulpit, theis 4 have ancient seatroomes belonginge to their Houses. vz. 1. Edward Oty of swyney./ 2. Robert tyly for his house in Churchend./ 3. John wilkens for his house by woodalins well./ 4. Thomas hewes for his house in Swyney./ And in the other end of this seat, w[hi]ch is parted theis 5 have ancient seat roomes belonginge to their houses. vz. 1. Brice wykes thelder for his house in swyney./ 2. Richard parker for m[aste]r Grayles house in swyny./ 3. The widow mayes house in southend./ 4. samuell plomer for his house in swyney./ 5. william Tyndall for m[aste]r Smythes house at the litle grene./ And no other in this end of this seate./
6. In the next seate below, parted into two by the pillar theis 6 clayme ancient seat rooms belonging to their houses. vz. 1. Alexander Birton for the house called Cobs house in mylend./ 2. Alexander perrot for his house in myllend./ 3. John purnell for m[aste]r Smythes house att the litle greene somtyme wilkens house and before moodyes./ 4. John nelme for his house in Churchend./ 5. william James thelder for his house at the bottome of the great greene./ 6. Christopher Jobbyns for his house at Ewcombs. who is next the pillar And no other in this part of this seat./ which is too many by one./ And in the other end of this seat on the south side of the pillar sit weomen vz. Jac[obus] gibbs wife for Bassets court onely
7. The 7th seate begyns the weomens seate, wherof after./

[p. 8] The seates in the new Ile, under the south wall there:

1. In the 1. uppermost seate, under the monument of m[ist]r[es s] Grace Smyth, Onely Henry hatheway for his house in southend hath an ancient seat roome belonginge to his house there./ h hatheway is otherwise so now placed./ And now in this william Curnock for moores mill./ william munday & Richard Duswell./
2. In the next seat belowe, 1. Henry heyward hath onely a seat room belongyng to his house at the bottome of the great greene, late william mundayes land, now m[aste]r Smythes, And (*none els*) 2. Thomas munday for frends place (*late*) at the bottome of the great greene & none els./
3. In the next seate below, theis 2 clayme ancient seatroomes belongyng to their houses. vz. 1. James gibbs for his house called Bassets court at the further end of the great grene./ 2. Richard Hadly for his house at Bow street late Longs. And none els.
4. In the seat below, theis 2 clayme ancient seatroomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. nycholas gybs for his house at woodalins well./ 2. Henry Andrewes for his house by the broke at Horend. And none els.
- [p. 9] 5. In the next seat belowe, theis 2 clayme ancient seat roomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. John Smyth for his house at southend, late Toby hathewaies./ 2. Thomas Dawe for his house in Horend called Wests house, And none els./
6. In the next seat below, theis 2 clayme ancient seat roomes belonging to their houses. vz. 1. william purnell for his house at the little grene, now in the tenure of Tobias Tyndall william archard. 2. Thomas purnell for his house, called myllend house, now in the holdyng of Alexander birton. And none els.
7. In the next seat belowe theis 2. clayme ancient seatroomes belonging to their houses. vz. John dorny for his house adioyninge to Pitcourt./ 2. (*ffrancis Jobbins for his house neere Swyny greene*) Edmund Baker of Ryddngs [*sic*] And 3. Thomas Dorny of west feld./
8. In the next seat belowe, the (*dwellers*) house at the buthayes beneath the Almeshouse, late in tenure of old Thomas purnell hath onely seat roome thereto belonging, And none els./ 2. Also william weekes of swyney./
- [p. 10] 9. In the next seat belowe, which is next to the south doare, theis 2. clayme ancient seat roomes belonging to their houses. vz. John Cole for his house neere Bush street, late Thomas Rogers./ 2. (*ffrancis*) John west, for his house in stancombe And none els: but it is intended to place Thomas sly here (as now hee sits) for his house in churchfeild late John Rogers./ which house [the land of John Rogers m(ortuus)] is to have the 3rd place.

In the 5 new seates theis ar to bee placed vz

Thomas heskyns of horend

Thomas trotman of his house in spuncombe in the ten[ure] of george longe

Henry hayward for his house at honley als[o] holoway

John Jobbyns for his house there

francis p[ur]nell for his house at woodiates

Disfeilde house at swyney m[od]o Thomas hewes

george Duswell for his house at uesryding

Edward payne for the churchouse

Brice beale & John heath for ye colladg houses

hugh Denton

Richard harrold
(X[christo]pber p[ur]nell for the)

william Rugg

Thomas Coopy. &

wherof i of the v is to bee a bachelors seat next the wall (*John ve*) Arthur ven, nicholas beale, william trotman, Thomas trotman & Anthony Jobbins./

And 31 (named in the other pap(er) ar to bee in the chancell

- [p. A] 1. At the entrance into the Chancell, over against pitcourt seate, are the seates of m[aste]r John smyth for his two mansion houses of warrens court wherin hee now dwelleth, And of Smalcombs court of late by him new built (*now laid together*) wheras for him selfe & family, wherof the former was by him built with the assent of the p[ar]ish & minister 30 years past at his charges And the later in like manner at this tyme, hee having with assent of the p[ar]ish released, All his interest in the former seates belongynge to his said houses both for men weomen & servants (*which are*) wherin other inhabitants are now placed, as herin appeareth. In lieu of theis seates now setled to his said houses for men weomen children & servants.
2. The uppermost halfe of the next seate belowe, belongeth wholly to the manor house of m[aste]r Anthony hungerford called Pitcourt, Anciently also used for weomen to sit in, at the tyme of their churching after safe delyvery from childbirth. And in the other halfe or end of that seate towards the (*south East*) south, was first the seate roome anciently belongynge to Smalcombes court aforesaid, the inheritance of M[aste]r John Smyth which hee having released as aforesaid, now of newe therin is placed the tenant for the time beynge for his house at Stretley now in the occupation of Robert James./ And secondly John purnell son of Thomas for his house at wike somtyme warners now in the occupation of Thomas Kirkman, (*And thirdly*)
3. in the [unfinished]

[p. B] [This page is written in two hands, the original and another]

Thomas cole for his mill by billingsgate frith¹¹

John hickes claymeth to have a seate for his house in stancombe, which if hee can prove it is allowed: If not then to have one assigned Val 20s p[er]an[um] m[od]o in ten[ure]

Richard Knight.

John woodward to bee placed

Edmund baker to bee placed

Edward hosier

(*Thomas parsons.q.[aere] where to bee seated:*) I find him no where

(*q. as william beale where was the ancient seate of warrens court & not mentioned it in its place before, now released.*)

(*q. a place for william wikes*)

(*q. a place for John heywards house in chestly*)

(*q. a place for william cumoks [sic] house in weke*)

q. who to be placed in the seates of william beale with him

q who to be placed in the seate with Jac[obus] gibbs & Richard hadley

[on the outer back cover]

Our Curates in the last 40 y[ear]s have bene. vz.1 Harryson 2. gwyn./ 3. Orton./ 4. prytchard./ 5. Clarke./ 6. Codrington. now 1629.

Notes

1. Glos Colln, County Lib: *Smyth of Nibley Papers* 1–16.
2. Glos Colln, County Lib: *Smyth of Nibley Papers*, 1st supplement, 4, 115 R.216.4.
3. Richard Gough, *The History of Myddle* (ed David Hey) Harmondsworth, 1981.
4. Somerset R.O. D/P/b.re 7/3/1.
5. John Smyth, *Berkeley MSS* vol. 3, *Hundred of Berkeley*, 278.
6. Irvine Gray, 'Smith of Nibley's Will', *TBGAS* 78 (1959), 129.
7. In a church inventory of 1680 (Glos R.O. GDR V5 216T 1) and Churchwardens' Accounts, 1820 (Glos R.O. P230 CW 2/3).
8. John Smith, *Men & Armour for Gloucestershire* in 1608, 173–5.
9. Glos Colln, County Lib: *Smyth of Nibley Papers* 3, 114.
10. Irvine Gray, *Antiquaries of Gloucestershire and Bristol* (1981), 146.
11. 'frith' = a rough area of woodland ground.

Acknowledgements

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