

Claydon with Clattercote Newsletter

Village History Supplement

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THE CHURCH HYPOCAUST SYSTEM, THE CHURCH ROOM REFURBISHMENT AND HOME HEATING CUSTOMS

In recent conversations with long standing villagers, the Claydon History Society has learned more about life in the village in the recent past.

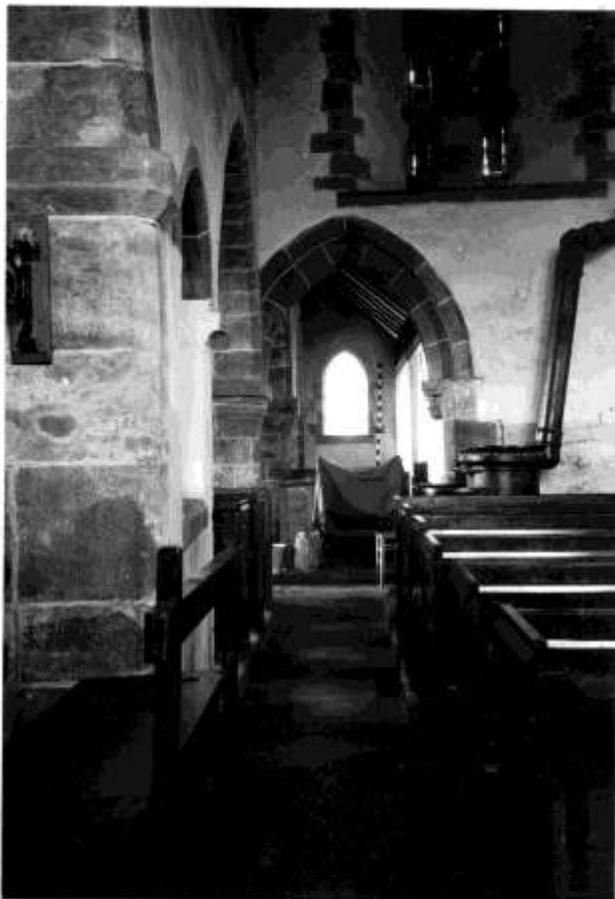
St. James' Church Hypocaust System

Many of us associate hypocaust systems with school history lessons on the Romans. The church flower arrangers were therefore quite surprised one day to be interrupted in their work by two visitors stating that they were investigating hypocaust systems in churches in the locality. Apparently systems were installed in many English churches during the nineteenth century in order to make churchgoing more comfortable for their congregations.

A metal plate on the floor was subsequently lifted, and what at first was thought to be a heap of dust proved to be ash. Several lumps of coke were then discovered amongst the ash. There are four plates currently visible, one at either end of the Lady Chapel, one at the very back of the church at the end of the main aisle and one as the main aisle meets the entrance. A fifth can be found under the carpet in the chancel. They are connected by a network of ducts under the floor. Similar systems can be found in the churches of Wormleighton, and Fenny Compton, and there are remains of a different type in Butlers Marston and Priors Hardwick.

It is likely that the system was built in 1861 when a major refurbishment took place and the church was re-floored. Coke would be heated and the hot embers placed in a chamber under each plate. The hot air would then circulate along the ducts to provide under floor heating through the network. One or two current regular churchgoers suspect that this form of heating may have been far more effective in preventing cold feet than the present electric heating.

Questions remain as to how the coke was heated. A stove was in place at the end of the Lady Chapel until 1957 when an electric system similar to the one in use today was installed. Older villagers do not remember the hypocaust system being used so it is more likely that the stove was a replacement for it. At that time paraffin stoves were also used as either an alternative to the coke stove during the summer months or a supplement in the colder periods.



The coke stove at the end of the Lady Chapel in 1942

Access to the chimney at the end of the Lady Chapel has been sealed by a metal plate. One suggestion is that an open fire was in place here. The hypocaust system was messy, time consuming and mildly dangerous to

operate in transferring the burning coals into place and cleaning out the ash afterwards. It also required a plentiful supply of coke. This was housed in what is now the kitchen of the Church Room. At that time the Church Room porch did not exist and the room was entered via a door at the top of the steps.



The church chimney which was partially rebuilt in the 1980s

The Church Room Refurbishment

While the Old School was in use for large gatherings such as receptions and dances there was still a need to use the Church Room for other events. It had been used by the Mothers' Union, but they had an alternative in the vicarage, while the regular Sunday School could use the church. Its main use was for Parish Council meetings, Sunday School parties, whist drives and the Harvest Sale.

Even after the school closed, the school house was used by the education authority and so the main school hall was available to the village for hire. However, following the sale of the building by auction in the late 50s, apart from the church, the Church Room became the sole meeting place for the village.

The building was extremely damp, due to water rising through the brick floor. So in the late 60s a group of villagers who were not all churchgoers, decided to do something about it. They dug the floor out completely and, as there was very little money available, they used plastic feed sacks as a damp-proof membrane. It was then all covered in a thick layer of concrete.

The floor was completed thanks to one of the villagers who happened to work for Marley Tiles. The firm had just reached the end of a large contract for Heathrow Airport and there were various odd vinyl tiles left over from this project. These oddments were gratefully accepted by the villagers.

The Church Room building was changed to the configuration we know today when the Parochial Church Council provided a loan for the alterations. The original entrance was sealed and the flat roofed extension built to house a new entrance, plus a porch and toilet. The kitchen was also created. Various events were held in subsequent years in order to pay back the money. Few other changes took place after that until the Jubilee Group began their improvements in 2002.

Home Heating Customs

Heating in individual cottages was by open fire, usually stacked with logs rather than coal. However, in some houses the owners didn't deem it necessary to chop the logs. A large tree branch would be placed with its end in the fireplace and the rest protruding into the room. One villager was known to use branches so large that they blocked the front doorway. As the wood burned, the branch would steadily be moved into the fireplace.

To be continued

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