

GREAT AMWELL CHURCH

C19TH RENOVATIONS

BY
STUART MOYE

Great Amwell Church like many churches in England was to undergo what is sometimes referred to as a Victorian renovation. For many at the time the changes made to churches were something of a shock and regarded as acts of vandalism. At Amwell church much of what was old and familiar was indeed removed, but a few of the changes became regarded by some as the best features of the church. In addition to the physical changes the congregation at Amwell experienced considerable alterations to the nature of the services which were met with varied reactions from the parishioners.



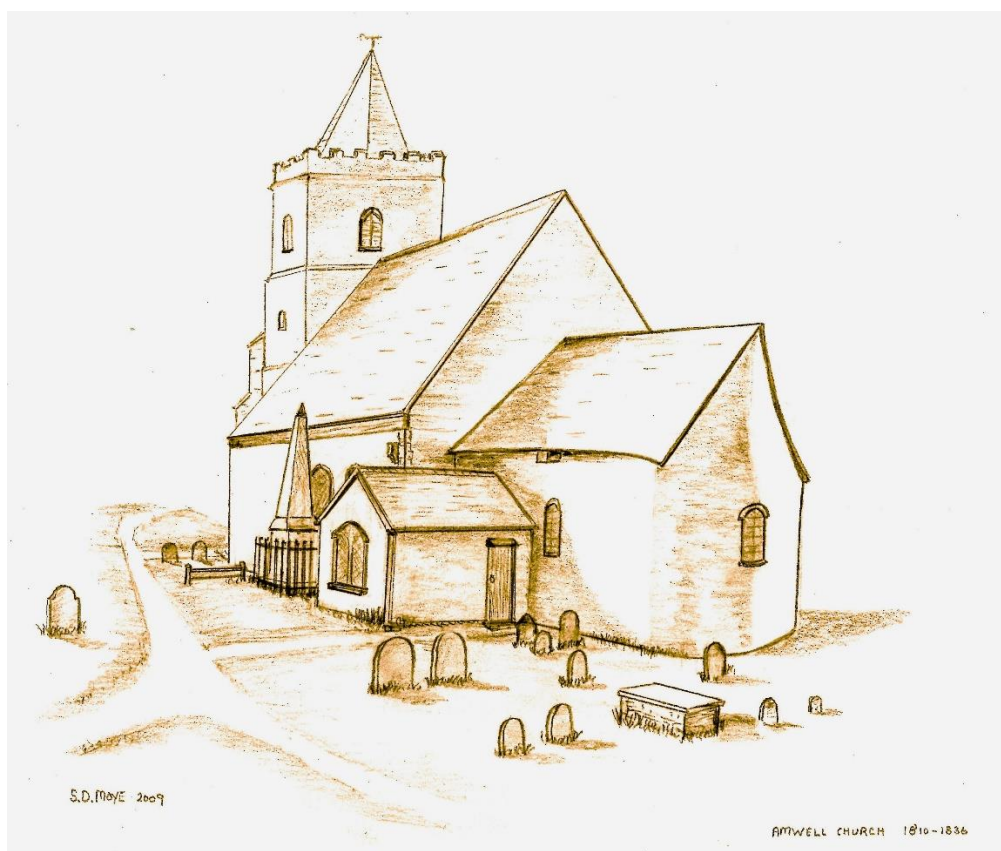
A 1977 winter view of Great Amwell church taken during a particularly cold snowy spell.

The C19th changes made at Great Amwell Church occurred in four main periods. The first fifty years saw the churchwardens make practical changes to maintain the building without too much regard for the appearance of the church. This approach was driven by the fact that the fabric of the old building needed constant work for which available finances were limited. The second phase took place in the mid to late 1850s driven by the Vicar Rev Mordant Barnard and his curate Neville Rolphe. The main changes focusing on a very thorough refurbishment of the chancel for which the Vicar had specific responsibility. The third period which took place in the mid-1860s saw extensive changes to the nave and other work carried out by both the Churchwardens and the Vicar Rev. Parrott. It was the changes made by the Vicar that caused considerable conflict with influential individuals in the Parish as well as the Churchwardens. In addition, the Vicar introduced changes to the church services which some churchwardens and parishioners regarded as uncomfortably close to a return to the catholic faith. The remaining part of the C19th saw a fourth period of change as the Vicar continued to add to his vision of what he thought the church should look like. All done to further align the building with his 'High Church' beliefs.

In 1799 a new Vicar the Rev. William Cross arrived at Great Amwell; he was to remain until 1822. In the same year the parishioners at Amwell had seen the demolition of a timber-built porch on the north wall of the nave close to the tower. The doorway opening having been bricked up created a rather dark corner in the nave, which still exists today. The porch was said to date from the 1420-30 decade about the same time as the tower was built. The doorway may have been much older dating from the early days of the present building in the C11th. Inside the church in 1799 an impressive tall three decker pulpit was installed having been acquired by Robert Mylne an influential Amwell resident, in return for having his own private pew. The tall octagonal white painted oak pulpit had once been in the chapel of the Archiepiscopal Palace at Croydon. {Chanc Proc Eliz I reg Grindall folio 95}

[The Archiepiscopal Palace at Croydon was the summer residence of the Archbishop of Canterbury for about five centuries until 1760. It was sold in 1807 after standing empty for decades.]

During the first 50 years or so of the 1800s much of the work carried out by the Churchwardens was done with scant regard for the appearance of the church. Their work often hampered by lack of funds tended to be practical rather than aesthetic, as they attempted to maintain the integrity of the ageing and crumbling structure of the church. In the early years of the 1800s the churchwardens were to purchase 4,000 bricks some of which are still probably embedded out of sight in the walls. *[Note in the 1860s a concerted effort was made to remove visible non authentic materials from the church which suggests that some of those bricks were perhaps still visible in the church walls at that time.]* A considerable number of these bricks were no doubt used in the construction of the vestry room, built abutting the south wall of the chancel in 1810. Today some of those bricks can be seen in the foundation pedestal of the 1836 replacement vestry attached to the north wall of the chancel. One 1806 addition to the interior of the church is of note as the Churchwardens purchased a new painting of the Royal Coat of Arms which was displayed above the chancel arch until the 1865 nave renovations.



The church as it appeared between 1810 and 1836. The vestry building built on the north side of the chancel made use of an existing door into the chancel. The vestry proved too hot in the summer months which led to its demolition and a replacement built on the south side of the chancel in 1836. It is worth noting the ancient small round headed window in the east wall of the chancel later to be replaced by three larger windows in the mid-1850s. The blank wall at the far end of the nave was where the wooden porch had once allowed access into the nave through a now blocked up doorway

1826 saw the arrival of a new Vicar the Rev. Mordant Barnard [Vicar 1826-1864]. He had other livings and personally administered in another parish. At Amwell he paid a curate, under his overview, to do much of the running of the church at Amwell. One of his first acts at Amwell was to replace the small east window in the chancel with a wooden framed one with clear glass. In 1830 two hatchments, displaying the Mylne family crest, were placed on the walls in the nave by the Churchwardens.

The illustration to the right shows one of the two Mylne family hatchments placed in Amwell Church in 1830, that were later removed and then this one returned to the nave walls; as views regarding church decoration at Amwell changed in the second half of the C19th.

RESURGAM is the Latin for "I shall rise again"
Hatchments are large lozenge shaped paintings on canvas in a wooden frame. They were usually hung above the front door of a deceased persons home until they were buried and then moved to be hung on the nave wall of the church where they were buried.



As mentioned above 1836 saw the building of a new vestry on the cooler north side of the chancel unusually utilising a wooden door and surround in the chancel wall, which may well date from the time the tower was built, in the early 1400s. [*It is thought that there had been an earlier building accessed from the chancel by this ancient doorway; perhaps a now long forgotten vestry*]. In 1836 this door joined the new vestry and the chancel where the floor levels were of equal height. Some 20 years later the chancel floor was to be raised causing the awkward step down we experience today through a low height doorway.

An interesting report of 1837 informs us that at this time the congregation was no longer seated by gender as had been the case before the introduction of box pews in the early 1800s. This had been started when the Mylne family purchased their own box pew in the chancel. This led to others following their example creating private box pews in both chancel and nave. This further emphasised the difference between the affluent and the poor of the parish during services. This was especially so as the poor were crowded at the back of the church on benches in the galleries and in the dark space beneath.

A notable change took place in 1840 when a barrel organ was introduced into the nave. A new Curate Rev Neville Rolfe was appointed in 1845; he was Rev. Barnard's son in law and was to take a big part in the planning and financing of the 1856 renovation of the chancel. It is recorded several times that the Rev Barnard felt that the galleries obscured the view of the rather splendid tower arch in the west wall of the nave which he felt was one of the best features of the church. Perhaps not surprisingly then we discover that in 1846; *'The upper gallery was removed by the churchwardens Mr Cheffin and Mr Tuck who had then rearranged the seats in the remaining lower gallery to provide almost as many seats as had existed previously, which would be adequate.'* [Parish records of Jan Feb 1864]. The upper gallery had been installed in the church by a Mr Greave in 1740. [Mylne family records]. Both galleries being used to seat the poor of the parish on simple benches. The lower gallery reached back into the tower with a gently inclined floor remaining in place until 1884.

In 1851 the Churchwardens Messrs Cheffin and Tuck were once again busy when we find them repairing the walls of the church. The north wall of the nave appears to have needed considerable urgent work. Which involved cutting deep into the walls to effect repairs. While doing this they found in the north wall buried remains of two small lancet Norman windows one towards each end of the nave. [*It is believed the church nave originally had matching windows in the south wall.*] They used knapped flints to face the north wall of the nave; something they would continue to do in later years to the lower parts of the tower and the much of the exterior walls of the church.

The year 1856 saw the commencement of the complete renovation of the chancel, a shared project between the Rev Barnard and his Curate Neville Rolphe. The Curate had very specific views on the then renewed idea that the altar should be the centre of attention during church services; not the pulpit. He was thus keen to see his ideas emphasised in the physical changes made to the chancel.

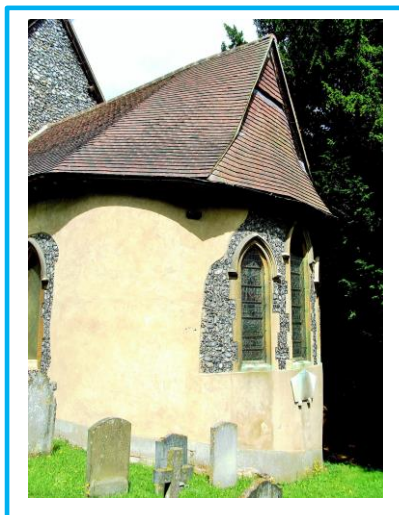
It is worth describing the key features of the chancel before the work began. The chancel was separated from the nave by a wooden rood screen across the chancel arch which allowed only a limited glimpse of the altar supplemented by the two hagioscopes [squints] either side of the arch. The floor in the chancel was at the same height as the floor in the nave with no intervening steps. The east window was just a small round headed window with plain glass within its wooden frame. The low flat ceiling of the chancel was fixed to the underside of the tie beams [cross beams] which rested on the top of the chancel walls. The sanctuary was a little larger than today within which the altar stood against the east wall. The floor space in the chancel being mainly occupied by four box pews of various heights, sizes and appearance. One reached right up to the altar rail preventing the full rail being used for communion. Of note was the existence of a niche in the west wall of the chancel to the north of the altar at about seven to eleven feet above floor level which had once contained a statue of St Augustine to whom the church had once been dedicated. The chancel was in fact a rather gloomy claustrophobic sort of space entered by few and rather set apart during services that focused on the pulpit in the nave. The exterior of the church had a gable end to its apsidal form at its west end as seen in the drawing on page 2 above.



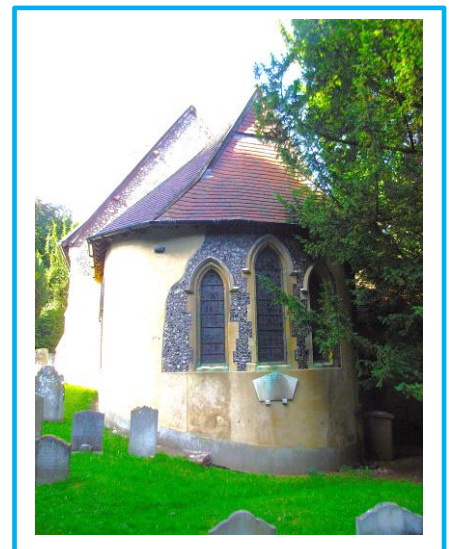
Rev. Mordant Barnard vicar at Amwell 1826 –1864 was the person who pushed forward the changes to the chancel. The vicar being responsible for the chancel and the churchwardens the nave. His portrait can be seen to the left and a commemorative plaque to him can be seen affixed to the wall of the chancel along with many other memorials to former vicars at Amwell



A noticeable change to the chancel was the removal of the low ceiling and all but one of the tie beams to which the ceiling had been attached. The tie beams were in fact just tree trunks shaped at the end to fit the wall plates. They had of course been hidden from view by the ceiling attached beneath them. The work also included the full refurbishment of the chancel roof including the alteration made at the apsidal east end. The end wall of the chancel received considerable attention with a rather awkward sub roof applied above the newly created three east windows which replaced the previous small one



Two views of the altered east end of the chancel. The windows were fitted with stained glass costing £55. A gift from the Rev. Barnard in commemoration of the friendship between him and his churchwarden Mr Peter J. Cheffin, over a 30-year period. Their initials appear in the glass of the window.



Inside the chancel the major changes included raising the floor two steps in height [*had been level with nave floor*] to make the chancel and altar more impressive. When carrying out this work a vault in the north wall within the sanctuary was accidentally broken into. A coffin plate inside the vault confirmed that the remains were of Lady Codrington. After investigations all was returned as it was and the vault resealed. The altar rails on the new raised floor were moved two feet towards the altar thus reducing the size of the sanctuary. The wooden rood screen that had for many centuries stood across the chancel arch was removed. It was then somewhat reconfigured, filled with glass and then placed across the base of the large arch at the western end of the nave; where it can still be seen today.



Left view shows the interior of the west end of the chancel showing it now open to the roof. It also shows the two recesses cut into the west wall which once contained seats for clergy [sedilia]. The upper part of the left one in this view [north] was once part of the niche for a statue of St Augustine. The original niche had its upper part filled in and was then cut out down to floor level. The picture above shows the screen that was moved from the chancel arch and erected in the nave / tower arch in 1857

In the chancel the four box pews were removed and replaced by seating in the form of bench seats arranged longitudinally either side of a central aisle. It was reported that these seats provided twice as many places as the original box pews had. It was also noted that a piscina with a shelf across it to the south of the altar was closed off as of no real use. [*glimpsed to the right in image above*] It was later to be reinstated when changes further emphasised the importance of the altar during church services. [*A piscina is a basin located near the altar for draining water used in the communion services.*]



The image to the left is of the "Children's Window."

In 1857 this large south facing window in the nave was refurbished funded by the efforts of the 80 children at the village school. The cost of the re-glazing with coloured glass was recorded as £40. This seems a large sum for children many of whom were from poor homes. One suspects that the affluent adults of the parish had a considerable role to play in contributing to the fund. In any case the window became known as the 'Children's Window' acknowledging their efforts in encouraging donations. An interesting and perhaps relevant point was that in 1847 William Upton had written that 'the people [of Amwell] are entirely under clerical and church influence' This may be an indication of the positive relationship between the vicar/curate and their congregation, especially the poor at this time.

Following the mid-1850s chancel refurbishment there was not surprisingly a pause in activity although preparations were undoubtedly in hand for the upcoming renovation of the nave. In 1862 the Curate Neville Rolphe was replaced by the Rev Richard Parrott who was to become the next vicar in 1864. He also believed in the altar being the focus during services and was keen to see the church return more to pre reformation ways both in the appearance of the church and the nature of services. Which some parishioners may have considered a step back to Catholic beliefs but tended to refer to it as a High Church approach. *[The reformation of the church in England began in the 1530s during the reign of Henry VIII and continued into the reign of Elizabeth I, with some scholars suggesting it actually continued into 1700s].*

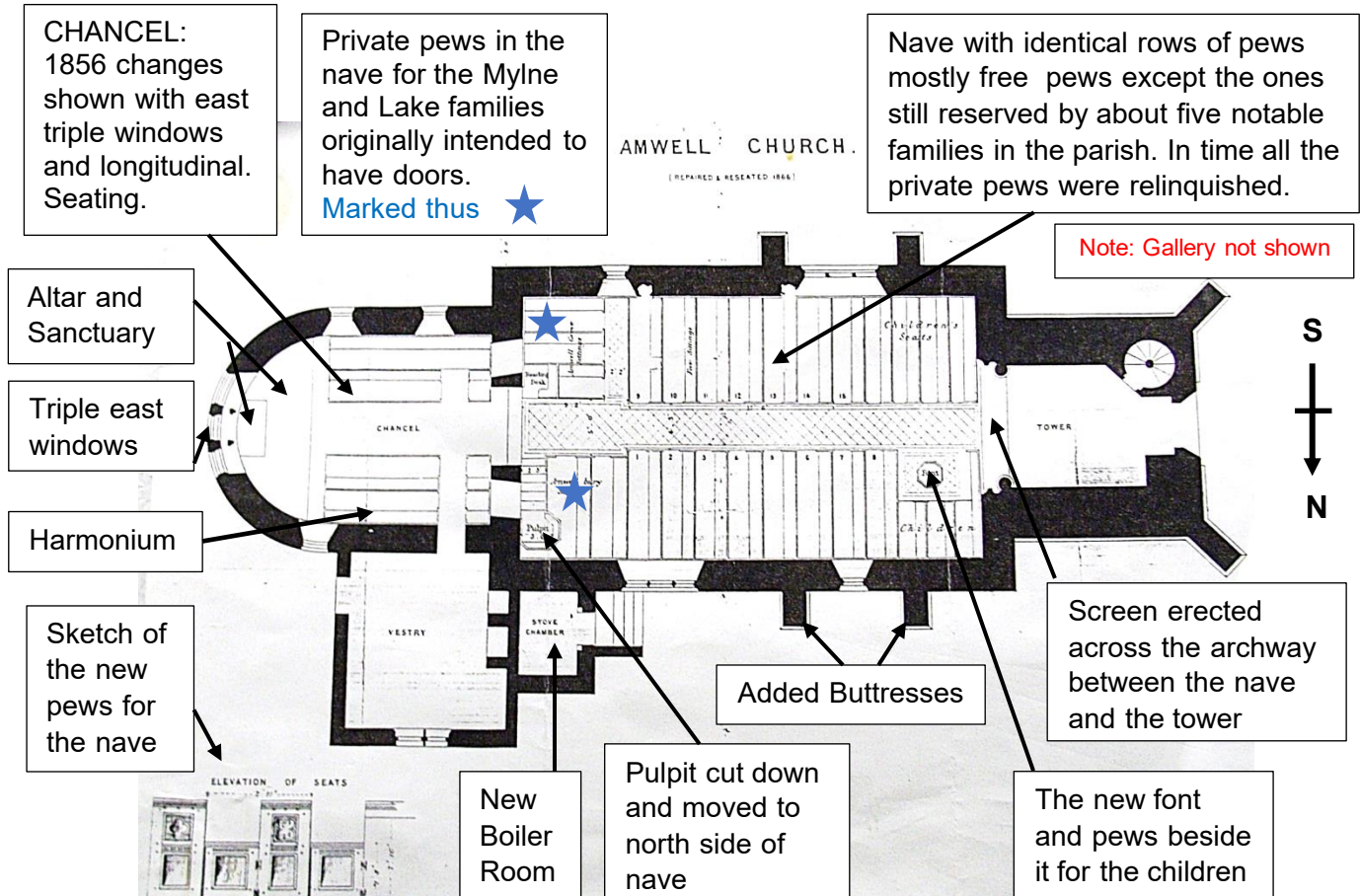
Rev. Parrott's appointment as curate suggests strongly that Rev. Mordant Barnard was also fully behind those ideas even if he did not publicly express vast enthusiasm. Rev Parrott noted that in an 1851 census of religious worship Amwell had a possible congregation of 400 but in 1862 had church seats for only one fifth of that number. It is interesting to note that the average attendance at services in January 1863 was noted as only 43 persons. One of Rev Parrott's aims was to sweep away the private box pews, standardise the seating and enlarge the church. Private pew owners were to react strongly against the changes to the pews, but the Rev. Parrott was to prevail mainly by force of personality. In the end a planned new side aisle on the south side of the nave was never built due to limited finances. Rev. Parrott's religious beliefs dominated his thinking rather than favouring any particular architectural style. Focus on the altar could he thought be implemented with the use of candles, incense, imagery, colour, vestments, procession and music. On the other hand, he disliked heraldic decoration and family hatchments hanging on the walls and preferred a surpliced choir in the chancel.

It is interesting to note that in 1864 it was recorded that Neville Rolfe had wanted a more radical set of changes but had been tempered in his efforts by Rev Barnard. This perhaps indicates how Rev. Barnard quietly guided the changes that he wanted to see for the church at Amwell, without himself antagonising those with money in the parish who financial supported the church. The following comments made by Rev Barnard after Rev. Parrott had arrived as curate, may give us an idea of his own thoughts about the church. In 1863 he mentioned that the recently renovated east end of the chancel had given it a square roof end, not successfully applied, and "hoped it would be removed in the near future". He also organised, preparations jointly with his new curate, for the nave alterations to be carried out by the churchwardens and the following was recorded. "In the church were many high square box pews which were to be replaced." In Jan/Feb an estimate of the nave refurbishment and heating was given as £800 and new chancel roof £180. A proposed north aisle was priced at £700. The minimum work was thought to require at least £1500. Rev. Banard also commented that "The unsightly gallery spoiled the west arch which he thought "was the best feature of the church." He mentioned that "the ugly black stove with its unsightly funnel in the nave gives no heat in the chancel at all." In 1864 Rev. Barnard stepped down from being the vicar and handed over to his able curate Richard Parrot, in the full knowledge that the younger man could carry out their joint project for the renovation of Amwell church.

No doubt conscious that some of his new ideas were not finding favour with the churchwardens, Rev Parrott managed to persuade them to allow him a free hand regarding the interior of the nave, while they carried out the work, they were more comfortable with. The Churchwardens had a more practical approach to the restoration of the nave. Their priorities were; 1] Rebuilding more thoroughly the crumbling north wall of the nave which was in a precarious state despite earlier work. 2] Add a heating chamber to the north wall of the church and remove the stove from the nave. 3] Replace plaster on nave walls and add knapped flints to exterior walls to complete the earlier flint work. 4] Add buttresses to both side walls of the nave to prevent subsidence and keep the walls upright.

The interior of the nave before restoration began was considerably different to what we see today. The nave had a low flat ceiling which was fixed to the underside of rafters which sat on top of the side walls giving a tunnel like feel to the nave. The private pews which filled the main part of the nave were described as high and inconvenient square pews or boxes for the use of the better classes in the parish. Whilst the children and the poor were in the gallery or the dark miserable hole beneath it sitting on simple boards. An unsightly black stove with chimney barely warmed the nave and in the winter the chancel remained chilly. A large three decker white painted pulpit dominated the south eastern corner of the nave. The font was ancient and was decidedly showing its age. Lighting was by oil lamps, hung by chains from the ceiling, which could be lowered and raised to allow for maintenance and lighting. It was clearly in need of a long overdue refurbishment; it was to get a comprehensive remodelling instead.

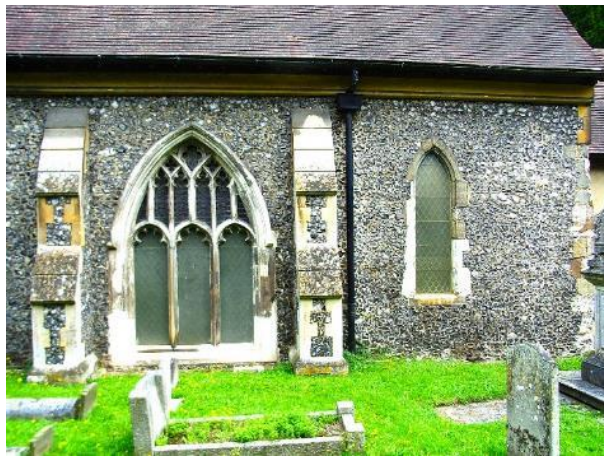
AN 1866 CHURCH PLAN SHOWING THE RENOVATION OF CHANCEL AND NAVE



[Note the pews in the sketch are shown with doors requested for the family pews by Messrs Lake and Mylne]

In September 1865 work began on the renovation of the nave which meant the closure of the church. Services then being held in the main room of the village school which was located just up the hill from the church. Initial work on the nave saw part of the tiled roof removed to allow inspection of the structure hidden from view above the low ceiling. Even at this point Mr Mylne and Mr Lake, the most affluent and important parishioners who were both opposed to the changes, proposed a maintenance only option. This attempt to deflect the Rev. Parrott from his renovation work was not successful but seems to have delayed the work being carried out on the roof during October. We find reported in November Rev. Parrott insisting that all the existing pews in the nave were going to be replaced although no information was given as to what those pews were going to be like. At the same time an estimate of £450 was presented for the removal and replacement of the floor and for the resurfacing of the walls with new plaster. By February work had started on the nave with Mr Hunt of Hoddesdon as the contractor for both the roof and the new seating. [Seating costs estimated at £382 19s 3d]

At this time the church had been cleared out of much of its contents and work of removing the roof was taking place. Two oak tie beams were removed with one being sold and later to be seen in use as a post down in Amwell Marsh. Another beam was found in December 1893 under the steps of the sanctuary when the steps were being replaced in marble, but the latter may have been from the renovation of the chancel in 1856. More controversial was the removal from the nave wall of the two Mylne family hatchments and a painting of the Royal Arms from above the chancel arch. The latter quickly finding its way to being exhibited at Mr Teale's Victorian Pleasure Gardens at Rye House. Decorations of this kind were seen by the Rev Parrott as having no place on the walls of his church. As work continued renewed efforts by Mr Mylne and Mr Lake took place to oppose the removal of private pews and insisted that they should have doors on their own family pews. Their opposition was to continue for the rest of 1866. In March the vicar made it clear that his hope was for all pews to be free, which of course implied no one should have special treatment because they could pay. At the same time the meeting considered starting a fund for a clock to be placed in the west side of the tower an idea which was never proceeded with. Meanwhile the churchwardens quietly set about rebuilding and refacing some external walls with added flint work, they added buttresses to both the north and south walls to strengthen them and prevent downward and outward movement and also built the heating chamber onto the north side of the church.



These images show the new boiler house built on the north side of the nave and the buttresses on the south wall of the nave. The application of the knapped flints considerably changed the external appearance of the church. All this was the work of the Churchwardens.

The work progressed well and all was completed by the opening day on August 8th 1866. The parish minutes show the timetable of events for that day.

GREAT AMWELL CHURCH REOPENING DAY AUGUST 8TH 1866

8am Eucharist

11am Mattins with a special order of service followed by a luncheon in the school, with 100 guests and Robert Dimsdale as president.

4pm Tea and Coffee in the Vicarage Grounds.

6pm Evensong with Rev, Owen Davys MA Rector of Wheathampstead

Evening Poor of the parish [no children] to be entertained in the school room with substantial refreshments to be provided.

It was decided that the churchwardens would allocate seats in the church pews. In addition, it was deemed reasonable to ask the poor of the parish not to attend releasing seats for those guests from outside the parish who may well be able to make donations to the renovation funds.

At the reopening of the church the Rev. Parrott's changes to the inside of the nave were not met with universal approval by any means. The Churchwardens felt that the Vicar had completely changed the ethos of the building. They thought his ideas of restoration had meant the destruction of their once ancient and familiar church. They were in some shock and bitterly regretted ever having given the Vicar a free hand in making changes to the inside of the nave. These physical changes rather overshadowed the changes the Vicar had made in the way the services were carried out with imagery, colour, candles and processions. Little comment seems to have been made in the church records concerning the parishioner's divided views of those types of change. The Churchwardens did attempt to reverse some of the changes but they were unsuccessful. Indeed, by the Vicar appealing to the poor of the parish rather than the rich, the Vicar's changes became over time accepted by a majority of the congregation. This was despite his openly stated wish for a return to the good old days of their catholic forefathers.

A SUMMARY OF THE CHANGES MADE BY REV PARROTT IN 1865-6

IN THE NAVE

- A] The ancient mural close to the low ceiling above the chancel arch was removed. This depicted a heart held in a hand with a line of Latin text beneath [See Appendix I]
- B] Low ceiling removed as well as the C15th tie beams that had held the ceiling up. King post roof also removed with the complete replacement of the roof leaving nave open to the roof.
- C] The painting of the Royal Arms of George III [*new in 1906*] once had a place of honour above the chancel arch and below the ancient mural but then spent the period 1866 to 1893 on loan at Mr Teale's Rye House Pleasure gardens . The removal of the Royal Arms from the church caused considerable discontent among the congregation. When returned by Mr Teale's son in 1893 it was hung on the west wall of the nave [See Appendix I]
- D] The two Mylne family hatchments had been removed and one of them was later to be reinstated in the nave after the Rev Parrott had died.
- E] The Commandment board that listed the ten commandments as a constant reminder to the congregation of what was right and wrong was removed.
- F] The ancient baptismal font had been replaced with a new one.
- G] The Pulpit once painted white, saw many layers of paint removed during the renovation. The pulpit was disassembled and then reconstructed in a much-reduced form, losing about one third of its height. When the church reopened it had been repositioned within the nave; moved from the south to the north side of the chancel arch.
- H] All private box pews were removed and replaced by a uniform style of pews with no social distinction in their appearance.
- I] Mr Lake's [Amwellbury] and Mr Mylne's [Amwell Grove] family box pews had been removed despite a previous agreement to keep them.

IN THE CHANCEL

- 1] The harmonium had been moved from the nave to the chancel.
- 2] Ceiling above altar, that had been previously painted to show clouds against a blue sky, had been cleaned and whitewashed over.
- 3] Chancel had new benches installed to compliment the new benches in the nave. These were now used by a surpliced choir during the main church services.
- 4] Had additions of candlesticks and a cross which was placed centrally in relation to both to the altar and the triple windows of the east end of the chancel.



An interior view of the nave looking eastwards from the tower dating about 1900. Of note are the chain hung oil lamps, the rows of identical pews, the pulpit to the left of the chancel arch and the new font of 1866. Also seen through the chancel arch are the cross and candle sticks on an altar covered in a detailed and rich altar cloth in keeping with the high church principles of the Rev. Parrott.

For some time, Mr Lake and Mr Mylne had wanted doors to their family pews and the Rev. Parrott had deftly avoided committing to this. Even though the renovation was to all intents and purposes complete in October 1866 Mr Mylne questioned the faculty for the renovation claiming the requirement for the doors had not been met. The Vicar explained "Doors were not mentioned in the faculty" in addition "were doors to be fitted a grant from the Incorporated Church Rebuilding Fund would have to be repaid". In fact, it was too late to raise this issue. The renovation had created a debt and efforts needed to be made to meet all costs including the heating. In December the matter of the doors seem to have been partially resolved as 4 of the 5 original seat owners were giving up their seats so the church was becoming free. But in April 1867 the Vicar noted that "The hateful pews doors are to arrive. 20" high for appropriate seats only". There is no record found nor fixing marks on pews to suggest that these doors were ever fitted, with privately owned pews quietly fading into history. The debt incurred by the renovation had still to be fully addressed and this was discussed in July 1867. The amount owed stood at £43 15s including for the lighting and a restoration rate of 6d in the pound on the parish rates was agreed. By September the debt had reduced to £29 and by March 1868 the debt had been cleared.



Left-hand view shows the tall arch between the chancel and the tower. Thought by Rev Barnard to be the best feature in the church. This view shows it at its best after the gallery had been removed in 1884. The right-hand picture shows the east end of the chancel. Notice the longitudinal seating at the front of the nave that were originally designated to the Lake family, those for the Mylne family by the pulpit had already been removed when this 1900 image was taken.

The Rev Parrott was to continue his work on the church after the main renovation was all completed. It was in 1878 that he installed a Father Willis Pipe Organ in the chancel replacing the harmonium. This was of course used in conjunction with a surpliced choir which sat either side of the central aisle facing each other. It is recorded in the Vestry minutes of 1878 that "A considerable quantity of Roman tiles were found in the north wall of the chancel", this occurring when the new organ was being fitted into place. Attention now turned to the ancient oak west door in the tower when in 1881 one of the churchwardens a Mr Lewis Pain paid for the many layers of paint to be stripped off and the bare oak revealed. This was thought more in keeping with the work carried out on the church earlier in the century which had emphasised genuine materials. Both Rev Barnard and Rev. Parrott had expressed the view that the gallery spoilt the view of the tower arch. In 1884 this was fully remedied by the removal of the gallery which opened up the view of arch and displayed the west window to best effect. This took place 38 years after the upper gallery had been removed in 1846, both having originally been provided for the seating of the poor of the parish. In 1888 some of the wood salvaged from the gallery was used to construct a cover for the font. This was donated by Mr D Y Johnstone on the baptism of his daughter Elsa Margaret. This proved more than useful as it prevented the font being used as a place to leave coats and other belongings during services as had unfortunately been the case.

In 1889 stained glass was placed in the west window which meant for the first time since the reformation, or perhaps ever, the church had a full complement of stained-glass windows. The window was designed by the artist Charles Kepple and paid for by Mrs Lewis Paine in memory of her husband. This was the last project overseen by the Rev. Parrott as he was to pass away in 1893. It was said of him that he was a remarkable man but a very controversial vicar. He had made a big impression personally in the parish and had radically changed Amwell Church. He left it with a strong High Church appearance and services which some ventured to call a Catholic orientation. This was to last in the way services were conducted into the 1990s. By the Rev. Parrott appealing to the poorer of the parish rather than the affluent, as had been the case before he arrived, it did have a detrimental effect. The church was to decline into relative poverty in the late C19th only recovering somewhat in the 1990s. Some one hundred years plus of High Church services taking place in straightened financial circumstances.



The more recent pictures above were taken from the bell ringing floor not put in place until 1953. The left-hand view shows the impressive west window which can be more fully appreciated up close; a view not normally available to the public. The right-hand view shows the view of the nave from the ringing floor looking through the tower arch. The striking modern rood above the chancel was put in place in 1965 and harks back to the days of the ancient mural of a hand holding a heart and the framed painting of the Royal Arms of years gone by.

Provided In memory of Rev. Parrott the chancel choir stalls were replaced two years after his death. By which time a new Vicar had arrived at Amwell the Rev. William John Harvey. He was in 1896 to write his delightful and informative history book of the parish titled 'Great Amwell past and Present'. Also, in 1896 the pews in the nave were cleaned their first renovation since 1866. Although not in the C19th it is worth recording that in 1912 a replacement organ was installed in the chancel in honour of the Rev. Parrott.

Stuart Moye July 2025

Appendix I & II Follow;

- I] The ancient mural and royal arms.
- II Summary of C19th vestry meeting minutes related to the church renovation

APPENDIX I

ANCIENT MURAL AND ROYAL COAT OF ARMS

In Great Amwell Church above the chancel arch there had been for a long time an ancient mural showing a heart held by a hand with a short line of Latin text beneath. This had been described as being positioned high up towards the ceiling. This was the much lower ceiling that existed up until the 1865-6 renovation of the nave. The present wall of course reaches right up to the apex of the roof. Beneath the mural and text was a framed painting depicting the Royal Arms of King George III hung not that far above the chancel arch. Both the mural and the painting being reminders that following the reformation of the church in England the Queen or King of the day was the head of the church.

*Painting of a heart
held in a hand*

‘COR REGIS IN MANU DOMINI’



The meaning of ‘*Cor Regis in Manu Domini*’ was ‘*The heart of the King is in the hands of the Lord*’

The Latin phrase is in fact an extract *from Proverbs XXI 1 King James Bible*

‘The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.’

Writing in 1842, William Griffith, who studied the mural in situ, confirmed that the fresco high up above the chancel arch in the nave at Amwell with a hand holding a heart with the Latin phrase beneath it was an emblem of loyalty to the reigning monarch; the supreme governor of the Church of England.

APPENDIX II

C19th RENOVATION OF GREAT AMWELL CHURCH SUMMARY OF VESTRY RECORDS

- 1799** Porch on south wall of nave removed and doorway into nave blocked.
Rev William Cross appointed Vicar
- 1800** Pulpit presented to church by Robert Mylne.
- 1810** Vestry built on south side of chancel almost abutting the nave wall
- 1826** **Rev Mordant Barnard becomes Vicar**
- 1836** New north side vestry replaced 1810 vestry which had proved to be too hot in the summer.
- 1840** Barrell organ introduced into the nave.
- 1846** The upper gallery was removed by the churchwardens Mr Cheffin and Mr Tuck who had then rearranged the seats in the remaining lower gallery to provide almost as many seats as had existed previously, which would be adequate. *[Parish records of Jan Feb 1864]*
- 1851** Churchwardens Mr Cheffin and Mr Tuck had refaced the north wall of the church and when doing so found two Norman windows, one behind the pulpit the other towards the gallery
- 1856** Extensive refurbishment of the chancel had been carried out. The original east window with round top removed in the 1820's had been replaced by a wooden window filled with stained glass presented by the Rev Barnard. This had been removed in 1856 and three windows had been pierced through the east wall of the chancel. The chancel floor had been raised two steps in height [had been level with nave floor] to make the chancel and altar more impressive. When carrying out this work the vault of Lady Codrington had been accidentally broken into and then repaired. The altar rails had also been moved two feet towards the altar.
- Up until 1856 the chancel had 4 box pews of various heights and appearances with one right up to the altar rail preventing its use for communion along that part of the rail. These box pews had been removed during the 1856 renovations.
- Before 1856 one niche had existed on the north side of altar. The work involved cutting two sediles with the existing north niche cut down to the new floor level. Also, one piscine with stone shelf had been blocked up as of no real value.
- The apse wall was cut down in height and a new lower rounded tiled gable shaped roof had been added with vertical tile infill up to the original roof line. The chancel roof was as a whole was fully refurbished at this time and low ceiling removed.
- 1863** The Rev Mordant Barnard commented on the circular roof of Chancel that had recently been renovated in 1856 and he thought that the square roof end had not been successfully applied and "hoped that it would be removed in the near future" It was noted in the parish records that in the mid C16 the chancel was altered and three bells hung in the tower 1864 Jan/Feb An estimate for the necessary refurbishment of the church was presented and considerable concern expressed about the poor state of the nave. The total estimate for work needed was given as £1,500, made up of:-
1] Nave refurbishment and improved heating £800
2] North Aisle proposed at £700 3] New roof for the chancel £180
- The attendance at services was given as 43 on average during the month of January 1863.
- 1864 Jan /Feb** Rev. Barnard mentioned that "the unsightly gallery spoiled the west arch", which he thought was the best feature in the church. He mentioned that children tended to collect in a group at the back of the gallery against the tower, which had proved to be less than an ideal arrangement. In addition, it was explained that the seats, for the poor, under the gallery were boards with no backs in a dark and gloomy hole at the back of the church. He also thought the black stove with its black funnel in the nave was unsightly and gave no heat in the chancel at all. It is mentioned that the church once had a porch and doorway entering the church on the south side under the gallery.
- 1864** **Rev Richard Parrott takes over as Vicar**
- 1865 September** Some of the roof tiles had been removed to look at the condition of the rafters. Mr Mylne was to give it his attention. However, by October no work had been done.
- 1865 November** The Rev Parrott [he became vicar in 1864 and had been instrumental in raising the issue of refurbishment whilst still the curate at Great Amwell] was insisting that the box pews in the nave must go as well as the other work needed. It was also reported that services were taking place in the school room as had been suggested in early September. An estimate for removing floors, resurfacing walls was given at £450 but excluded heating. Mr Mylne and Mr Lake were clearly against the changes to the pews and clearly worked hard to defeat the vicar insistent about installing ordinary open and free pews.

- 1865** New boiler room built to the north of the nave abutting the vestry.
- 1865 December** Mr Mylne and Mr Lake [Lord of the Manor] put forward a church maintenance only proposal which was put to a vote set against the vicars more radical alterations. The vote took place with 30 votes for changes in support of the vicar and 22 votes for the maintenance only proposal of Mr Mylne and Mr Lake. Mr Clarke was proposed by Mr Mylne and Mr Lake to carry out the work as he had recently moved into the parish.
- 1866 January** The services continued to take place in the school but "sadly slow progress on the work had occurred" Rev Parrott.
- 1866 February** Work was now in hand with Mr Hunt of Hoddesdon as contractor for the nave roof and the new seating. [*Mr Hunt had recently 1864/5 completed work on Hoddesdon parish church adding two aisles and the base of a tower, he was also a churchwarden at Hoddesdon*] It had been thought best to have one contractor for both so as to avoid the problems two separate contractors might cause. Mr Hunt's estimate for seats was £382 19s 3d and it was recorded that £395 8s 6d had already been subscribed for the new seating.
- 1866 March** Reseating was now being met with renewed opposition from Mr Lake and Mr Mylne. The vicar restated his hope to have all free pews in the church. At the same meeting a fund was started for a clock to be placed in the west face of the tower. No further reference could be found in reference to this fund.
- 1866 April** It was recorded that the reseating problem appeared to be over.
- 1866 June / July** Work was reported as progressing satisfactorily. Additionally in July it was reported that "There was no reason why the opening [of the church] should not take place on August 8th as previously planned."
- 1866 8th August Open Day Plans**
 8am Eucharist
 11am Matins, with a special order of service .
 Luncheon in the school room with 100 plus places and Robert Dimsdale as Lunch President.
 4pm Tea and Coffee in the Vicarage grounds.
 6pm Evensong with the Rev. Owen Davies M.A. the vicar of Wheathampstead .
 Evening The Poor of the Parish (no children) to entertained in the school room with substantial refreshments to be provided.
 The Churchwardens were to allocate places in the new pews. It was also stated that during the special day it was considered reasonable to ask the poor to make way for those from outside the parish as these quests may well be able to make donations to the funds of the church.
- 1866 September** The reopening news mentioned but no further reference to details were made.
- 1866 October** Controversy arose again with respect to the pews, specifically doors for the pews. Mr Mylne questioned the faculty for the changes, claiming the requirement for pew doors had not been met. Mr Mylne stated that the doors for the pews would arrive shortly. The vicar explained in his reply that "Doors were not specifically mentioned in the faculty" in addition were doors to be fitted the grant from the Incorporated Church rebuilding Fund would need have to be repaid. The vicar concluded that it was too late to raise this issue. The renovation had given a debt and efforts would be needed [*to pay off the debt*], all costs did include the new heating.
- 1866 December** The vicar related that the wider problem of pews seemed to be resolving itself as 4 or 5 original seat owners were giving up using their seats so the church is gradually becoming free. However, he had to report that "The hateful pew doors are to arrive". They were 20" high and would be fitted to appropriate pews only. [*The doors had apparently been ordered by Mr Mylne but no further reference to them appears, so maybe they were never fitted.*]
- 1867 April** Cracks had been discovered in the roof and this was to be looked into and put right.
- 1867 July** A Restoration Rate of 6d in the £ was unanimously carried at the vestry meeting . The debt stood at £43 15s including lighting.
- 1867 September** The debt had been reduced down to £29
- 1868 March** The Church renovation debt could now be considered as met.
- 1884** The lower gallery at the back of the nave was removed.
- 1894** Marble floor of sanctuary was laid in memory of Mesolina Rolfe.
- 1893 William John Harvey arrives as Vicar**
- 1896 March** Pews in the nave were to be cleaned and re varnished at a cost of £22 10s. It was stated that this was the first renovation since they were installed in 1865/6.
- 1896 June** Seats in the nave re varnished and are making the rest looking shabby.