



## **Shellingford Church Monuments**

**by David Mynors**

The inhabitants of Shellingford are most fortunate to have such a delightful Parish church which is not only an aesthetic joy but also an inspiring setting for their regular worship. Much credit is owed to the re-ordering so sympathetically and successfully carried out in the 1940's under the direction of F. Etchells, FRIBA whose work of this kind earned him a wide reputation. Since that time further minor embellishments have been added and a fine new organ installed, the gift of the Williams family. Only one feature still needed attention namely the monuments in both Chancel and Nave which needed cleaning and restoration since much of the inscription was difficult to read and in some cases indecipherable to the ordinary visitor. This was put right in the Autumn and Winter of 1988/9 under the direction of Miss Anna Hulbert of Childrey, much of the work being done by her assistant, Miss Corinna Kenyon. (This article is partly based on Miss Hulbert's report on the project.) The cleaning and restoration have given the building an additional air of elegance such as is seldom found in small village churches.

Until the historical unity was broken up in 1923 the parish of Shellingford constituted a manor in single ownership with no economic activity other than agriculture, so the monuments in the church commemorate successive occupants of the manor and their near relations. They relate to the 200 years 1630-1830 and a brief history of the manor is necessary to explain the succession of names involved. During the period with which we are concerned a large Elizabethan house stood immediately to the south of the church: a photograph of the original drawing, which is in the Bodleian in Oxford, is in the church vestry. In the 18th century the manor came into common ownership with the neighbouring manor of Wadley (nearer to Faringdon). The house was abandoned when the Goodlakes came into the ownership and decided to build a new seat, Kitemore House, halfway between the two existing manor-houses, and eventually demolished in the mid 19th century: the only part of the complex still standing is the Tudor building on the south side of the path leading up to the church, now restored and converted into three houses, known as Timberyard Cottages.

After the departure of the Nevilles the manor was acquired in mid 17th century by the Packers. They must have been people of great substance as they owned other manors besides Shellingford and Robert Packer married Mary, one of the co-heiresses of the celebrated wool merchant Jack of Newbury. The last Packer, Robert, who died in 1751, was very active in Shellingford: he built the fine brick garden wall which surrounds the site of the existing (modern) village school, to the south of which he created a lake (now silted up) by damming the Holywell Brook, together with extensive hydrological works of which traces can still be seen - though the exact purpose is not entirely clear - including irrigation channels for flooding the grass land between Shellingford and Rosey Brook. It is also likely that he planted the older nearby trees including the magnificent cedar at the east end of the churchyard. There still exists a record of the fruit trees he planted on his new garden wall which is of interest to horticultural historians. Robert Packer had no children and his brothers died before him; he sold Shellingford before his death - his wife had also

long predeceased him - and left his other manors to distant relations. The purchaser was Sara, Duchess of Marlborough, who merely bought it as an investment; land being the only form of investment then available to the aristocracy: she let it to the second Viscount Ashbrook. Later the manor passed to the Spencers (ancestors of the present Princess of Wales), who were her descendants, and the third Viscount Ashbrook followed his father as tenant. Why Ashbrook came to Shellingford is unclear: the family had settled in Ireland and had land there from which the family Barony was derived. The present Viscount gave great moral and financial support to the restoration project but remains puzzled by his ancestors' connection with Shellingford and their adoption of the name Ashbrook for the Viscounty.

The principal monuments are as follows:

### **Chancel**

1. **South Wall.** Sir Edward Neville, died 1632, Fellow of Kings College Cambridge, whose father, Sir Henry Neville, was Queen Elizabeth I's Ambassador to Henry IV of France. This must have had considerable style when originally put in place but both the slates used for the inscription and the surrounding gold size ornament have deteriorated with the passage of time. Even after restoration the Latin inscription is difficult to read from ground level and is partly indecipherable at eye level as the Latin is corrupt - and may have been unintelligible to the original carver.
2. **North East Corner.** John Packer, died 1682. This is a simple memorial to such a rich man but the skill of the sculptor gives it great charm.
3. **North Wall.** Mary Packer, died 1719, and Robert Packer, died 1751. This is a large monument which seems to have been erected in two stages, although the combined design is a harmonious whole. Mary's inscription is in Latin and has one intriguing feature: it refers to her devotion to the Anglican church with the word ANGLICANAM the only one in capital letters - one feels there must have been a story behind this. Robert's inscription is in English: presumably the fashion in the choice of language changed during the 32 years between their deaths.

This fine piece particularly benefited from the restoration project as much of the inscription was previously illegible.

### **Nave**

4. **North Wall.** Sir Edward Hannes, died 1710, physician to Queen Anne. He appears to have had no connection with Shellingford except that he was brother-in-law to the Packers through his second wife. Originally there seem to have been two obelisks at the top of the monument but they are now missing. There is a certain similarity of style with the big Packer monument and one may well wonder whether they are by the same hand.
5. **South East Corner.** William Lord Viscount Ashbrook, died 1780, signed by W. Tyler of Bath. This is a strong piece which catches the visitor's eye on entering into the church, mainly because of the contrasting colours in the materials. Closer inspection reveals a glowing tribute written in magnificent rolling English, typical of the age in which Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was written, to a person of whom his living descendant has said that he seems to have been a very boring man.

5. **North East Corner.** William Viscount Ashbrook, died 1802. Less flamboyant than its Tyler companion, this is signed by Flaxman. He was a famous and prolific designer of monuments: he was careless with this one as he spelt Shellingford as Shillingford, a confusion which still continues. He also designed for the Wedgewood pottery company and this monument has strong overtones of some classical Wedgewood piece. This is not a major Flaxman effort but it creates a satisfying impression.

All the 18th century monuments originally had more paint on them than they now have, particularly in the heraldic shields. Where colour was still identifiable it has been touched up but where the shields are now blank heraldic research is needed which was beyond the resources of the parish and it was thought better to accept the existing blank than guess at the original.

Together the monuments are a fine aesthetic embellishment to what would otherwise be a plain little village church, apart from the stained glass in the East window. They are examples of what was a flourishing Art Form for several centuries involving the skills of Design, Choice of Materials, Sculpture, Painting and Verbal Composition, whether in Latin or English. Although one can appreciate how social, economic and ecclesiastical developments have now strangled this fine Art Form which was in existence many centuries ago, dating back to the pre Christian era, it did undoubtedly add aesthetic elegance to many otherwise undistinguished buildings as well as perpetuate the memory of those commemorated: the restored monuments at Shellingford are well worth a visit to bring this point home.

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Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL  
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: [museum@wantage.com](mailto:museum@wantage.com)