

St. Vigor's Church - A History of Its First Building

by Fr. Miles Pateman

What's the oldest thing you can think of? One of the oldest things in our village is our church. And *that's* named after a holy bishop from France who's even older again.

Sometimes we can think that churches are a little bit boring: really old, never changing, everywhere has one. But, have you ever stopped to *really* think about a church? Imagine how much has happened there – all the great events of Fulbourn's (and England's) history have been marked in our church. It's like a great big stone time traveller in our village. It feels as if St Vigor's has always been there. I certainly hope it always will be. Of course there must have been a time before St Vigor's was built. I wonder what that was like...

The old church was little more than a barn: low wattle walls and a thatched roof. It was pretty much the only thing the five manors had in common in Fulbourn. The idea to build a new church to St Vigor in the village was Father John's; and the money came from the Lords of the manors.

Father John was a Saxon, like most of us; but he knew clever men from all over Normandy. He brought a master mason from Normandy who could design a new church for the whole village – and to glorify God. William, the mason, spent weeks and weeks walking all around the old church, and sketching out lines and pictures in the dirt. The village children would follow him about like a gaggle of little goslings! After all his strange wanderings about, William presented his finished drawing of what the church should look like to Father John and the Lords of Fulbourn.

On a sheet of plaster, William had drawn how the church would look if you could fly above it like one of the swifts or jackdaws: a great big hall shape (longer and grander than any of the manor houses), pointing towards the east. On a huge piece of vellum (paper made from animal skins), William drew a cross-section, showing everyone how the walls and roof would fit together. Father John and the Lords were overjoyed with the plans for the new church and gave William money to start work at once.

The first job was to dig out the foundations. Into the dark Fulbourn soil, the Lords had their tenants dig great trenches and holes. No one had ever seen holes so deep. 'Almost as deep as the walls are to be high,' said William when people asked him. It wasn't just the peasants working in Fulbourn to build their church. William had master quarrymen working to dig out the stone needed to build the new church. For miles and miles around he had small quarries digging out flint and chalk. Cart after cart of stone came rumbling into the village. Slowly, the great trenches began to fill up with rubble and mortar.

When the foundations were nearly complete, Father John and William ordered the work to stop. 'We have a very special ceremony,' said Father John. 'We have to lay the foundation stone and bless it to be part of God's house.'

Some weeks later, as the summer was drawing to a close, Bishop Eustace arrived all the way from Ely. Now, Bishop Eustace was an important man - he had even been an adviser to the King - and he arrived with servants and his chaplain and monks from the abbey. On the Sunday, William built a tripod of hefty wooden staves and attached a metal pulley. From out of the master mason's hut near the building site was dragged a large, flat piece of stone carved with a cross, and two lines of writing in Latin:

*Guillermus mihi fecit.
Eustacius mihi benedixerit.*

which means: 'William made me. Eustace blessed me.'

Using the hoist, the master mason and his men lowered the great slab into its place under where the Altar would be in the finished church. With Bishop Eustace and Father John singing praises to God in Latin, and with clouds of sweet-smelling incense: the stone was marked with holy oils.

'For the rest of the day we did no more work on the church. Instead we had a great feast, sitting on top of the finished foundations, while overhead the last of the swifts whirled and screamed.'

It was after this that we normal people in Fulbourn had to stop helping as much with building the church. The masons under William's guidance began to put up the walls and arches of the church. Heavy carts trundled into the village with fine, pale-coloured sandstone all the way from Lincolnshire. Father John said that each cart took nearly a week to travel the seventy miles from the quarry in Lincolnshire to us.

'Fine stone, for a fine building!' laughed William, as he watched it take shape under the skilled hands of the masons from France. With hammers and chisels, they formed the heavy blocks of stone from rough lumps into delicate round sections that would become the columns in the outer walls. Other masons carefully carved sloping and curving sections of stone, measuring each one precisely from William's drawings.

'Fine stone, for a fine building!' laughed William as he watched it take shape under the skilled hands of the masons from France. With hammers and chisels, they formed the heavy blocks of stone from rough lumps into delicate round sections that would become the columns in the outer walls. Other masons carefully carved sloping and curving sections of stone, measuring each one precisely from William's drawings.

Other things were arriving in the village as well. Though we couldn't work with the masons, the carpenter had sent out teams of peasants into the woods to cut down trees to make the scaffolding that the builders would work on. We felled huge oak trees to make the skeleton of the roof. 'They need time to dry and mature,' said Pierre the Norman carpenter all the way from Paris. 'Otherwise the timbers will warp and change shape and the whole roof might fall in!'

As the autumn turned slowly into winter, the first stumps of pillars began to rise from the ground where the new church would be built. Between each column, the masons put up big wooden boards called 'shutters'. Into the space between these shutters, they poured a mix of mortar and stone. Our church was beginning to have walls.

By November, most of the work on the church slowly came to a stop. Cold and rain and snow aren't good for unfinished stonework, so William had us cover the exposed walls with a stinking concoction of cow and sheep dung mixed with straw. This was going to protect all the hard work from the cold and the snow until building could begin again with the spring. In their little huts and sheds all around the new church, the masons worked hard through the cold winter days: shaping and finishing the fine Lincolnshire sandstone, ready for the next season's building.

Christmas came, and we celebrated the birth of Jesus in the old church for the last time. We shivered and waited our way through the cold of winter and, with the spring thaw, life began to come back to the village.

With the warmer weather, the walls of our new church grew higher and higher. The masons brought out finely shaped pieces of stonework for the windows in the new walls. Over the winter, they had taken the rough lumps of limestone and shaped them into flowing and branching curves. With great care, they fitted the new stone into the mortar of the walls. Each piece they checked to make sure that it was perfectly vertical using a plumb-line: a long piece of string with a lump of lead on the end. 'It hangs straight down,' explained Father John. 'That means the masons can check that the wall goes straight up and down.'

With the spring, the walls of the church were finished in a few months. The masons concentrated on the great tower William had planned for the west end; meanwhile, the carpenter and his apprentices swarmed up the wooden scaffolding at the east end. Way up at the top of the walls, they built a huge wheel of wood. From this wheel there poked out an arm. With great care, they threaded a rope in and out of this new contraption.

The next day, the carpenter shouted his apprentices into the great wooden wheel and made them walk in it. Ever so slowly, the rope began to move and lift up one of the huge timbers for the roof. As the days went by, we watched in amazement as the carpenters put up a great web of wood in the sky. Huge wooden triangles that looked like they were touching heaven. The jackdaws must have thought this great fun, as they spent hours every day wheeling and stunting through this new maze. And *skwaaaaaakking* at the carpenters.

Soon, leadworkers arrived from Ely and set up a furnace which they fed with blocks of lead. Under a tower of sparks and smoke, they softened the lead and hammered it into great flat sheets. It took four of us just to carry one sheet over to the crane! Even from the ground, we could hear the grumbling of the apprentices up in the great wheel as they strained to lift the lead up to the roof. And so it went, the carpenters being chased slowly down the length of the church by the leadworkers. In a fortnight, they had put a whole roof on the eastern end of St Vigor's. This made Father John very excited indeed. Once the roof was finished over the east end, he spent weeks fretting and pestering William about his 'special delivery'. None of us knew what he was talking about, and William wouldn't tell us – even after a night in the Plough and Crown¹.

Father John had decided that the arrival of his 'special delivery' was going to be another day where no one needed to do any work. He got the village children to pick wildflowers from the church yard and the hedgerows; he set the ladies of the village to weaving garlands of greenery; he got us all to take this to the northern edge of the village, where the road leads up over the Gogs and towards distant Cambridge.

As we were waiting up near the Haggis family's fields, we saw a huge cart come rumbling down the hill being pulled by a team of four massive oxen. In the back of the cart was a great big block of stone. It must have been as long as a man is tall, and as tall as Father John's waist. 'Our new Altar!', Father John shouted happily.

Once the cart had come to a stop, we set about decking it out with the flowers and garlands. There were even special garlands woven to fit around the oxen's necks. All of us, lords and ladies, freemen and peasants, the masons, carpenters, lead workers, followed behind in a procession from the edge of the village to the church. As we went, Father John led us in singing hymns in Latin and in English.

¹ Today, we know the Plough and Crown as the Six Bells!

Once we were at the church, William set his workers to placing wooden rollers on the ground and used the crane to lift the Altar onto them. It took all of us shoving from behind and pulling on ropes to get the Altar into the church and in place over the foundation stone.

While we were heaving the new Altar into its place, Father John had disappeared from the crowd with one of the masons. After some time, they came back; and Father John was clutching a box wrapped in a linen cloth. Walking up to the Altar, he carefully placed the box into a hole cut into the Altar-stone. The mason then placed a smaller, well-fitting stone engraved with crosses into the hole. 'The relics of St. Vigor are in our Altar. Now we can celebrate the Mass in our new church!' rejoiced Father John.

Another, larger box was brought into the church. 'What's in there?' asked one of the children. 'The last lady to be one of the manor-lords of Fulbourn,' replied Father John. 'We don't know much about her, but as she was a lady of the manor and was buried in our old church: we are going to lay her back to rest in the new church.'

Once the Altar-stone and the lady's tomb had been sealed, we knew it was time for another party. We began in the new church (well, the part that was finished) with a Eucharist at the new Altar, and then we feasted outside under the powder-blue skies.

The carpenters and leadworkers finished roofing the nave by the middle of the summer. Where once there had been a stark criss-crossing of wooden beams was now a gleaming bright roof of leaden panels. Everyone came to watch when Father John climbed slowly (and wobbly-ly) up the scaffolding to the roof, clutching a pot of good ale from the Plough and Crown. William said, 'We cannot finish off a roof without having it "topped out". It's a bit like a baptism, but for a building.' And indeed, Father John poured the beer onto the new roof and asked God's blessing on it.

The church was watertight. But, we had a problem: it was even darker than our old church – all the windows had been filled with rough planks of wood while the builders were working. As the leadworkers and most of the masons left Fulbourn to find their next building projects, glaziers arrived. They came with carts that seemed to be full of straw, big, fluffy mounds of straw. But from the carts they lifted down sheets of beautifully coloured glass, and glass so clear it was as if it wasn't even there. The master-glazier looked at all of the empty windows, and then spent several days talking to the lords of the manors and with Father John.

With shining metal tools, the glaziers began to cut the coloured glass into little pieces. On huge boards shaped like the windows, they began to arrange the abstract glass shapes. Slowly, ever so slowly, the sparkling chaos began to form into pictures. After the glass had been arranged, the glaziers used little leaden strips to hold each piece in place. While they were working on the ground, other men installed long iron bars into the window frames. Very carefully, they lifted each finished section of glass into place, and fixed them onto the bars. As a finishing touch, the glaziers installed rods of copper on the outside to keep the windows solid. When the sun hit the windows, the whole interior of the church was bathed in multicoloured light. It was as if the pictures came alive in their frames. Now we were surrounded by images of stories in the Bible and the lives of the saints. 'Like having our family with us all the time,' said Father John.

High above us, the tower had finally been finished. Already the bell from the old church was hanging there, ready to call us to prayer. 'A new church needs a new bell!' said William, and Father John nodded. So, a bell-founder was brought to Fulbourn. Another cart and another set of apprentices who would play tricks on each other and try and impress the village girls.

The bell-founder first dug out a huge pile of clay and shaped it to look like the bell it was going to become. Then, he covered it all over with wax and made loops out of wax that he stuck to the top. Under the founder's watchful eye, the apprentices stuck pins made of bronze all over the wax until the whole thing looked a bit like a bell-shaped hedgehog! To our amazement, they then covered the whole thing with goat's hair, and slapped another layer of clay over the top. Once this strange operation was complete, the bell-founder melted down ingots of bronze until he had filled a great big cauldron with the glowing, melted metal.

Once the bronze was bubbling away, the apprentices took hold of the long pole on which the cauldron was hanging, and held it while the bell-founder carefully poured the molten bronze into the hole in the top of the form. There was a horrible smell of burning hair!¹ 'Why did you put all that hair in there?', choked one of the farm-hands who was watching. 'Well, my boy,' answered the bell-founder, 'the hair and the wax get destroyed by the hot metal. The metal will now cool overnight in the space where the hair was; and in the morning we'll have a bell. The hair is great because it stops everything sticking together.' So, the bell-founder left the smoking bell overnight with his apprentices guarding it.

With the light of the new day, the bell-founder came back with a huge hammer and smacked the baked clay into pieces. Underneath was our new church bell. With the help of some of the more burly peasants in the village, the bell-founder and his apprentices got the bell hanging from a frame, just off the ground. One of the apprentices was sent, grumbling, under the bell with a long stick to poke out the rest of the baked-on clay. When the bell was clean, the founder struck it with a small hammer. It went *kloonnnggg!* 'The bell needs to be tuned', he explained, 'and we need to cast a clapper for it, and fit a headstock.' Using a sharp chisel, the founder chipped away at the metal inside the bell. Every so often, he would hit the bell with his hammer and listen to the note. Once or twice, he sent an apprentice into the church tower to toll our old bell.

All the while, the apprentices were busy working at the furnace, pouring more molten bronze into a smaller mould. What came out of it looked like a tall, bronze thistle. This, we were told, was called the clapper and it was to be hung inside the bell. With great care, the founder had also carved words around the mouth of the bell.

IHS NAZARENUS REX JUDEORUM FILII DEI MISERERE MEI

which means: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, Son of God, have mercy on me.' After the decoration was complete, the bell-founder fitted the headstock, a huge piece of wood, strengthened with iron bands, from which the bell would hang in the tower. Father John came with more beer from the Plough and Crown to bless the bell; and we watched as it was hauled up from the floor of the church and to its place in the top of the tower.

¹ If you don't know what burning hair smells like, *don't try and find out!!!!* Trust me, it smells *awful*.