**St Nicholas’ Chapel, King’s Lynn**

**British Brick Society ‘Information’ no.135, February 2017 : *addendum to no.134, September 2016***.

David Kennett’s short paper referred to the reopening of the Chapel after some 15 months closure to the public in 2014-15. The works were relaying the roof, minor stonework repairs, major timber conservation and repairs, and the insertion of modern facilities for users; regrettably the work did not include any timber conservation work to the Angel roof. The paper cited *Pevsner and Wilson 1999* and raised questions about the use of brick when the Chapel was rebuilt around 1400.

The revised ‘Buildings of Norfolk’(vol.2) by Bill Wilson, based on the Pevsner 1962 volume, is the only readily available reference book to detail the use of brickwork here – “a remarkable thing is the amount of red brick used” - and the sections of external wall then listed. Pevsner 1962 made no comment, and the Council for the Care of Churches 1990 redundancy report only says “side walls brick and rubble, rendered”. The British Listed Buildings [BLB] text of 1993 says “aisles brick, rendered and scored to imitate ashlar”, but since the mid-1980s there has been no visible evidence of coursed and consolidated brickwork, in red or any other colour. Only at external clerestorey level is there exposed walling as mixed rubble including bricks, with red brick segmental arches.

Publicly-available photographs of the Chapel, principally in the King’s Lynn Library Local Studies collection, do not include any pictures of brickwork elevations exposed due to collapsed render. The photograph in Brunskill (1990, & 2009, illust.16) is the only one seen so far. It shows the external wall above the N-E door (N aisle bay 7), and a very small area of the original irregular-bond coursed brickwork. Unfortunately the largest part of the brickwork revealed is in fact a window opening made in 1628 and filled with brickwork in c.1791. Consequently, the only site description that can be relied on is that in BBS 44 (March 1988) by T.P.Smith, and which was clearly Wilson’s source in Pevsner 1999.

Smith states that the north aisle (all 12 bays), south aisle (eastern 5 bays) and the east wall of the Chapel are brick walls; these have been rendered since at least 1822, and were ‘lined out’ until the 1980s. The west end, the south-west corner tower, the south porch and the western five S aisle bays (3 to 7, which are now rendered) are all built in irregular-coursed ashlar blocks with fine mortar joints, as are the buttresses dividing each bay around the external walls. When decayed interior timber dado panelling was removed in 2015 the walling revealed at plinth level in S. aisle bay 6 was all of local coursed brown carstone and clunch (chalk). The interior high slopes of the east gable wall then inspected by the author are also built of clunch cobbles.

There is very little documentary evidence about the rebuilding of the Chapel. It is probable that the western half of the present south aisle was the site of the previous small church, and possible that the magnificent south porch was added as a first stage in the rebuilding in the 1370s (former finials displayed the supporting royal beasts of Edward III). The west wall displays the remnants of the armorials of Richard II, and must have been in place by 1399. By 1405 there must have been some sort of roof, since a jury bribe was paid in there at an Easter service that year. In 1411 there is a Council minute about buying the stone surplus to demolishing former side chapels (to use in the South Gate). Benjamin Mackerell in 1738 recorded the date ‘MCCCCXIII’ (1413) in the west window glazing. The often-repeated ‘completion date’ of 1419 “de novo edificato” - meaning ‘recently built’ – was a remark in another Council minute. A date of 1380s to 1410 is realistic for the main structure.

David Kennett poses the question whether the use of brick in the Chapel can be identified as a deliberate choice, or whether it was purely a matter of the supply or cost of stone. There were brickfields in Lynn by the 1380s, since the use of clays from Sayer’s Marsh is recorded, and is an area immediately east of the historic town limits; there were other brickyards nearby in the 15th century. The contracts in Dorothy Owen (1984) refer to the shipping of bricks for use on town infrastructure as early as 1339-40 (“archos de Brike”); and in 1385 ‘tegulis murabilis’ cost 4s per 1000. The oldest completely brick building in Lynn is the Guildhall of St George, which is dated at 1410-20 in BLB.

There must be a likelihood of a deliberate choice to use brick, which could be sourced locally, rather than stone sent by barge from Barnack (near Stamford). There were certainly trading and social links with Hull, and with the Hanseatic towns, for the leading merchants of Lynn to have seen the use of brick in buildings throughout the 14th century. The context of the Chapel rebuilding from the 1370s was that Lynn was the leading English town for trade with Prussia and the Baltic, especially through Danzig (modern Gdansk), and this trade was extremely prosperous and growing. However, by 1405 there was economic recession in Lynn, and it is notable that the niches on the porch and in the nave clerestorey do not appear to have ever been filled with statuary.

The group of merchants and benefactors associated with the rebuilding were especially a political group of younger entrepreneurs, who differentiated themselves from an older generation of Black Death survivors and Trinity gildsmen who supported the Priory and parish church of St Margaret. Perhaps the choice of structural brickwork for most of the Chapel reflected modernity, cost, speed of building, and limited availability of skilled masons. During the 14th century many of them would have seen the huge brick churches being built in the German towns along the Baltic. They spent a fortune on the new stone porch, built an architectural wonder as the stone west wall, and left the stone tower and the old chapel south wall as bays 3 to 7 in the new project; the remainder of the new building (*per* T.P.Smith) was structural red brickwork which has since been rendered over.

Adrian G. Parker - King’s Lynn 31/12/2016.

BLB : British Listed Buildings, the Heritage England on-line record of listed buildings.

N.Pevsner & B.Wilson *The Buildings of England: Norfolk 2: North-West & South.* London 1999 p.468

R.W.Brunskill *Brick and Clay Building in Britain.* London 2009 p.47 (enlarged from *Brick Building in Britain* London 1990.) Illustration 16 is accredited to Peter Crawley, and believed to be in the late 1970s.

T.P.Smith *British Brick Society Information no.44* (March 1988) ‘Medieval Bricks in St Nicholas Chapel, King’s Lynn’ pp. 17-18

Benjamin Mackerell *The History and Antiquities of … King’s Lynn*. London 1738 p.93

Dorothy M. Owen (ed) *The Making of King’s Lynn: (vol.3) A documentary survey*. The British Academy : Records of social and economic history: New Series IX. Oxford 1984. See documents 479, 258, 269.