



A History of Pew Renting in the Church of England

J.C. BENNETT

palgrave
macmillan

A History of Pew Renting in the Church of England

J. C. Bennett

A History of Pew Renting in the Church of England

palgrave
macmillan

J. C. Bennett
Office of the Public Defender
Panhandle Area Public Defender
Amarillo, TX, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-54426-2 ISBN 978-3-031-54427-9 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-54427-9>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG. The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Paper in this product is recyclable.

Portions of this book have been taken from the author's previous articles on the subject:

'Informal Pew-Renting and Pew-Openers in English Anglican Churches', Church History and Religious Culture, v. 100 (September 2020), p. 364–382, and 'The Demise and—Eventual—Death of Formal Anglican Pew-renting in England', Church History and Religious Culture, v. 98 (December 2018), p. 407–424, both used here with the kind permission of Brill Publications.

'How Formal Anglican Pew-Renting Worked in Practice, 1800–1950', Journal of Ecclesiastical History, v. 68 (October 2017), p. 766–783, reprinted here with the kind permission of Cambridge University Press.

'And One for My Friend the Barmaid: Pew-renting and Social Class in English Anglican Churches in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries', Anglican & Episcopal History, v. 86, n. 2 (June 2017), p. 167–185, used here with the kind permission of Anglican & Episcopal History, 2023.

*This book is lovingly dedicated to Patricia Allen, my ladyfriend of nearly
four decades.*

Acknowledgements

At the University of Birmingham my doctoral research was supervised by Professor Hugh McLeod. My thanks to him cannot be overstated. I am also grateful to have benefited from the comments of the others in my committee, Professors Michael Snape and Frances Knight, and the late Dr. Nigel Yates, who earlier oversaw my master's dissertation on this topic. Any errors which remain are my own.

I am also indebted to the staffs of many archives throughout England, most particularly to those of the Centre for Kentish Studies, the Canterbury Cathedral Archives and the Bristol Record Office, whose prompt production of needed documents and skill at making sense of outdated writing symbols will always be remembered.

Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	‘That Woman that Shall Succeed Her’: Formal Pew-Renting to 1818	11
3	‘Free from Tractarian Error’: Formal Pew-Renting Churches After 1818	41
4	‘Drive-A-Good-Bargain’: The Mechanics of Formal Pew-Renting Since 1818	57
5	‘Cobblers and Rat-Catchers’: Formal Pew-Renters	83
6	‘Pew-Opener’s Muscle’: Informal Pew-Renting and Pew-Openers	97
7	‘The Morphine Velvet, Lavender-Kid-Glove School of Theology’: Private Pew-Letting	119
8	‘To Hinder Such Abomination’: Supporters and Opponents	137

9	'Seats We So Seldom Use': Formal Pew-Renting's Demise	157
10	Conclusion	173
	Appendix	179
	Select Bibliography	209
	Churches Referenced Index	223
	General Index	233

Abbreviations

BLARS	Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service
BLSA	Bromley Local Studies and Archives
BLSAC	Bexley Local Studies and Archive Centre
BRO	Berkshire Record Office
BRRO	Bristol Record Office
CCA	Canterbury Cathedral Archives
CCALSS	Cheshire and Chester Archives and Local Studies Service
CERC	Church of England Record Centre
CKS	Kent History and Library Centre
CRO	Cornwall Record Office
CROC	Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle
CROK	Cumbria Record Office, Kendal
CROW	Cumbria Record Office and Local Studies Library, Whitehaven
CWAC	City of Westminster Archive Centre
DALHC	Dudley Archives and Local History Centre
DRO	Devon Record Office
DuRO	Durham Record Office
EKAC	East Kent Archives Centre
ERYARS	East Riding of Yorkshire Archives and Record Service
ESRO	East Sussex Record Office
GA	Gloucestershire Archives
GL	Guildhall Library
HALS	Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies

HFA	Hammersmith and Fulham Archives and Local History Centre
LA	Lincolnshire Archives
LAD	Lambeth Archives Department
LaRO	Lancashire Record Office
LLSA	Lewisham Local Studies and Archives
LMA	London Metropolitan Archives
LPL	Lambeth Palace Library
MALS	Manchester Archives and Local Studies
MALSC	Medway Area Local Studies Centre
NA	Nottinghamshire Archives
NAK	National Archives, Kew
NCS	Northumberland Collections Service
NDRO	North Devon Record Office
NRO	Norfolk Record Office
PMR	Portsmouth Museums and Records Service
PWDRO	Plymouth and West Devon Record Office
SRO	Somerset Archive and Record Office
SROBSE	Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds branch
SSTAS	Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service
TA	Teesside Archives
WA	Wigan Archives Service
WCRO	Warwickshire County Record Office
WSHC	Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre
WSRO	West Sussex Record Office
WYASK	West Yorkshire Archive Service, Kirklees
WYASW	West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield

List of Tables

Table 1	All Kentish Anglican churches found to have rented sittings (or in 1886, to have rentable sittings)	179
Table 2	All Bristol Anglican churches (under Bristol's 1951 boundaries) found to have rented sittings (or in 1886 to have rentable sittings), 1800–1960	198
Table 3	Bristol Anglican churches for which information of fund-raising survives, but which were not found to have formally rented sittings from 1800–1960	201
Table 4	Cities and towns in Kent with 2500 or more residents in 1801, those with 5000 or more in 1851 and those with 10,000 or more in 1901	206



1

Introduction

In days gone by, any Anglican church in England might be crowded with worshippers, just as today on Christmas Eve or Easter. The numbers of congregants who turned up depended on many factors, such as the popularity of the vicar, rector or visiting clergyman renowned for sermons, the particular requirements of the governmental regime, the weather at the time of service, the special celebration of the day if any and the like. On days when a church was packed, obtaining a seat might be difficult regardless of how early one arrived before the service.

But some congregants paid for sittings to be reserved for them in preferred parts of their church and so could stumble into church and take their seats at any time before or even shortly after the service regardless of how many others were waiting for places. In other churches no pews were set aside before the day of each service, but wealthier congregants, provided they were prepared to pay a church official quite a decent sum, could get very nice sittings for themselves and their families from which seeing and hearing the proceedings was easy—but only for that particular service.

Both practices affected society, particularly in Victorian and Edwardian times, by altering relations between churchgoers and church officials and between churchgoers themselves. Charging money for the better church

places physically and obviously divided congregants into two groups—those who were not only able but willing to pay for preferential sittings and those who could not or would not; the open benches that usually formed free (unrented) seats ‘helped police behaviour by exposing the noisy, naughty, and refractory to the rest of the church community’.¹ And since those responsible for receiving the funds and assigning churchgoers to particular seats were most often churchwardens and pew-openers largely drawn from the labouring class, the arrangements not only separated those who spent their money for this privilege from congregants lower down the economic scale but put the renters at the mercy of their social ‘inferiors’ for the choicest sittings. Where sittings were rented in advance, the practice discouraged the sort of ‘church-hopping’ tourists particularly liked to engage in, attending a service in one church and the next service in another and so on. It also meant that while away from home on holiday or business, those who wished to attend that sort of pew-renting church often had to resort to unfavourable and often less comfortable ‘free seats’ among the *hoi-polloi*, unless they had friends or relatives who rented sufficient space in that church to accommodate them. Pew-renting also affected those who wished to have reserved church seating but to do so had to spend their disposable income where it might have been better put to another use. Finally, as it was often the main source of income for many churches from their inception, church officials could be at a loss to know how to make ends meet when attendance declined—as it would sooner or later. Where those officials might have previously allowed renters to fall behind in their payments and catch up when they could—such as when harvests were better—payment might be demanded immediately, resulting in budget shortfalls and bickering or worse. All this, in turn, should affect how we perceive the wider society and interpersonal relations in those periods of history.

As might be expected, pew-renting came under a great deal of criticism—detractors could be heard in the early eighteenth century and before, although the complaints grew to a crescendo in the Victorian era and into the twentieth century. The reservation of seats, particularly for money, tended to make those without funds—or at least those above

¹Whyte, W. (2017). *Unlocking the Church: The Lost Secrets of Victorian Sacred Space*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 87.

them in the social hierarchy who found the practice abhorrent and spoke out on behalf of the poor—very annoyed.

But despite the upheaval, pew-renting is conspicuously absent from secondary sources, which mention the phenomenon—if at all—only in passing. Current churchgoers accordingly know little of the renting of seats in church despite the effects it had on their earlier counterparts. And even those sources which describe the practice are of little help; since no comprehensive study has previously been done, the details given are just guesses and, as this book will show, often inaccurate.

The *Episcopal Dictionary of the Church* website, for example, gives the usual understanding of the practice:

The renting of pews was the primary way that churches in many denominations collected funds prior to the twentieth century. Most of the families were seated in separate pews. The closer a family sat to the altar or pulpit, the higher its social or economic position.²

This is not surprising—most Anglican churchgoers believe the letting of church sittings was a Victorian or, at the latest, an Edwardian practice, in which the leisure class paid handsomely each year for the privilege of being allocated beforehand the most advantageous seats for hearing and seeing the liturgy, for their exclusive use. In this view, those of the middle class were given the sittings just behind them, also paying comparatively large sums for the exclusive use of those pews, those of a bit lower social standing behind them and so on. The working class paid no pew-rents, according to this view of things, and were consequently consigned to the benches at the back known as ‘free seats’—and if no places were available there, they would, if lucky, be allowed to stand for the service. Labourers were, it is thought, relegated to a very peripheral role in Church of England services—if they were allowed to participate at all—and consequently by the 1851 religious census or so they had largely become

² ‘Pew Rents’, *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church*, at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/pewrents/>. Accessed 23 December 2022.

alienated from the church, and many either resorted to nonconformist denominations or simply became non-religious.

This perception is understandable, since no book has been written specifically on pew-renting since Victorian times, and the monographs then were most often polemic works denouncing or defending the practice, not histories. Even in scholarly books and articles, the subject is relegated to footnotes or given very little attention; records of pew-rents are deemed useful for genealogy, but little else. A few studies have provided peripheral analysis of the practice while concentrating on the differences in fees paid by male and female congregants,³ and on parliamentary debate on the subject in Victorian times.⁴ But little else has been said.

The dearth of research has not gone unnoticed. Professor Callum Brown has noted that ‘comparatively meagre attention has been paid to how’ pew-renting ‘worked in practice’.⁵ And Professor K. D. M. Snell and Dr. Paul Ell have urged that the ‘economic history of the Church of England—the most neglected subject in British social and economic history—would be significantly advanced by study of the customs and finances of pew-renting’.⁶

This book seeks to fill the void. Its findings challenge virtually the entire above description of pew-letting in the *Episcopal Dictionary of the Anglican Church* and various other assumptions as well. Pew-renting is divided here into formal and informal methods, a distinction that has not previously been made. The formal type is what most people imagine pew-letting to have been, that is, a system in which congregants pay churchwardens annually, semi-annually or quarterly for the exclusive privilege of occupying particular church sittings. This indeed occurred, but at least in the Victorian period and later when formal pew-renting flourished—and to some extent earlier than that—the renters were not the leisure class.

³Tate, W. E. (1969). *The Parish Chest: A Study of the Records of Parochial Administration in England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 90–1.

⁴Machin, G. I. T. (1977). *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832 to 1868*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 265, 274, 340.

⁵Brown, C. G. (1987). ‘The costs of pew-renting: church management, church-going and social class in nineteenth-century Glasgow’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38:347–361. there 347.

⁶Snell, K. D. M. & Ell, P. (2000). *Rival Jerusalems: The Geography of Victorian Religion* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 361.

Instead, they were largely of the middle-middle class, the lower-middle class and the labour aristocracy. The rents charged for even the best seats in formal pew-renting churches were most often sums well within middle-class budgets, and the price for the less expensive sittings was generally affordable for those of the respectable working class. Moreover, in perhaps most churches engaging in formal pew-renting, at certain points before or early in each service those sittings whose tenants had not turned up for services were deemed open to all, so even if the ‘free seats’ were completely filled any congregant who waited might get a sitting far nearer the chancel.

Informal pew-renting, though, was common in churches populated mainly by ‘posh’ sort of people. It consisted of congregants giving tips to church officials—usually called pew-openers—who in turn chose which seats the tippers would then be allowed to occupy for that particular service. Predictably, the larger the tip, the better the sitting the congregant would likely get. The tips were largely sixpence or a shilling or more per service, so if the tippers regularly attended informal pew-renting churches, they spent far more annually than the most expensive sittings in a formal pew-renting church. The pew-openers who expected tips were almost always female and usually manual labourers, whose status was below even the labour aristocracy. Their duties could extend to janitorial chores around the church, but most often pew-openers often did other jobs on weekdays—some, for example, were washerwomen. In addition to the labour aristocracy who paid formal pew-rents to secure sittings, as churchwardens and pew-openers, members of the working classes could favour those far above their station whom they liked and respected, and politely deny privileges to those they did not. Consequently, one conclusion reached here is that members of the working classes were often heavily involved in each type of pew-renting and therefore participated in services and in the internal work of parish churches to a degree that has rarely been recognised.

The *Episcopal Dictionary* is incorrect, as well, in stating that pew-renting disappeared before the turn of the twentieth century. Formal pew-letting not only continued at a significant number of English Anglican churches but thrived up to the start of the First World War. From its evident start late in the fifteenth century, pew-letting persisted

in English churches for nearly half a millennium, to 1972; in the year of Watergate and the horrors of the Munich Olympics, the last known formal pew-rent in an Anglican church in England was paid, at St Anne's, Turton, Lancashire. Today pew-rents are still charged on the Isle of Sark, where each sitting in gated pews costs 2p annually.

Even further, pew-renting was unlike any other method of church finance, except perhaps the letting of glebe land. The least invasive means of voluntary church finance is of course a simple request during services that congregants send money in whatever amounts they choose by whatever means they deem fit. The obvious drawback to this is that the resulting revenue may be sadly inadequate. Slightly more aggressive is the placing of collection boxes in secluded places in the church or a nearby room, where parishioners may go and make contributions whenever and to what extent they feel willing and able, with the opportunity of being seen or not depending on which they choose. But placing a box where all can see it—such as next to the church doors—which some Roman Catholic churches in England have done and labelled the box 'door money'—naturally entails a greater possibility of flamboyance by those who contribute and potential shame and embarrassment felt by those who do not or cannot.

The advantage of using only the collection plate is that a congregant may sit wherever one can or finds room and need not contribute anything, but again, if one puts in the plate an unexpectedly generous or stingy amount, one's fellow congregants may well notice the fact. In informal pew-renting congregants' generosity in tipping usually resulted in a commensurately favourable sitting, which again showed everyone else in the vicinity the approximate size of the sum given, although whether the money ended up in the church's hands rather than the pew-opener's pocket was uncertain. Formal pew-rents entail a conspicuous sign of how much one has paid but have the unique advantage over the collection plate in that churches can collect the rent in private and, if the renters fall behind in payment, may arrange with the churchwardens or other collectors to catch up after the next harvest or pay-day or whenever they expect to be solvent again. And besides the obvious advantage of being assured of a decent sitting for six months or a year, formal pew-renting might be desirable for a congregant for other reasons. At least

before the Reformation, renting a pew may have been treated as an indulgence—or perhaps a form of almsgiving. Roman Catholics and Protestant nonconformists, in Elizabethan times and later, may have rented pews in Anglican churches to avoid recusancy fines; even if they attended for only some parts of the service, as some clearly did, their rented and prominent seats would make their attendance obvious to officials who might otherwise conclude they had absented themselves entirely. Clearly, the renting of a sitting would not then be for pageantry or flamboyance.

The next chapter looks at formal pew-renting from late-medieval times up to when the government sanctioned the practice with the first Church Building Act in 1818. Then the characteristics of formal pew-renting after that date are detailed, followed by the procedures and policies used and the prices charged, by the churches in question. Finally, on this type of letting, the occupations, ages and other hallmarks peculiar to formal pew-renters are given. Then informal pew-renting is described, along with the church personnel on which this practice relied—‘pew-openers’—followed by the phenomenon of pews owned by private individuals and groups which were leased by those entities to individual churchgoers. The debate, which could become fierce, over pew-renting’s efficacy and propriety is investigated, and finally, the process by which pew-renting slowed down and eventually died out is described.

The word ‘pew’ has had several meanings through the ages. In the past the sort of pew used today has historically been referred to as a bench and a ‘pew’ has meant an actual small room within a church, either fixed to the floor or at least difficult to move, possibly having seats on all four sides, and often with walls of varying heights, usually for a single family or for two or more individuals—the term has been so used at least as far back as the late fourteenth century, when the ‘Vision of Piers Plowman’ referred to a ‘puw’ with that connotation. Its origins may be even older: in 1870, an English court surmised that ‘pew’ came from the Dutch ‘puye’, or that the word might be from the Old French word ‘puie’, meaning a balcony, possibly enclosed, from which speeches could be made.⁷ Although ‘pew’ was sometimes used in Britain until the mid-twentieth

⁷ ‘Open Seats in Churches’ (1852). *The Christian Remembrancer*, 24:80–136. there 88.

century or later to describe anything one might sit on, it has come to specifically mean church furniture for seating. Sometimes the word has been used to denote a single chair in church or at least a smaller piece of furniture than a bench—the records of St Mary, Scarborough, in 1634 distinguish between pews and other types of church seating apparently for more than one person, speaking of pews being ‘next to the long seats’.⁸ Church space allocated for a sitting by one congregant has sometimes been called a ‘pewage’ and in Scotland and the north of England a ‘bottom-room’—and in one Warwickshire parish a ‘seat room’ within a pew.⁹ Because the subject at hand is the renting of a sitting rather than the characteristics of the seat, the word ‘pew’ here refers to all three types of church seating unless otherwise indicated.

Kent and Bristol are given special attention here, although much evidence is taken from other parts of England. Kent is taken to be the ‘ancient county of Kent’, that is the pre-1889 county borders. For Bristol the 1951 city boundaries are used—no other date for Bristol can be used with much accuracy since expansions in the city were asymmetrical and evidently only loosely related to population growth in previously unincorporated areas.

Throughout, also, the word ‘church’ used here indicates the Church of England unless designated otherwise and includes chapels and rooms licensed for Church of England services. And ‘parishioner’ is used to indicate one who merely lives within the parish served by the church in question. Where available records do not indicate whether the one attending a church resided in that parish, the word ‘congregant’ is used. The term ‘free seats’ is ambiguous—as a critic of pew-renting wrote in the early 1870s,

A church must be either “free” (that is, perfectly free) or not free; and to call a church “free, but appropriated,” and to consider a church free because the seats are only bought, usurped, allotted, or otherwise privately claimed,

⁸ ERYARS, PE165/241.

⁹ WCRO DR0022/23.

but not rented, is simply to confuse all argument, and render reasoning impossible, upon the subject.¹⁰

To avoid this difficulty, when speaking of pews for which no rent was charged, 'rent-free' or a similar adjective is used below, and when referring to seats not allocated to particular congregants but not designated as rent-free, 'unallocated' or 'unassigned' is applied.

¹⁰Herford, E. (1871). *Pew Rents Fatal to the National Church*. Nottingham: National Association for Freedom of Worship, 7.



2

'That Woman that Shall Succeed Her': Formal Pew-Renting to 1818

Arrangements of church places for participants have varied by time and place; provision of seating by the churches developed haphazardly. Anglo-Saxon illuminations show congregants seated on 'low, rude, three-legged stools, placed dispersedly all over the church'.¹ The stools may have been their own property rather than provided by their church. In 1287 Bishop Quivil of Exeter imposed open seating in his diocese, with the qualification that nobles, even those residing outside a parish, should be allocated the best sittings.² Lesser mortals were evidently left to take whatever seats remained or to sit on whatever stools or mats they might bring for the purpose or else to stand throughout the Mass. The records of Archbishop Warham's visitations in Kent in 1511–2 note that in one area of St Mary with St Sexburgha, Minster in Sheppey, Kent, 'the people may make setts and pewys where they may more quietly serve God, and that it may lesse cumber the rowme'.³ The poor were expressly to be provided with seats

¹ 'Pews,' (1864). *Notes & Queries*, 3rd Series, 4:474.

² *Archaeologia: Or Miscellaneous Tracts on Relating to Antiquity* (1896). 2nd series. London: Society of Antiquaries of London, 96.

³ *Kentish Visitations of Archbishop William Warham and His Deputies, 1511–1512*, (1984). Detsicas, A. P., ed. Maidstone: Kent Archaeological Society, 256.

since they were deemed ‘the persons most in want of religious instruction’,⁴ but in practice, this injunction was generally ignored; the amount of seating set aside in the typical parish for visitors and the destitute was extremely small.⁵

But sitting on stools in church evidently lasted in some places for several centuries after that—full-scale hostilities in the Bishops’ Wars in Scotland began in 1639 with women throwing footstools at the Dean of Edinburgh in St Giles’ Cathedral.⁶ The few permanent or semi-permanent structures in existence in the thirteenth century, such as at St Mary & All Saints, Dunsfold, Surrey, gradually became more common in the fifteenth century, first along church walls, and set apart for women or the elderly, feeble and poor,⁷ although priests and aristocrats were sometimes allotted wooden chairs in the chancel.⁸

Historians have generally presumed that the Reformation’s emphasis on preaching led to churches providing movable pews and benches. But preaching was done at least as far back as the late middle ages, including at All Saints, Biddenden, Kent.⁹ A claim has also been made that in 1493 no private church seats were allowed, as such structures were generally thought to have interfered with standing and kneeling room.¹⁰ If so, some churches in Kent may have been an exception, or exceptions in general may defeat the claim, since in 1458 John Young bequeathed ten marks to St Martin, Herne, Kent, ‘to make seats called puyinge’,¹¹ and in 1491, at St Petroc, Bodmin, Kent, seating was ordered simultaneously

⁴ Heales, *History and Law of Church Seats*, v. 2, 76.

⁵ Yates, N., Hume, R., & Hastings, P. (1994). *Religion and Society in Kent, 1640–1914*. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press/Kent County Council, 48.

⁶ Schama, S. (2001). *A History of Britain: The Wars of the British, 1603–1776*. New York: Hyperion, 86.

⁷ Marsh, C. (2002). ‘Sacred Space in England, 1560–1640: The View from the Pew’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 53:286–311; Heales, A. (1872). *History and Law of Church Seats*. London: Butterworth’s, 149; French, K. L. (2001). *The People of the Parish: Community Life in a Late Medieval English Diocese*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 107.

⁸ Flather, A. (1999). *The Politics of Place: A Study of Church Seating in Essex, c. 1580–1640*. Leicester: Friends of the Department of English Local History, 10.

⁹ Thompson, A. H. (1947). *The English Clergy and their Organization in the Later Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 97.

¹⁰ *Year Book* (1517). 8 Henry VII, 12, cited in Heales, *History and Law of Church Seats*, 32.

¹¹ Cox, J. C. (1916). *Bench-ends in English Churches*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 4.

with the purchase of the pulpit.¹² The churchwardens' accounts of St Michael, Cornhill, London, reflect that in 1457 the church 'payd for an henge for Russes wyfe's pewe ... iiii' and 20 years later 'payde to a smyth for making of a lok to Maister Stokkers pew viij'.¹³ Several sixteenth-century churchwardens' accounts also refer to pews 'obviously not for individuals of dignity' which had existed for sufficient time to need mending and were likely to have been fixed in place—St Mary, Sandwich, paid ninepence to repair its pews in 1513.¹⁴

Before the Reformation many other churches bought or constructed pews, semi-permanent seats or benches for seating congregants—but equally, centuries after the Reformation some churches remained unpewed or only partially pewed. The population of each parish seems to have been unrelated to the appearance of church-owned seats. Some decades before the Reformation in 1494, Robert Hunt of Reculver, Kent, left in his will a gift of 20 shillings to help fund seating for two local churches, even though almost a century later Reculver still had only 165 communicants.¹⁵ Yet, in 1621, stools were still used for seating at St Margaret, Wychling, Kent, suggesting the church was not then fully pewed and may have had no fixed seating at all, although more permanent seating evidently appeared in the next few decades—the churchwardens' accounts of 1695 mention a pew door.¹⁶ And a reference from Tonbridge indicates that the Church of Sts Peter & Paul was not completely, and perhaps not even mainly, pewed until 1763,¹⁷ even though Tonbridge's population grew considerably in Georgian times. At St Mary the Virgin, Ashford, a 1744 plan to provide new seating shows pews in the nave, but not in the galleries or aisles, including the aisle marked 'school',¹⁸ and even in the nineteenth century the church's vicar and

¹² Whiting, R. (1989). *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 237.

¹³ Heales, *History and Law of Church Seats, or Pews*, v. 1, 189.

¹⁴ CCA, U3/173/28/28 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ *Religious Worship in Kent: The Census of 1851*, (1999). Roake, M., ed. Maidstone: Kent Archaeological Society, 185.

¹⁶ CCA U3/196/1/1.

¹⁷ CKS P371/5/1/2.

¹⁸ CCA DCb/E/F/12/12.