

All Saints Church West Farleigh's 'Hole in the Wall'

The Hole in the Wall ...

... the '*north wall of the chancel*' to be exact. But why is it there? Why is it evident on the *outside* though not on the *inside* of the wall? And why is it not level with the other window? And (like our hymns) is it ancient, or is it modern? And is it significant, or should we ignore it?



The answer is that '*the hole*' is in fact the vestige of one of the church's **Low-side Windows**; that it is indeed *ancient* and *significant*, and that it should certainly *not* be ignored since its story is part of the heritage and culture of both the church and the village.

Stephen Norman points it out for us here, but sadly this shows today that it is *not* actually **low** at all; in fact, by comparison with others of its genre it is rather high, and highness does not equate with the window's intended function as we will shortly see.

At the time of its *insertion* (for 'inserted' it certainly was – nearly two centuries after the church was originally built), the ground outside would have been at least a metre higher than it is now – to the extent that if Stephen had been standing on this (higher) ground for the picture, his head would have been level with the top third of the window. The curious change in the colour and pattern of the (relatively modern) rendering on the lower half of the whole of the church's northern wall might in some way be related to the former height of the ground here – but this possibility lies outside the scope of this paper.



Inside the north wall of the chancel, there is, as far as I could make out, no evidence of the window's ingress. This is not unusual.



Outside the *south* wall, where one might expect a sister Low-side window to be, the area has been invaded by the (I assume) ...vestry? Again, it is not unusual to find that the inconvenience of having such an oddly-positioned redundant window has been catered for in later years by turning it into a doorway and this would have been one of the main reasons for building the (post 1350) vestry in this particular position. I would have checked the architecture more closely had I realised that my connection with All Saints Church West Farleigh was any more than just a fleeting visit to honour David and Helen Swan's 60th Wedding Anniversary.

Low-side windows were a by-product of the decisions reached by the Fourth Lateran Council which took place in Rome in 1215. The most significant result of this supremely important meeting of Bishops and other senior clergy was a renewed attitude towards the rite of **Transubstantiation** - the doctrine which describes the sacramental process by which the Holy Communion bread and wine become *the actual body and blood of Christ on the cross*. The new concept was almost immediately linked with the doctrine of **Purgatory** and the issuing of **Indulgences** for purgatorial temporal relief. Much of the Church's control in the Middle Ages

was based on fear about the afterlife. The 1215 Council brought the potential dangers into a closer and even more frightening focus, and the prospect of obtaining some relief from the terrors of purgatory became acutely attractive to the common man and woman.

Many indulgences were on offer but the one that is relevant here was for a communicant to be allowed (on payment of a fee) to gaze upon the bread (host) immediately after transubstantiation and, in the belief that what he or she was seeing was the actual body and blood of Christ as He hung on the cross, utter the words “My Lord and my God”. This would grant the applicant’s soul seven years and forty days relief from purgatory.

The Low-side Window was an integral part of the mechanism by which such a privilege could be offered. Such rites were commonly carried out on festival days (especially Easter) when several priests were officiating and the church was full to overflowing with communicants standing in the nave (there were no pews) and spilling out into the churchyard. The essence of the granting of an indulgence such as I have just described required privacy - without the possibility of someone looking over the penitent’s shoulder and gaining the benefits of an indulgence without entering into an arrangement which swelled church funds.

The nave belonged to the village; the chancel belonged to the rector and the church authorities. It was the Low-side Window which gave the penitent villager private access to the chancel, and to the newly transubstantiated host which lay on the paten held by the priest.

A century later (in about 1350) the ‘church’s’ attitude changed – ostensibly because it seemed that the public were becoming too familiar with the *host* to the extent that the benefit of its mystery was being lost. The open chancels were promptly closed by the erection of screens with the result that the chancel itself became part of the mystery and little of the celebrant’s activities could be observed directly by the congregation who instead had to rely on the sound of the sacring bell to tell them that the unseen elevation of the host had occurred. Low-side Windows were needed no more. Many were blocked up – especially those on the north walls which were prone to letting in the biting north winds of winter.

The structures had, nevertheless, been important in their time, and I would urge that, whenever you visit a church which was extant between the years of 1215 and 1350, you join the challenge of searching for signs of their existence.

Footnote

In the past a number of other *raisons d’êtres* have been offered for Low-side Windows, ranging from ‘leper windows’ to ‘confessional windows’ to ‘ventilation windows’ to ‘windows associated with the viewing of an internal light’ or ‘with the ringing of the sacring bell’. All such suggestions have over the years been steadily refuted - often because when questioned, the proposer had no answer to why the need for them would have suddenly vanished a hundred years later.

One thing is clear and that is that the purpose of the low position of the window’s cill is to allow communication between a person outside the church and someone or something inside the church. The amalgam of dates and circumstances I have mentioned above make it fairly clear that the mystery of the windows’ function has at last been solved.

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