

THE BLACK DEATH & ALL SAINTS CHURCH, Birchington

The shape and appearance of all Saints Church in Birchington is mainly due to the arrival of the Black Death in the village in about 1348. Just a few years earlier in 1343, a Contract was drawn up between John Steed (Churchwarden – or Guardian) of Birchington Church and William Goldwert of the Parish of Herne, who was to undertake the work on the church. The work is described in some detail and compares the proposed extension was to be like the work on the north side of the church of St Nicholas at Wade (in Thanet).

The work was begun soon after the contract was signed and the first phase was also to include a new S.W. Tower of much larger proportions than the S.E. one (which at that period had no spire. The enlarged pilaster, the extra thick wall in the S.W. corner of the nave and the enormous S.W. pillar were all completed. The springers at the point where the arch was to rise towards the centre of the new arch for the additional tower were begun – but suddenly the village was overtaken by the Black Death in 1348-9. The labour force diminished to a tiny trickle and the money for funding the project ran hopelessly low. The great new project came to a standstill.

Quite how long things remained in this state, we do not know. But as soon as it was humanly possible the project was reviewed and adapted to the greatly limited labour and cash flow. The new tower was abandoned and the builder and Churchwarden decided to compromise with two half aisles instead. These were sited under the eaves of each side of the church, giving the church that huge roof span we are all so used to recognising. Unfortunately, is also meant that instead of some large windows, pairs of small windows were inserted, making for a very dark interior. This made the bill for candles much higher than in lighter churches.

Putting the two half aisles was economically cheaper than the huge south aisle that had been planned, because construction of the smaller, lower structure meant less labour and almost certainly less material was required. At the end of the work, Goldwert (or whoever survived him) put a spire on the original tower. The original 14th century framework is still in place, albeit with quite a few repairs and strengthening ties added over the ensuing centuries. It is also possible that the height of the old tower was raised at the same time, but this would need further research to prove correct or not.

So Birchington Church owes its present shape entirely to the arrival of the Black Death so soon after the enlargement was begun.



All Saints 1723
John Lewis