
FEATURE ARTICLE

A doorway to the past

'St Mary's Church East Ilsley from the south-east'

By Eric Saxton



This image of St Mary's Church, East Ilsley, the earliest known representation of the building, had been in the possession of the Local History Society for a number of years in the form of a small mediocre photocopy. Such was the quality of this reproduction that it was not possible to read on it the date or the name of the artist. How it came into the possession of the society, was not known, although it was thought to have originated from the Bodleian Library. The small size of the photocopy suggested that it had been copied from an illustration in a book. The original drawing turned out to be 10 x 6½ inches.

The drawing appeared to show a doorway in the South Aisle which no longer exists, and therefore the picture was thought to predate the grade 2 listed tomb which now stands partly in front of where the door would have been. At some time the window above it, was extended downwards and the remainder of the opening was blocked in. Today there is exposed brickwork below this window.



Recent research has confirmed that the original drawing is, in fact, in the Bodleian Library. It is dated 1819, and signed J. C. Buckler.

John Chessell Buckler was the son of John Buckler who was born in the Isle of Wight in 1770 and from the age of fifteen, was employed in various capacities by Magdalen College, Oxford. His employment lasted all his life until his retirement in 1849.

The nature of the employment of John Buckler Snr., allowed him ample free time in which to pursue an interest in architecture, and he became a prolific artist and architect. The tower of The Holy Trinity Church in Theale, Berkshire was designed by him. His artwork mainly consisted of drawings of ecclesiastical buildings, including a series of all the cathedrals in England. He also produced drawings of many country churches such as that in East Ilsley. He may have been particularly familiar with this church as Magdalen College acquired the avowson in 1829 when it was sold by the Kennett family.

His son, John Chessell Buckler was born in 1793, and received art lessons from the painter Francis Nicholson. From 1810 he worked with his father and in 1830 took over his father's architectural practice, doing much work in Oxford and elsewhere. He died in 1894 aged 100.



The drawing in question is in pen and wash over pencil and is dated 1819, although the pencil under-drawing may predate this by some years. The original pencil drawing could have been executed as much as twenty years earlier than the given date. This theory is based upon the fact that a doorway is depicted in the south aisle under a square headed window. By 1819 this doorway had almost certainly been

filled in and the window extended downwards. There is no reason to suppose that the inclusion of this doorway in the drawing is an example of 'artistic licence' given the meticulous accuracy of the artist's other body of work. On the contrary we can assume that the doorway has been faithfully observed, as are all the other details. Could it be that the pen and wash were added By John Chessell Buckler, to one of his father's drawings in 1819?

The other doorway in the chancel, is now obscured by a small vestry added in the 19th century, otherwise the building has remained unchanged for the last 200 years.

The two visible entrances are depicted in the styles corresponding with the dates of the building, the one in the chancel, being more pointed, is the earlier. The doorway in the south aisle is less pointed and fits with what we know about the date of this extension to the church around 1240.

It is not known exactly when the doorway in the south aisle disappeared but it is unlikely that burials would have taken place in front of such an opening. The tomb, now in front of the site of the former doorway is Grade II listed, Early C19, and consists of a Stone chest, with a Moulded plinth, baluster corners, frieze and moulded cap, and double side panels. The inscription on the cap is now illegible. The tomb commemorates four members of the Adnem family, children of Richard and Mary Adnem, and presumably marks the site of their burials. The earliest burial was in 1808, followed by three more in 1809, 1812, and 1817. This suggests that when the first burial took place the doorway was no longer there. Even if the tomb itself was erected after the last burial, it would still predate the date given on the drawing.

One theory could be that John Buckler Snr., produced a pencil drawing, perhaps as early as the 1790's, and his son later added the ink and wash to prepare it for publication.

This is by far the earliest image we have of St Mary's church and is of great historical importance in determining when certain changes to the fabric of the building took place.

The original drawing is in the Bodleian Library MS. Top. Berks. c. 50, no. 30