Eighteenth Century St Olave's - Restoration and Social Order

by Helen Robb

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Introduction

Have you ever imagined how St Olave's might have been in the Georgian era? An incredible hand drawn document, dated 1723 and discovered in the Borthwick Archives, reveals much about the internal layout of the church, who was worshipping here and how members of the congregation were seated according to their social position, 80 years after the English Civil War ended.

The church had just undergone a major restoration to finally repair the serious damage it had sustained during the siege of York. After re-building work was completed, parishioners were 'at a loss where to seat themselves'. So in 1723, Reverend Thomas Moseley (curate), the churchwardens and other prominent church members applied to the consistory court of Archbishop William Dawes to gain his approval for a new pew allocation plan. Seen in context, the document provides a fascinating snapshot of St Olave's and its congregation 300 years ago.

Cover photo: West view of St Olave's and the ruins of St Mary's Abbey
Source: Drake's Eboracum

From the ruins of the English Civil War

'If York be lost, I shall esteem my crown a little less'
Charles I to Prince Rupert - early July 1644

York was lost to the crown on 16th July 1644, surrendering to parliamentary forces after the Battle of Marston Moor and a prolonged siege. Cannon fire and fighting around Bootham and Marygate had left St Mary's Tower, parts of the ancient abbey walls and St Olave's in a ruinous state. Many Royalist dead were buried in the churchyard. Despite the decree by Lord Fairfax (Parliamentary Governor of York), in the surrender agreement, that York's heritage and churches should be protected, it is hard to imagine how parishioners and city leaders dealt with the aftermath of such a bloody and destructive conflict.

Over the next few decades St Olave's was repaired (patched up might be more accurate) to a degree that services could continue. In 1705 Queen Anne gave permission for stone from St Mary's Abbey to be used for further repairs but it wasn't until 1721/2, by which time the church was considered unsafe, that St Olave's underwent extensive restoration. The church order book for repairs and the outcome of a parochial visitation in 1721 (held at the Borthwick Archive at York University), itemised extensive work to be done; '*The whole body of the church, walls, windows, roofe and floor to be repaired*'. The south wall and pillars were dismantled and rebuilt, the oak roof was repaired, windows were inserted in the north aisle, new altar rails fitted, and a new cover installed for the font. The restoration included an order that the interior should be whitewashed. It would be another 157 years before the present Victorian chancel extended the length of the church by around 20 feet and the whitewash was painstakingly removed, apart from the south wall, built of rough stone which needed to be concealed.

Over eighty years after the Civil War ended, parishioners could at last worship in relative comfort and security.

Whilst reviewing documents relating to the restoration, a unique diagram of the church interior, hand drawn in 1723, drew my attention. The diagram showed the 'pew allocation' proposals for the layout in the newly re-built church. Probably created by one of the churchwardens, it shone a light on the social hierarchy and norms then existing at St Olave's, including names of parishioners and officials taking a key role in the life of the church. Some of these had gained wider recognition for their achievements. The majority of those named are recorded in the parish register and buried at St Olave's. First the historical significance of the document needs to be placed in context.

Church and state in 1723

Church and state were indivisible in the early eighteenth century. Thousands of parishes existed, served by over 15,000 clerics, usually the sons of nobility and gentry. Hanoverian bishops and clergy exerted considerable influence on local government, parliament and the universities. Often gaining their position through preferment, bishops were politically motivated. Generally, none but those professing the faith of the Church of England were eligible for public appointment. Order and 'place' ensured individuals rarely moved beyond their social station.

In fact, the eighteenth-century established church was viewed by some historians as being in a state of 'advanced moral decay', borne out by indications that as the century progressed the church had lost around 1/5 of its congregation. By contrast, non-conformist religious movements were on the rise.

1723: nationally and locally

The era of the Hanoverians was underway, George I was monarch. Robert Walpole was Prime minister. Scientific and technical advances were increasing, particularly in agriculture. Coffee drinking and coffee houses had become popular. Smallpox and other serious infectious diseases were common. Medical care was rudimentary for the wealthy, almost non-existent for the poor, mortality in childbirth was high. Charitable poor relief was administered through parishes, paid by rates levied on wealthier households and through donations. Almshouses grew in number. Vagrancy was illegal, yet beggars were a familiar feature on the streets. Workhouses began to be built after 1722.

York was becoming less influential as other northern towns grew. It remained a large market-based city, accommodating many diverse craftsmen and skilled artisans. The city corporation was making improvements to roads and buildings within and outside the walls and over a decade later, York Mansion House and the Assembly rooms were built. Sanitation was slower to develop, sewage and animal dung still drained into the Ouse, from which many inhabitants derived their water supply. York remained the social capital of Yorkshire. Leisure occupations included the races, assemblies held initially in the Manor House (and later the assembly rooms) during race weeks. There the affluent enjoyed dancing, music and card games. York Theatre Royal had not yet been built. For the less wealthy ale houses were plentiful, cock fighting, gaming and travelling performers were popular. For the destitute, many York parishes had small, overcrowded pauper houses and several almshouses. The ‘Old Maid’s Hospital in Bootham (Wandesford House) was not built until 1739 and York’s first (purpose-built) workhouse in Marygate did not exist until the 1760s.

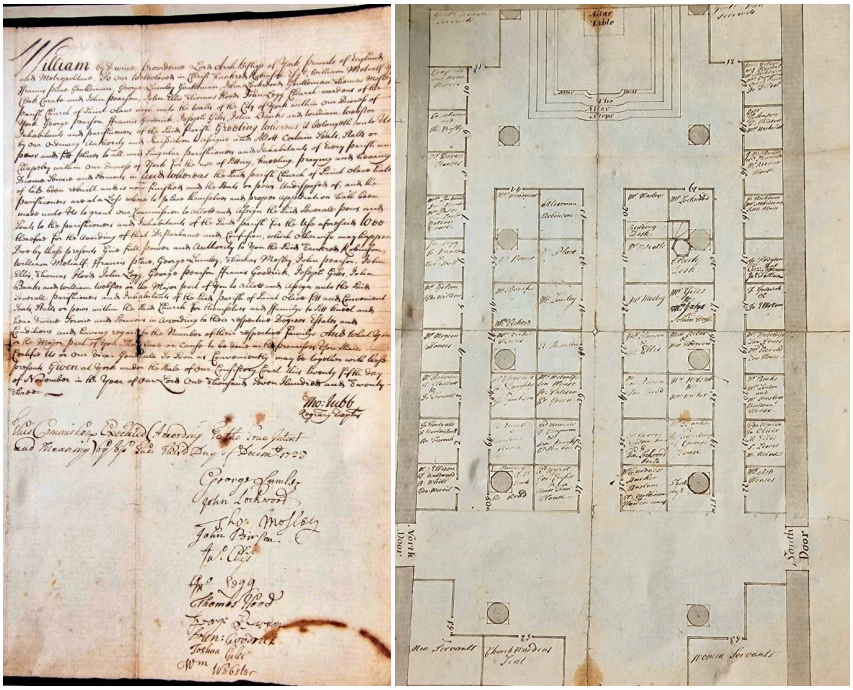
At St Olave's, Reverend Thomas Moseley was the incumbent (curate). Born 1663 in York, the son of a verger, Moseley was descended from a leading Yorkshire family. He was admitted to Cambridge in 1681, eventually becoming curate at St Olave's in 1695, until his death in 1732. He was simultaneously Rector of Skelton. Married with four children, he and his family lived in Marygate. Two of his sons became priests. Most of his family are buried at St Olave's. Reverend Moseley appears on one of the benefaction boards at the rear of the nave.

The Archbishop of York was William Dawes, 3rd Baronet. Dawes, a Hanoverian tory, owed his early advancement to Queen Anne who had previously overruled ministers to appoint him Bishop of Chester in 1708. He was a good friend of his predecessor Archbishop John Sharp, who on his deathbed recommended Dawes to succeed him. Dawes was considered an outstanding preacher with an authoritarian personality.

St Olave's was then one of the wealthiest churches in the city[1], having attracted financial advantage from the Queen Anne's Bounty scheme, established in 1704. Churchwarden reports held in the Borthwick refer to land acquisition in Kirkby in Cleveland, which was let. The investment returns and rents from this land supported upkeep of church fabric and payment of the clergy. St Olave's was then partly surrounded by pastures and gardens. Evidence, (also in Churchwarden accounts), indicates that some of this land, including nearby gardens and the churchyard, was let, presumably for growing fruit and vegetables and for grazing livestock. Easter offerings and fees were paid to St Olave's (together with those from other parts of the then parish; St Giles, Clifton and Rawcliffe).

[1] History of the County of York: City of York. The parish churches. Pages 160-65. Victoria County History 1961. Ed P.M Tilliot. Also Borthwick Institute Churchwarden Reports and Church Rate Assessments 1719-1784

St Olave's Pew Allocation 1723



St Olave's Petition to Archbishop Dawes (L) and map of church interior/ pew allocation 1723 (R). ***Images reproduced with permission of the University of York: Borthwick Institute for Archives July 2023.***

Viewing this document from a modern-day perspective, it is difficult to see why the seating of the congregation in 1723 should have been so important. But regardless of the centuries, many members of the current St Olave's congregation continue to gravitate to their familiar pews each Sunday morning. So maybe our habits and traditions, as opposed to our status as individuals, are not so vastly different!

There is an assumption from the St Olave's pew plan that the seating in 1723 took the form of boxed pews, similar to those still existing at Holy Trinity Goodramgate (below). A common feature in the eighteenth century, box pews eventually fell out of favour and most were dismantled by the end of the next. This was largely due to expansion of the population and the need for more space but also to promote greater social cohesion in worship.

Boxed pews: Holy Trinity Goodramgate, York
Source: Wikimedia Creative Commons

Generally, the allocation of pews 300 years ago offered a clear visualisation of social hierarchy and standing in the parish. After the reformation, sermons, occasionally lasting hours, had become a central act of worship, emphasising the 'ministry of the Word' and making pews and their position even more important. Pulpits could be three decks high allowing the preacher lofty views of the congregation, with the parish clerk's desk and/or reading desk at the bottom. Such was the case with Laurence Sterne's pulpit at Coxwold Parish Church. People with hearing problems would use ear trumpets and there is little doubt that 'dozing off' was common.

The sleeping congregation – Print by William Hogarth 1736
Source: Wikimedia Creative commons

Marsh suggests that Sunday services in English Parish churches were distinctive occasions where society displayed 'itself to itself'[2]. Church seating was an important reflection of this. Wealthier parishioners expected prestigious seats in reward for contributions to the material upkeep of the church or simply by right. Pews were often rented to raise income. Some were customarily linked to residences or houses whilst others designated at the mercy of the churchwardens. Demographic expansion and visitors coming to services must have made this task even more challenging. Such factors were probably behind the need to draw up specific pew plans using criteria such as rank, worth, merit, calling, condition and means. Segregation of the sexes and by female marital status were common but not universal features. Some widows often kept the seats of their deceased husbands. Children might be separated from parents; servants were set apart from their masters.

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[2] Marsh C (2005) Order and Place in England: The view from the pew. Journal of British Studies Vol 44. No1. Pages 3-26. JSTOR collections.

The dilemmas facing churchwardens could manifest themselves in formal disputes over seating allocations which did not meet with approval. Challenges might end up being referred to the ecclesiastical court. One case heard by a court in the south of England related to two men who resorted to blows and insults during a service, when one, (possibly unknowingly) had occupied the seat of the other. Marsh further cites the plea of one churchwarden, Richard Gough, who had drawn up his pew seating plan in 1701: *'I hope no man will blame me for not naming every person according to that which he conceives is his right and superiority in the seats in church, for it is a thing impossible for any man to know'*.

And so it was in November 1723 that Reverend Moseley, Alderman Sir Tancred Robinson and the churchwardens of St Olave's applied to Archbishop Dawes requesting approval of the allocation of pews after restoration of the church. The rationale being that the parishioners were *'at a loss where to place themselves'* and there was a need to *'avoid disturbance and confusion'*. This does not suggest there were any unseemly challenges at St Olave's over pew seating, merely a degree of confusion and uncertainty about where to sit after the rebuilding work. But there was certainly an underlying intent to avoid any such confusion in the future.

The archbishop responded a month later writing *'To our well beloved in Christ Tancred Robinson Esq, William Metcalf Esq, Francis Place (Gent), George Lumley (Gent), John Lockwood (Gent), Thomas Moseley (Curate), John Ellis, John Wood, Thomas Hood, John Legg, Joshua Giles, William Webster (Churchwardens of the Parish). Whereas it belongeth unto us by our ordinary authority and jurisdiction to assign and allot certain stalls, pews and seats, for the use of sitting, kneeling, praying and hearing of divine services and sermons in the said church of St Olave's, recently rebuilt and now finished and the stalls and pews*

undisposed of. Proper application hath been made unto us to grant our permission. By these (proposals?) we give full powers and authority to you, the said Tancred Robinson (et al) to allot and assign to the said parishioners and inhabitants fit and convenient seats, stalls and pews within the church for themselves and their families according to their respective estates and conditions etc.' **(Abridged)**

The pew allocation diagram is an important record of the layout of the interior of the church in the first quarter of the century. It shows the church without the Victorian chancel; a shorter building with the former chancel wall, altar and medieval east window positioned where the existing chancel now begins. At one time there was a sacristy entrance (in the north wall) presently marked by an iron blacksmith's cross, set into a window ledge. The nave columns, tower, belfry and font remained as they are today. The pulpit was sited a little way down the right side of the nave. It seems from the drawing that it was no more than one tier high. A parish clerk's desk and a reading desk were positioned at the base of the pulpit, together with pews distributed for Reverend Moseley and presumably his family members. The churchwardens sat where they do now, at the rear of the nave on the left. As for the other pews, the layout depicts the social status of the parishioners, with servants clearly separated from their employers and by gender.

Notable pew occupants

In pew 43, north aisle at the front **Alderman Tancred Robinson (1685-1754**) was placed. Sir Tancred Robinson, 3rd Baronet was the second son of Sir William Robinson and nephew of a naturalist and personal physician to George I, after whom he was named. Robinson succeeded his older brother to the baronetcy and estate of Newby Park, nr Ripon in 1741. He had an illustrious naval career, eventually becoming a Rear Admiral with several high-

profile commands. Some of his naval papers are held in the Royal Naval Museum at Greenwich. He was elected Lord Mayor of York in 1718 and 1738. Parish records indicate that Robinson was living at the King's Manor in 1723 and was a regular worshipper at St Olave's. He married an heiress; Mary Norton in 1713. They had nine children, two of whom were baptised at St Olave's, Thomas in 1725 and daughter Margaret in 1727. Tancred Robinson is buried at St Crux church with his wife, where there is a distinctive monument.

Tancred Robinson Memorial. St Crux Church.

Behind Alderman Robinson in pew 42 sat his neighbour, **Francis Place (1647-1728).** Francis Place (Gent) was a celebrated draughtsman, potter, engraver and printmaker. Born in Dinsdale, County Durham, he was destined to enter law at Gray's Inn London. The outbreak of plague in 1665 forced him to leave London and the legal profession. He had a talent for drawing and engraving through association with his friend, the artist Wenceslas Holler. Settling in York around 1680, where he had relatives, Place married twice. He had two daughters by his first wife. Both children were baptised at St Olave's. His second marriage was to a wealthy widow, augmenting his financial security. He had

apartments in the York Manor House[3]. Place befriended many renowned local artists and antiquarians, becoming a founder member of the York virtuosi, a forerunner of the Yorkshire Philosophical Society.

During his lifetime, he travelled widely, sketching and painting topographical scenes in Britain and Europe. Over 400 of these are extant. Place was a brilliant experimenter in the art of engraving and mezzotint and his works are found in art galleries and collections around the world. Some of his greatest work includes 12 historical etchings of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich, executed around 1677. The etchings show in exquisite detail the surrounding landscape, the rooms and instruments at the newly built observatory. Place died in 1728, aged 81. He is buried in the nave of St Olave's, with his father (Rowland Place) and his wives.

An obituary by his friend and fellow artist George Virtue expressed his talents: '*This year dyed at York Francis Place, an ingenious gent, whose works in painting, drawing, engraving and mezzotint are deservedly esteemed by lovers of art. In the latter part of his life, having means to live on, he passed his time at ease, being a sociable and pleasant companion, much beloved by the gentry of these parts. In his younger days he was a keen sportsman, particularly for fishing. But time and great age brought him to his grave'.*

[3] King's Manor York – Grade I listed and originally the Abbots house of St Mary's Abbey. After the dissolution it became the seat of the Council of the North until 1641. St Olave's was the official church of the council. The manor then became the residence of the Governor of York. After 1688 it was rented to private tenants and housed a school until the nineteenth century. It was then taken over by the Yorkshire School for the Blind. It is now part of the University of York.

Portrait of Francis Place by Thomas Murray Hospitalfields (circa 1725)

Pew 41 housed **George Lumley (1665- 1738)** - Gent. Lumley was schoolmaster at the Manor house, friend of Francis Place and brother-in-law of Ralph Thorseby, both members of the York Virtuosi set. Lumley was an amateur yet skilled portraitist in crayons and mezzotint. Francis Place encouraged Lumley's artistic ambitions, giving him equipment and advice. Lumley died in 1738, aged 73. He was buried with his wife Phoebe and six of his children in St Olave's churchyard.

Pew 40 was allocated to **Robert Thornton (1703-1724)**. Thornton was the son of William Thornton (1670-1721), celebrated carpenter and architect based in York, who had designed and built Beningbrough Hall and ingeniously saved Beverley Minster from collapse in 1718/19. Robert Thornton prematurely became head of the Thornton family, inheriting the successful family firm after his father's death. But he was to die three years after his father, aged only 21. This left his younger brother William Thornton II (1707 - 1737) to take on the family business which continued for another decade or more. The elder William Thornton, born in Thornhill nr

Wakefield, married Anne Prince in 1695. They had seven children, four sons and three daughters. Evidence of Thornton's innovative work can be seen in many of the great houses in Yorkshire, including Castle Howard, Wentworth Castle, Wentworth Woodhouse, Gilling Castle and Beningbrough Hall.

Thornton (the elder) worked with many renowned architects and craftsmen, most notably Nicholas Hawksmoor at Castle Howard and Beverley Minster. The family lived in Marygate. It seems that the early deaths of William Thornton and his sons meant that the once thriving firm eventually declined and ceased. Thornton's daughter Christiana died aged just 18 in 1735, his other two daughters (Sarah and Ann), both unmarried, ended their lives in the 'Old Maid's Hospital' (Wandesford House, Bootham) in the latter half of the century. Most of the family are interred at St Olave's. William and Robert Thornton are buried together in a nave vault to the right of the altar. An impressive memorial to their memory and legacy can be seen on the wall at the rear of the nave.

William and Robert Thornton Memorial: St Olave's

Pew 17, close to the pulpit, housed **Montague Giles** (confusingly spelt as either Gyles, Geils or Giles in the parish record) **1699-1779**. A successful York brickmaker and amateur antiquarian. Giles was also a friend of Francis Place and the renowned York glass painter and namesake, Henry Gyles. Giles was a member of the York Virtuosi, who met to share interests, conversation and antiquities at the house of Henry Gyles on Micklegate hill. An article by John Knowles[4] describes these meetings 'as frequently merry and extending far into the night'. The friends corresponded regularly over a lengthy period and had nicknames for one another: 'Honest Harry (Henry Gyles), Ralpho Thorseby, Monty Giles (Montague Giles) and Frank (Francis) Place'. Knowles refers to a meeting where Henry Gyles apparently pocketed a small roman urn belonging to Montague Giles who had passed it around for his friends to examine. Gyles admitted in a letter to Thoresby that he hoped 'Monty' would not notice. It is hoped that Gyles eventually returned the object to its rightful owner.

Montague Giles lived on The Mount (York), an affluent suburb with a history of many archeological finds, which may explain how he obtained his 'urn'. A newspaper report in the Leeds Intelligencer of July 29th , 1777, cites Giles (by then at an advanced age), being embroiled in a case tried at the Guildhall in York. The case was brought by a clergyman (Reverend Stockdale). Giles had illegally enclosed Stockdale's large pond which the clergyman used for watering his cattle. After a hearing lasting six hours (!) the jury brought in a verdict for the plaintiff. The penalty was not disclosed but Giles was probably compelled to quickly remove the enclosure.

[4] Knowles J. Henry Gyles – Glass painter of York. The volume of the Walpole Society. Vol II (1922-1923). P 47-72.

Giles was married twice and had at least two children. He and his family are interred in a large chest tombstone close to the south wall of the churchyard, bearing the inscription: *'Her lieth interred the remains of Montague Geil (Giles) husband to Mary Giles who died 1779 aged 80. He was an indulgent husband, a faithful friend and cheerful helper of the poor'.*

Pew 9 was allocated to **Jacob Wharton (1682-1727)**. Wharton, a successful draper and Freeman of York was a tenant at the York Manor House. With his wife Mary, Wharton had three children, the eldest of which, Thomas (1713-1775) became the chief goaler of York Castle in 1756. A post he occupied for over 20 years. Thomas Wharton presided over many executions at the Knavesmire and arranged numerous prisoner transportations. Jacob Wharton and his wife are buried at St Olave's. Thomas Wharton is also buried in a nave vault with his wife and eldest son. Wharton family members worshipped at St Olave's over many years.

Churchwardens

The churchwardens at St Olave's, in common with those of the rest of the country, had significant responsibilities. Guardians of the church fabric, land, possessions and furniture, they also raised and allocated funds for upkeep. Churches were expected to support themselves, with the main source of income from levies on wealthier householders and tithes levied on parishioners living on or renting church owned land. Annual costs and church fees were assessed and determined each Easter. As now, there were years when exceptional expenditure created pressure on churchwardens to generate more resources and raise fees. From the early part of the century, churchwardens were also poor law overseers, empowered to use a proportion of rates to support parishioners in poverty. Accounts had to be kept separately to show disbursements to the poor, which may have included clothes, money, food, medicines and accommodation.

If elected as churchwarden, it was compulsory to accept the appointment. Appointments could only be declined on payment of a fine. Regular ‘vestry meetings’ were held with the parish clerk, some of which were ‘open’ to parishioners, but usually only householders or tenants made the effort (in their own interests) to attend. Records of the vestry meetings of St Olave’s, from around 1725, are interesting historical documents, almost worthy of an article in their own right.

The churchwardens who signed the St Olave’s pew sheet allocation petition, were of some stature within the parish but detailed information about them as individuals is sparse or non-existent. All are buried in the churchyard.

- John Legg – a baker and Freeman of York - died in 1732
- John Lockwood - a wine cooper and Freeman of York - died in 1740
- William Webster, a miller, died in 1737
- John Ellis, a baker, died in 1736
- George Lumley (referenced above) died in 1738
- Thomas Hood, a blacksmith, died in 1727
- Joshua Giles (son of Montague) died in 1736

Conclusion and thanks

Each time I visit the Borthwick Archives, new historical facets of our ancient church are discovered. This record is no exception. It is significant because it helps illuminate the lives of the congregation during a significant era of change in society, the city of York and in the religious norms and practices at St Olave's in the eighteenth century.

My thanks are due to the staff of the Borthwick Institute for Archives at York University who are without exception unfailingly helpful and professional whenever I turn up or email them with requests for information.

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Helen Robb

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St Olave's Church, Marygate, York
www.stolaveschurch.org.uk

This booklet is part of the St Olave's Church "History Revisited" series

Titles include:

- History Revisited
- William Etty RA
- Joseph Halfpenny
- Daniel Harvey
- Daniel Isaac
- Francis Place
- William Thornton
- WW1 Memorial
- Eighteenth Century St Olave's: restoration and social order

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