

A BUNWELL CHURCH PEW DISPUTE THREE CENTURIES AGO



Our earliest churches provided little or no seating for the congregation. Some began to appear from the thirteenth century but it was the Reformation and the introduction of the sermon that made seating essential.

By Georgian times box pews had become the fashion and were allocated on the basis of customary use or sometimes rented by members of the gentry for the use of their families.

In some churches the sides of the boxes were so high that the owners could comfortably sleep through the sermon, or, as Hogarth suggests in this

illustration, indulge in all manner of unseemly behaviour.

On Sunday 12th November 1699, as the faithful parishioners of Bunwell were in their parish church awaiting Morning Prayer, a young man by the name of Thomas James, servant to Mr William Rant (Rector of Bunwell), escorted the Rector's wife to a seat in the nave. The Rector then ordered James to go and sit in a pew near the pulpit. Mr Elisha Philippo, a Bunwell property owner, was already sitting in that pew, as had been his custom since coming to the village several years previously.

The pew had sides and a door. Philippo stood up and prevented James from getting into the pew by pushing him backwards down the step. The Rector seeing this, asked the churchwarden John Cann to show Philippo to another seat. Cann asked Philippo not to make such a disturbance, and to allow James into the pew, but when Cann ushered James forward, Philippo for the second time bodily prevented James from entering the pew. The Rector had to tell James to sit elsewhere. Soon after this, apparently on the orders of the Rector, a lock was fitted to the door of the disputed pew, and his servant James unlocked it to sit in the pew during divine service.

This incident arose because both parties – the Rector and Philippo – believed they were in the right. Rights and privileges were very important to individuals in a society much more rigid in its social ranking than is the case today. Mr Elisha Philippo was proceeded against in the Norwich Consistory Court, the Rector appealing to at least one witness to swear that

Philippo had struck James. Philippo brought counter proceedings in the same court against Rector Rant concerning the right to sit in the pew.

From the evidence gathered in these causes, it was established that the disputed pew was built by a Mr Eldred *alias* Skinner with permission from the then Rector. Skinner owned a house in Bunwell Street and he and subsequent inhabitants of this house used this pew. It was also established that the successive inhabitants of another Bunwell house had also, over a period of at least fifty years been accustomed to sit in the pew. Elisha Philippo was the owner and occupier of that house in 1699. It also appeared that the pew in dispute had also been the one where non-residents of Bunwell were allowed to sit.

Witnesses deposing this facts were almost unanimous in stating anyone sitting in the pew had done so by expressed or implied permission of the rector for the time being.

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