

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, EAST MARKHAM



'The Cathedral of the Trent Valley'

Sir John Betjeman

FOREWORD

This account of the history of the Parish Church of St. John The Baptist, East Markham, is largely based on a paper read to The Thoroton Society by the Rev. A S Briggs, who was Vicar of East Markham and Rector of West Drayton from 1896 until 1913. He exchanged, 'for health reasons', with the vicar of a parish on the Isle of Wight, where he died in 1931.

I am also indebted to the late Mrs. Mary Dalton Holmes, who left a wealth of press cuttings and fascinating photographs in the Church safe for the benefit of future researchers.

End paper

Architect's Drawing of the proposed choir screen and organ loft by Comper which, because of a disagreement between the incumbent and the Duke of Newcastle, was never built.

EAST MARKHAM CHURCH

Introduction

East or Great Markham, situated on the edge of the Great Forest of Sherwood, is the "ham" or "home" of the "Mark" or organised self-acting township. In Danish, mark means a field or common. In this parish we have both Markham Moor and Markham Field, meaning the village or land outside the forest. It is situated on a ridge which forms the watershed of the rivers Trent and Idle. Its precise geological formation is of Keuper Marl and its soil is rich and strong, particularly suitable for plum and other fruit trees, whose produce, for several centuries, was until recently one of the chief industries of the village.

Going back to the earliest days of its history, we find that during the two centuries before the Norman Conquest, Markham was peopled by Danish immigrants who settled in the valley of the Trent and mixed with the previous English settlers. When the length and breadth of the land was parcelled out among the followers of the Norman Conqueror, Markham was given to Roger de Busli, the list of whose lands in this country covers more than five pages in the Domesday Book. This Roger de Busli, or Bully, built Tickhill Castle, and in 1088 founded the Monastery of Blyth. Under the "Land of the King" in Domesday it is recorded: 'In Markham three carucates of land and a half to be villanes have here ten ploughs. There is a church and a Priest, and forty acres of meadow, and a very little coppice wood'. The tenants of Roger de Busli in East Markham were Turolde and Fulc.

Among his tenants in West Markham was Claron, who was the forefather of Alexander de Marcham, Constable of Nottingham Castle during the reign of Henry II (1154-1189). His son William married Cecilia Lexington, and their son Richard was lord of West Markham and Tuxford. Richard's brother Robert died in 1289, his lands in Markham going to his brother, but the Lexington estates were divided between his three daughters, who married into the great Nottinghamshire families of Santa Cruce, Longvilliers and Bekering. The nephew of Sir Robert, son of his brother Richard, was Sir John Markham, who arrived at the dignity of King's Sergeant. He was buried at East Retford in 1329. By his wife Joan, daughter of the lord of the neighbouring village of Bothamsall, he

had a son Robert, also a King's Sergeant who married Isabell heiress of Sir John Caunton, of Caunton in this county. Their son was Sir John Markham, the judge, who became lord of East Markham. This Sir John Markham was made a King's Sergeant during the reign of Richard II (1377-1399). He drew up the legal document for the deposing of that monarch, and was appointed one of the Commissioners to receive the Crown which Richard resigned in favour of his cousin Henry Bolingbroke.

Sir John had already become a Judge in Common Pleas, which office he held from 1396-1408, the year before his death. There is a M.S. History of the Markham Family, written by Francis Markham in July 1601, which contains the following passage: 'In Henry IV's time he was a judge of the common pleas. When a servant of the Prince of Wales was to be judged before him, the Prince sending to have him released, the judge refused. The Prince with an unruly route came and required it, the judge refused, the Prince struck the judge on the face. The judge committed the Prince to the Fleet (prison). The King being told of it, thanked God he had so good a judge, and so obedient a sonne to yield to the law'. A similar tradition has been handed down in another branch of the same family, although some historians have given Gascoigne as the name of the judge.

The judge's first wife was Elizabeth, daughter and co-heiress of Sir Roger de Cressy of Hodsock. It was apparently through her that the judge became owner of East Markham. By this wife he had a son, Robert, and a daughter Adele, who married Richard Stanhope of Rampton, and thus became an ancestress of the Dukes of Newcastle, who were, until recent times, the lay rectors of East Markham. (The last Duke died without issue in the 1980's, and the title is now extinct.) The judge's second wife was Milicent, daughter of Sir John de Bekeryng, and widow of Sir Nicholas Burdon, who was slain at the Battle of Shrewsbury in 1408. Milicent, not content with two husbands, married as her third, Sir William Merying. She bore Judge Markham a son, John, the future Lord Chief Justice. Judge Markham, the husband of Milicent and father of the Lord Chief Justice, is often spoken of as the founder of the church at East Markham, but it is evident that there was a church here at the time of the Conqueror. A more accurate title would be 'rebuilder' of the present church.

The chancel arch, which commands immediate attention, is much older than the rest of the church; and the remains of a much older wall could be seen in the west end of the south aisle during the restoration of the floor in 1897. The Rev. A.S. Briggs held the view that Judge Markham rebuilt the nave, aisles and greater part of the tower, and that his son the Lord Chief Justice, leaving the chancel arch in position, pulled down the 13th century chancel and erected the present one in its place. He writes: 'I speak of the work having been done by individuals because I am loth to upset the traditions I found when I came, but, knowing what we do of the zeal for the care and beautifying of their churches manifested by all classes in the 14th century, I should be inclined to substitute the parishioners of East Markham' for the, no doubt, worthy and munificent Judge and Lord Chief Justice'.

The next most striking feature is the range of eight clerestory windows which light the lofty nave, and are of the Perpendicular style. The crenelated capitals on the columns of the nave have been criticised by purists - Pevsner wonders how much of the outstandingly good details and portraits is due to Oldrid Scott's careful restoration - but were probably intended to be in harmony with the wealth of painted glass and screenwork which was here in the 15th century, much as Fairford Church in Gloucestershire looks today. The chancel roof is much lower than that of the nave, and until the 1883 restoration the easternmost ceiling boss was below the apex of the east window.

Standing against the north wall of the chancel is the tomb of Judge Markham. Thoresby in 1797 conjectured that it formerly stood in the centre of the chancel, but Sir Robert Markham of Sedgebrook, writing in 1680, says it was in its present position when he visited the church. Briggs conjectured that it was put there to be used as Easter Sepulchre, but a recent incumbent doubts this, indicating that it would have been further east, where there is no window to match the one on the south side. Sir Clements Markham, in 1882, describes the tomb as having one slab broken, but it was restored soon afterwards with funds left for that purpose by the daughters of Archbishop Markham (1777). The bones of Sir John were re-interred in the graveyard, but the stone coffin which had

been flush with the floor, was moved outside and used to collect rain water for washing. It has since disappeared, as has the lid, which for many years was propped against the chancel wall. A visitor has suggested that the latter might now be the door step of the chancel door, which is higher at one end than the other. Fragments of medieval coloured glass were found in the tomb, together with some alabaster. The inscription on the top of the tomb is as follows: *Orate pro anima Johis Markham iusticiarii - well may he ask, observes Pevsner drily, in view of the fate of Richard II - qui obiit in festo Sei Silvestri (papae) anno dni. millia CCCC nono cuius anime proptitetur Deus. Amen.* (Pray for the soul of John Markham, Justice, who died in the Feast of St. Sylvester (The Pope) A.D. 1409, on whose soul God have mercy. Amen.) The word 'papae' has been neatly cut out, not by the spoilers of our churches in the 16th centuries, but by vandals of the 18th and 19th centuries, for George Markham in 1784 said it was clearly visible then. Among a number of local names, a gaming board which has been identified as 'Nine Men's Morris', and a coffin with a skeleton in it, records of ignorance and irreverence scratched on the soft alabaster, appear John Clarke and William Monk 1647.

A mural tablet to the memory of Sherard Becher, Vicar of East Markham for 41 years, is in the south wall of the chancel. It also contains stones in the floor to the memory of members of the Williamson family, which succeeded that of Markham, and of the Kirkes, who have been associated with the place since 1681. At the entrance to the Chancel is a stone inscribed with the name of The Reverend William Che(a)les, 34 years Vicar (sic) of this parish. Since he was instituted in 1777, only three institutions took place until the 20th century; Mr. Becher in 1811, Mr. Brameld in 1852, during whose incumbency the great restoration of 1883 took place, and Mr. Briggs in 1896. There are numerous other ledger stones concealed under the carpet in the Chancel.

In the Nave, attention may be directed to the rood staircase, leading originally to the rood loft, access to which is now filled with remarkably modern-looking masonry blocks. The staircase continues to a turret which leads on to the roofs of the Chancel and Nave. It once contained a Sanctus bell, now to be seen in the Chancel. This stair was once blocked, and used as a chimney for a fireplace, the remains of which can be seen just inside the Chancel arch. It was re-opened early in the present century.

The East window was filled with stained glass in 1897 in memory of Mr. Brameld, and was designed and executed by J.N. Comper. It does not have his strawberry trademark, which he adopted later in his career, after the death of his father, but is authentic none the less.

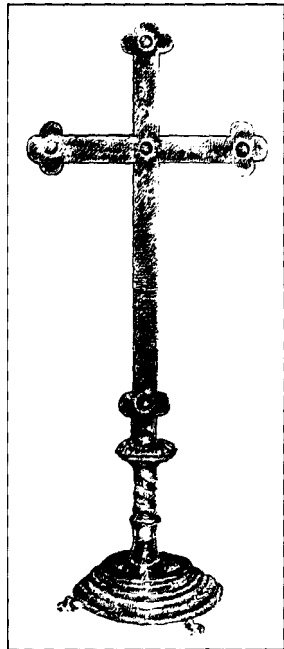
The windows of the South aisle have in their top lights fragments of medieval painted glass gathered from different parts of the church and churchyard in 1883-4. During the preceding eighty-odd years a considerable quantity of painted glass appears to have been removed. St. Lo Kniveton mentions, for example, the Arms of Foljambe, Longvilliers and Markham. At the present time there are in the east window of the South aisle, three old shields and a modern one; the last is that of Markham. The old shields are the Arms of Bewster or Brewster of Suffolk, Fitz-Hugh and Burdon impaling Bekeryng. This shows that Millicent, second wife of Judge Markham, was a Bekeryng. The name Pickering is prevalent in the neighbourhood, and it is tempting to think of it as a corruption of Bekeryng.

One of the windows in the South aisle was restored in memory of Mrs. Penrose, authoress of 'Mrs. Markham's History of England'.

This lady, who has slept in Lincoln Minster since the early 19th century, took her nom-de-plume from the village where she spent her early years under the guardianship of her aunts, the Misses Cartwright, who for a time lived at the Hall, known then as Mirfield Hall to distinguish it from an ancient house in the village known as the Old Hall. Mrs. Penrose's father was Dr. Edmund Cartwright, inventor of the power loom in 1795.

There are a number of 20th century memorial windows around the Church. The east window in the North aisle commemorates a relative of Brigadier J. Brind, as a result of whose death he inherited the Manor, where he now lives. In one of the clerestory windows above the North door is a single pomegranate, placed there, perhaps, to show what the others may have contained.

The Furnishings



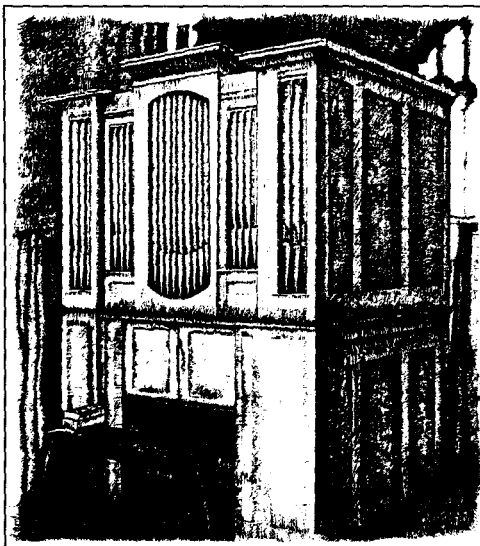
An old photograph shows that there were no side chapels prior to the 1883 restoration, the Nave and side aisles being filled with box pews. In the floor of what is now the Lady Chapel is a very fine brass of Dame Milicent Meryng. She died on September 27th, 1419, and the brass was originally a tomb top.

The Screen, apparently cut down in size and altered during the time of Archbishop Laud, was removed from the Chancel arch to its present position to make way for a magnificent screen and organ loft, in 1897. The architect's drawing, again by Comper, forms the end-paper of this booklet. The plan was never completed, however, due to a disagreement between the 7th Duke and Mr. Briggs and his Churchwardens, and the money allocated went to Egmonton Church instead.

An old Poor Box stands by the South door and had the inscription 'Remember the Poor', in Briggs's time. Note the three hasps, indicating that the incumbent and both Churchwardens had to be present to open it. It still attracts donations today. The litany desk was made from an old bench-end found under the floor of the South aisle.

The Font is an interesting piece of work, probably dating from 1686, except for its somewhat mutilated base, which many believe to be the old one turned upside down. That year may well have seen an extensive restoration, following the depredations, of the Commonwealth, since until 1883 the box pews were of that date, two ends forming the present Credence.

The Organ is a chamber organ, thought to be mid-Victorian until a restoration in 1988 revealed that the keyboard, or manual, is much



earlier, so it was probably built then, but from 18th century bits. There are no records of when it was installed, or where it came from, and it may have been in the music room of some long-demolished mansion. Although electrified, the original hand-operated bellows are intact and working.

The Altar rails, Pulpit and Font cover are thought to date from the 1688 restoration, but being Jacobean, may date from the installation of the bells in 1637, during the primacy, and possibly at the instigation of, Archbishop Laud himself. If so, they must have been well hidden during Cromwellian times.

The Trinity Chapel in the North aisle contains an old altar slab which, during periods of desecration and restoration formed a paving stone at the entrance to the Chancel. At least two of the crosses on it are quite visible, although much worn. There is a curious tale that when the Rev. A.S. Briggs was appointed to East Markham, and before he had set eyes on the place, he had a vivid dream of the altar slab with its crosses. When shown round for the first time, he went straight to the spot and identified the slab as the one he had seen in his dream. It was duly replaced in the altar table. The ancient stone slab by the North door was thought by Pevsner to be that of an unknown lady, of the same odd type as the North Collingham and Staunton.

Finally, the height of the West arch deserves mention. It is exceptionally high and unusual in a parish church. The arch was revealed in its glory during the 1883 restoration when a large timber belfry which completely



obscured it in a way now impossible to imagine, was removed. The rotten and dangerous ancient timber roof was replaced at the same time and the ceiling, which had apparently been below the level of the clerestory windows, was raised to its present level. The consequent flooding in of light astounded the local people, and was much commented upon in the local press. The modern screen across the tower room entrance was erected in memory of Mr. Briggs's

widow. A new vestry was built in 1993, behind the organ at the west end of the north aisle, and contains an oak vestment chest to a Comper design. The former vestry, at the base of the tower, was converted at the same time into a sound-proof room with toilet and catering facilities.

The Exterior

The Porch over the South door was rebuilt in 1883 by the generosity of two local people, and has an ancient timber roof with interesting carved bosses. There is a figure in a niche on the south side of the tower, probably of John the Baptist, and not, as at one time supposed, Judge Markham, and may possibly be connected with the town of Rouen, with which, in medieval times, there were ecclesiastical links. There is a sundial which has lost its gnomon, and a piece of moulding built into the wall of the South aisle. The gargoyles are in elaborate contrast to the plain character of the Chancel windows. The tower, beautifully proportioned in three tiers, is 81ft 6in high, and was completed in the time of Edward IV, a great period for tower building. It was restored, after a local appeal, in 1971.

The Bells, originally 4, were hung in 1637. They were re-hung in 1893, and two new bells added in 1895. In 1925 the peal was completed by two more bells given by Mr. T.W. Hopps of Leamington. The bells were completely refurbished in 1981, and to defray the cost, a miniature replica was raffled. The winners presented the tiny set to the Church, and they can be seen in the Chancel.

The 1637 bells each carry a motto:

The Big Bell:- All men that hear my mounful sound
Repent before you lye in the ground.

Second Bell:- I sweetly tolling men do call
To taste on meat that feeds the soul.

Third Bell:- God save the Church.

Fourth Bell:- All glory to be God.

The Parish Registers date from 1561, and the Vestry Book from 1662. Among the entries in the latter is one stating that a vestry meeting was held in the Chancel on Sunday May 25th 1785. Another states that



'Elizabeth Billiald being excommunicated, was absolved May 3rd 1704'. A third that on 'October 30th 1695, King William III came from Lincoln through Great Markham, in his progress to Welbeck' to visit the first Duke of Newcastle. From the list of 'Testamentary Burialls' in the Tone MS, Fr Briggs culled the following:- '15th November 1432, Hugh Knight, Vicar, to be buried in the Church. 30th April 1439, Christopher Saureby, Vicar, to be buried before the chancel door. 14th October 1446, Robert Markham of East Markham to be buried in the church before S. Trinity's Altar. 31st October,

1548, Robt. Robotham, Vicar, to be buried in the High Quire.'

Domestic Aspects

For the sake of students of domestic life in past years, there is an extract from a petition by Thomas Gylby, Vicar, to Lancelot, Archbishop of York, 1738, which sets forth that 'The Vicarage House of East Markham, through the length of time since it was first built, is become very bad and ruinous, and besides so inconvenient as to have cattle go to water and pasture through the midst of the house.'

Of traditions connected with the village, he gave the most authentic first. In 1609, a plague broke out in Markham which devastated the village, ultimately causing its market to be moved to nearby Tuxford. During the year there were 115 deaths, recorded by the Vicar, William Field, immediately followed by his own name, written, movingly, by an unknown hand. The mound on The Green is thought to be the plague pit. Markham, however, did not entirely lose its prestige, for Briggs was told by people whose informants could remember the fact that a row of six or seven carriages of 'The Quality', whose owners were making purchases at the local shop, might be seen constantly outside the present Post Office. A less savoury tradition is that a former vicar, being non-resident, rode over on a Sunday morning, and putting up at an inn near the church, sent the clerk backwards and forwards to the church, in order that he might have 'another pot' before an expectant congregation assembled. Moreover, after

waiting for the duration of several 'pots', and hearing that no-one had 'coom', he would remount and ride away.

There is, of course, the usual tradition of Cromwell's troops stabling their horses in the church. It is more probable that the havoc committed is to be laid partly at the doorstep of those so-called custodians in the 18th and early 19th centuries, who allowed glaziers from Tuxford, to remove stained glass and replace it with 'nice white glass', and also at the doors of Cromwell's namesake of the 16th century, the list of whose depredations would probably reveal how much of the glory of East Markham has departed. The following inventory of church goods was drawn up by Thomas Cromwell's agents, but the items were not removed until later, in the sixth year of the reign of Edward VI:-

'One chalesse of sylvr pcell gilte, one crosse bullion single gylte, one vestment of changeable sylke wt albes and amysses for deacon and sb deacon of the same coler, one vestment of dornix wt albe and amysses yrto, one vestment of grene and yellow sylke wt the albe and amysses yrto, one cloke of grene velvet imbroidered, one cope of changeable sylke, one cope of dornix, three bells in the stepull, one hand bell wt a little sacringe bell.

Conclusion

There are unsolved questions in more recent times too. The great restoration of 1883, partly funded by the 7th Duke of Newcastle, transformed what had been a sadly neglected old country church, with a roof on the point of collapse, perilously bulging side aisle walls, and a dark low-ceilinged interior crammed with ugly 200 year old box pews, into the light and airy building we see today. And yet, nowhere in his paper to the Thoroton Society does the Rev. A.S. Briggs make any mention of it, only a few years later. The contemporary newspapers, local and national, were full of it. His predecessor, during whose incumbency the restoration took place, and in whose memory the magnificent Comper window was installed, gets only scant mention. What was the nature of the dispute between Briggs, his Churchwardens and the Duke which aborted the culmination of Comper's work, the choir screen?

There are mysterious disappearances. Old photographs, undated, but clearly taken with a plate camera, show a beam across the chancel arch, supporting a large crucifix with the word 'God so loved the world' beneath it in gold lettering. At least two local ladies remember it in their

childhood. They also remember playing on the turret spiral staircase and running about on the Chancel roof, but the photographs show a blank wall where the door now is. The pulpit is now two feet lower than it was a hundred years ago, and it had at least two richly embroidered pulpit falls. Elegant brass lamps hung on chains from the ceiling of the Nave, and the walls were plastered. All have gone, and the removal of the plaster reveals medieval jerry building which was never meant to be seen, nor the Victorian bricks packed in above the windows during Oldrid Scott's otherwise meticulous reconstruction in the 1880's. Who, one wonders, installed the elaborate and ugly oil-filled heating system, from clerestory windows down to, and including Judge Markham's tomb? And at what cost? Hardly any of it works.

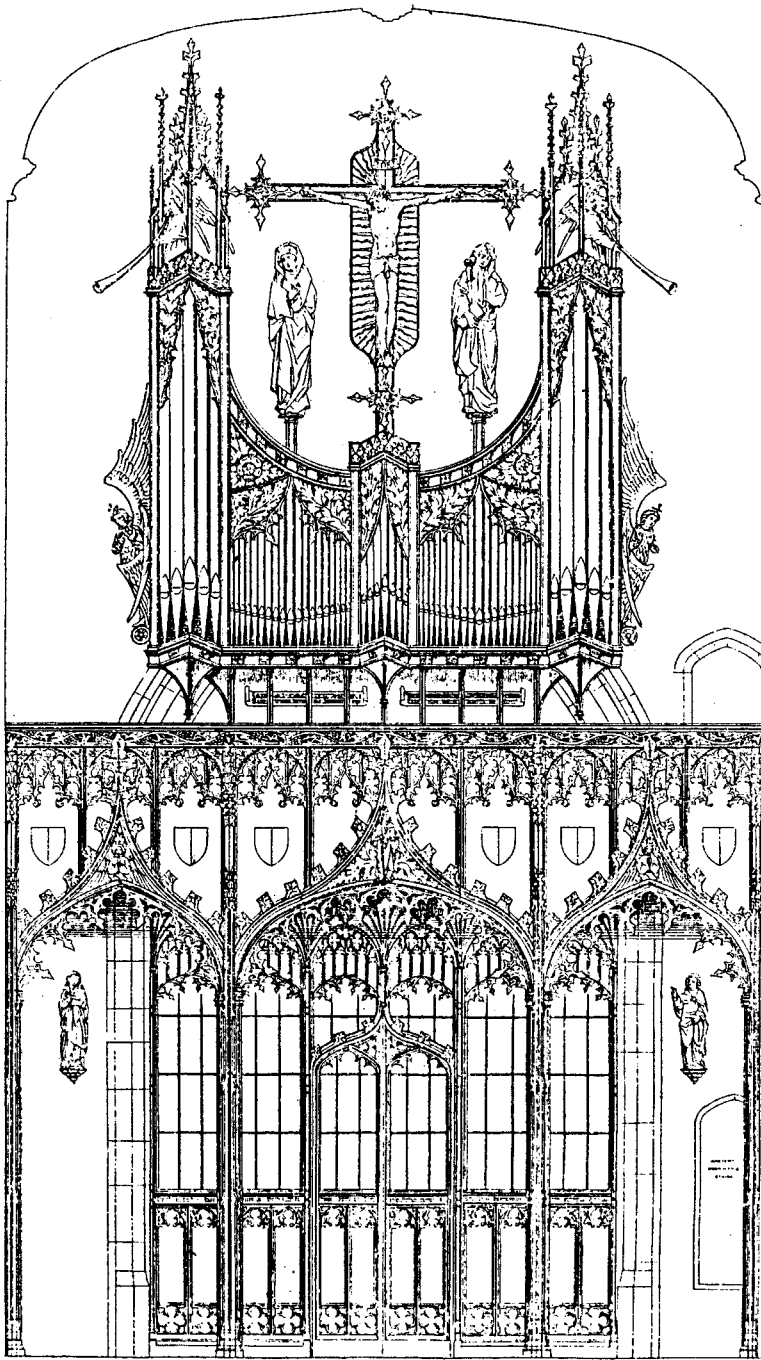
Stripped of much of its former glory the church may be, but come in early on a summer morning, when the rising sun pours in through the great East window, and, for a moment, you will get a glimpse of how once it must have looked.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, I offer my sincere thanks to the friends and family of the late Paul Beard, Barrister-at-Law, through whose generosity the publication of this booklet, in his memory, has been possible.

*Iain M MacIntyre
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