

The Sandon Pax – M W Hanson

Introduction

I am in the process of researching material for a book about trees in Essex, my special area of interest being ancient woodland and in particular what are known as wood-pasture sites, a group of habitats that is characterised by the combining of grazing animals with the production of wood and timber from the same site. Included in this group are ancient Royal Forests, deer parks and wooded commons. These three habitats are closely related and were very common features of the medieval landscape particularly in Essex.

The Medieval Economy

The medieval economy revolved around the management of trees, for cooking (charcoal), fuel for fires, structural timber for building (all types from castles to hovels), for domestic utensils, tool handles, farm implements, thatching spars, willow baskets – you name it, it was made of wood. Possibly rather unwisely, I decided to research material on wood products from this period for a chapter in the book. My aim was to try and establish a brief list of 'The Best in Essex' for such a list, because Essex has no really usable building stone, many of the buildings in the medieval period were skilfully constructed in wood and there is a huge list of medieval timber-framed buildings that have survived in Essex to demonstrate the durability of wood as a construction material one thinks immediately of the tower of Blackmore church or the Cressing Temple Barns. Having visited a number of Essex churches I realised that there was a vast but as far as I know unintentional and un-inventoried collection of examples of the medieval carpenter's and carver's work in the form of doors (there are doors known to be 6 or 700 years old), carved screens, font covers (Thaxted has a font and font cover which I think is about 15 feet high and is a magnificent and exuberant example of the medieval carvers craft dating from the late medieval period), bench ends, chests of many different types from crude dug-outs to elaborately decorated works of fine craftsmanship, wooden tomb effigies for which Essex is justly famous and of course the wooden pax at Sandon!!

The Sandon Pax

I first found out about the pax in a circa 1940 county history, needing to know more I contacted the former vicar of Boreham, William Smith, shortly to be celebrating his 90th birthday, requesting information about the pax and he very kindly enquired, on my behalf, of the churchwardens of Sandon and through the kind offices of Richard Cecil (he even picked me up from Boreham!) managed to get to see the pax on a very wet Tuesday the 16th February. The pax was a feature of every medieval church, it invariably had some representation of the crucifixion and was passed around for members of the congregation to kiss (the kiss of peace hence pax) some were fashioned in ivory, some in silver and probably many in wood. I would guess that eventually the pax was declared to be idolatrous and the reformation finished them off as part of the ritual of worship in most if not all churches. The Sandon Pax is said to be the only wooden example known to have survived.

Survival of the Pax

Reg Bush in his 1999 book about the village of Sandon devotes a whole chapter to the known history of the Sandon Pax, at any point in its history I get the feeling it was only by the slimmest of chances that the pax survived and slipped through each stage and at any time could have been lost to the world, it was seemingly only by the greatest luck it was actually identified as a pax, later verified by the V & A museum and I suspect they must have researched it, recorded it photographically and produced and archived a written description.

Differing Opinions

On seeing the pax in its glazed wooden box, I was struck by its overtly used appearance with its damaged gilding, exposed wooden frame with worm holes and damaged image of the crucifixion, what a fantastic object, bearing all the scars of public use, surviving the iconoclasm of the reformation and its adventurous life from being just a framed medieval miniature to its being

recognised as the lone survivor of a once commonplace object of everyday worship. I could not agree with the description given by Reg Bush in his Sandon book 'The Painting is of no particular merit, and is such as would be found in a third-rate illuminated Book of Hours...' the image is exactly what you would expect in a very rural Essex parish in an object with a very public everyday function. Books of Hours were commissioned by wealthy patrons and were lavishly and finely decorated according to the pocket of their future owners and were the private prayer-books of such people, ultimately kept securely in private libraries. The pax image was never meant to compete with the likes of the Très Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry!! Reg Bush also suggests the image shows Mary and St John but I wonder if in fact the image is of Mary and Mary Magdalene grieving as Christ suffers in agony on the cross at Golgotha. It is a wonderfully simple medieval evocation of what was probably the best known image from the bible, I also noted a flat area on the frame below the image of the crucifixion, all the gesso and gilding was missing but I wonder if this formerly held some relevant wording, possibly even the letters INRI or a biblical phrase appropriate to the use of the pax.

My Shock!

I was rather shocked at some aspects of the storage, in the box, a glass (or was it plastic?) plate inserted probably with the best intentions to protect the image, had come adrift from its wooden flange and if handled inappropriately has the potential to damage the image further. I was also concerned about the fact the pax had at some stage slipped out of two of the four metal brackets holding it in place in the glazed box.

Unique Status

It was a great privilege to look upon the Sandon Pax but I had to wonder, given its unique (in the true sense of the word) status, whether an item as rare and I would say of probable national significance should really be in the situation it now finds itself in.

Up for Discussion – a possible explosion in Sandon

The following points came up for discussion about the Sandon Pax with Richard Cecil, some, I recognise, are possibly a bit contentious coming from a non-Sandonian!!

1. Who is the legal owner of the pax? Candidates are the PCC, the Diocese or the Sandon Parishioners?
2. The pax is priceless and irreplaceable but it is presumably insured (given the church plate stolen in a 1960s raid).
3. Would the Catholic Church claim ownership of an object that once graced what was one of their churches, I expect the Vatican Museum would no doubt be interested anyway.
4. Why not retain the freehold ownership of the item but ask a national museum to act as custodian. A museum would give the object appropriate storage and curation (but some risks involved).
5. Although times are financially very difficult, why not get a copy of the pax made, but obviously without the damage and as it would have appeared straight from its medieval manufactory. Surely a wealthy Sandonian benefactor could be found or perhaps a legacy.
6. It would be fairly easy to replicate and could then be displayed in the church (and with its missing handle!)

A Brief Note

This is just a note to thank the Churchwardens, in particular Richard Cecil, for inviting me over to look at the Sandon Pax. I very much enjoyed my visit and my trip up Girolamo de Travise's brick tower to look out across this lovely part of Essex. I have one small request; does anyone have any information about medieval Sandon Park? It was almost certainly a deer park and was in existence

in 1330 and was still mentioned as a park in a will of 1564/5. It was, I think, situated somewhere near the parish boundary with Great Baddow. Perhaps it was the park of Sandon Hall??

Any answers gratefully received at M Hanson 3, Church Cottages, Church Road, Boreham, CM3 3EG.