

How Formal Anglican Pew-Renting Worked in Practice, 1800–1950

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Before the early nineteenth century pew-renting was comparatively rare in Anglican churches, and where it existed the practice was generally administered as a less serious means of fund-raising. But just before 1800 or so, methods of administering the letting of sittings became more businesslike and impersonal. The frequency of pew-renting grew exponentially with the advent of the Church Building Acts beginning in 1818, but the profits realised were usually less than is assumed. The often offensive and sometimes dishonest administration of pew-rent schemes, when later combined with waning churchgoing and a consequent surfeit of rentable sittings, marked the system's decline.

Pew-renting has been the subject of little academic enquiry. In particular, Callum Brown has noted in this JOURNAL that ‘comparatively meagre attention has been paid to how [the system of pew-renting] worked in practice’.¹ Recent authors have included pew-rents in their studies, but most have only mentioned the practice in passing and shed little light on the subject. A few studies have provided some analysis, including W. E. Tate’s 1969 treatment which discussed the early history of pew-rents, including the differences between fees for male and female congregants,² and G. I. T. Machin’s 1977 study pointing out Victorian parliamentary motions and the debate on pew-renting.³ But since then

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¹ Callum G. Brown, ‘The costs of pew-renting: church management, church-going and social class in nineteenth-century Glasgow’, this JOURNAL xxxviii (1987), 347–61 at p. 347.

² W. E. Tate, *The parish chest: a study of the records of parochial administration in England*, Cambridge 1969, 90–1.

³ G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832 to 1868*, Oxford 1977, 265, 274, 340.

K. D. M. Snell and Paul Ell have written 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’.⁴

This article seeks to help alleviate that paucity. To gather information, parish and other records of Bristol and the ancient county of Kent from 1800 to 1960, including visitation returns, were searched in detail for any references to pew-renting, and virtually every other archive in England with catalogue entries alluding to pew-letting was visited and the particular sources examined and recorded. Internet sources were used to find any mention of English Anglican pew-renting in both primary and secondary sources. The work also appears to have implications for debates on Victorian church financial matters and the parish economy at local level.

The decisions of individual churches to initiate pew-rents

Before the advent of the Church Building Acts in 1818, pew-renting was officially illegal in Anglican churches in the absence of specific legislation. It was generally sporadic and, where it existed, was usually done on a limited basis to supplement church receipts. Older churches often had endowments and were financed through rate and tithes, making pew-renting largely unnecessary. In 1798 the courts noted that pew-renting ‘has been constantly reprehended by the ecclesiastical courts as often as it had been set up’.⁵

Before 1818 those churches that started pew-letting schemes generally did so for laudable purposes. At Ellenborough (Anglican) chapel, Lancashire, in 1677, pew-rents were instituted specifically to augment the incumbent’s income, which had been £20 or less annually.⁶ At St Dunstan-in-the-East, London, pew-rent schedules were set in 1567 and 1586 ‘for avoyding contencion’ among parishioners.⁷ And at Northam parish in 1747, pew-rents were envisioned as a temporary measure to fund repairs to the church fabric: the vicar took pains to state in writing that ‘This was consented to by me only for the sake of ceiling ye Church – I condemn the method for ye future.’⁸ Doubtless many such *ad hoc* arrangements are lost to history.

⁴ K. D. M. Snell and Paul S. Ell, *Rival Jerusalems: the geography of Victorian religion*, Cambridge 2000, 361.

⁵ Alfred Charles Heales, *History and law of church seats*, London 1872, bk II, 57.

⁶ Lancashire Record Office, Preston, DDKE/acc. 7840 HMC/353.

⁷ Guildhall Library, London, MS 4887, fos 96v, 129.

⁸ North Devon Record Office, Barnstable, 1843A/PW 135.

But the nineteenth-century boom in church building and the consequent need to finance new churches changed the character of pew-letting. The new churches most often lacked endowments and, after the late 1860s – or even earlier – were no longer able to rely on rate. The Church Building Acts gave nascent legal approval to pew-letting in lieu of other means of funding, and many churches from their inception took advantage of this method in order to make ends meet.

Existing churches had more difficulty in persuading congregants to rent sittings. Parishioners often resisted ‘innovations’, including the setting up of pew-rent schemes, in churches which had not previously charged them. Even in 1858 the rector of Clerkenwell thought that introducing such a practice in an existing church would be highly controversial: ‘the cry outside would be of “pew rents”, and we should have it marked on all the dead walls, and we should never hear the end of it’.⁹

Setting and adjusting the rents

What little evidence survives of how churches set prices for sittings before 1818 indicates this was not done arbitrarily – the laity had some say in the matter. A note in the Hackney *Vicar-general's books* from 1598 reflects that if a judge thought existing rents too high, he was to call a meeting of the vestry, churchwardens and justices of the peace, each of whom would decide on an appropriate rent for each pew, then ‘shall putt their handes upon the back side of said platt, and exhibit unto the Judge of this Court upon Tewsdaye next, who will then take such order for the confirminge thereof as shall be fitt’.¹⁰ And at Ellenbrough (Anglican) chapel, Lancashire, in the 1670s the bishop requested three men, ‘ffeepees for the Endowment of the said Chappell’, to ‘take Care that such Persons who shall repaire to the Chappell of Ellenbrough and are not Annual Contributors ... be charged and pay such Reasonable paym^ts for the use of their respective Seats as others who do enjoy Seates in the said Chappell’.¹¹

From 1818 and for much of the nineteenth century the process of setting rents was much more centralised and uniform, usually done by the Church Commissioners, although building committees included lay members whose opinions were taken seriously. A committee of St

⁹ *Report from the select committee of the House of Lords, appointed to inquire into the deficiency of means of spiritual instruction and places of divine worship in the metropolis, and in other populous districts in England and Wales, especially in the mining and manufacturing districts*, London 1858, 541.

¹⁰ Heales, *History and law of church seats*, bk 1, 118–19.

¹¹ Lancashire Record Office, DDKE/acc. 7840 HMC/353.

Matthew, Kingsdown, Bristol, wishing to explore the possibility of letting seats, in 1834 appointed a subcommittee of the churchwarden and six others 'to make the necessary enquiries respecting the letting of the Seats in the New Church & making the preliminary arrangements'. The proposed scale was 'approved of with certain alterations'.¹²

Sometimes plans were disapproved and new arrangements required. The trustees of the proposed St Pancras, Middlesex, after consulting with the bishop in 1846, calculated that renting the sittings at 25s. or £1 each annually and assigning the revenue to themselves would be the best way to pay the incumbent £350 annually and a clerk £50, with lesser sums for the organist, verger, beadle and others. But the Commissioners sent the proposal back because, among other things, a clerk not in orders should in their view be paid only £25 and because the trustees had not given themselves and the churchwardens rent-free pews, even though the latter was not commonly required. The Commissioners eventually accepted a revised plan.¹³

When a church's proposal was deemed in order, the Commissioners furnished a grant and, with the bishop's consent and seal, issued an order formally approving and instituting the plan. Churches had earlier set higher prices on sittings nearer the pulpit and altar and lower rents for those further away. This became standard under the Church Building Acts and remained up to late Victorian times. Thus when a proposal to let the pews was put forward at St John, Chichester, in 1813, the authorities formally recommended that 'The front pews in the galleries being undoubtedly the best situated for both seeing & hearing, & being likewise handsomely fitted up, they are proposed to form the first class, at 30s. per sitting ... & next to them may be reckoned the front pews below, fitted up in the same manner, which form the 2d class at 27s.'¹⁴

The Commissioners evidently had no power to change the rents after setting them, although churchwardens could alter sums due with the consent of the incumbent, patron (if any) and ordinary. But making such changes could be complicated. At Trinity Church, Upper Chelsea, an exchange of letters in 1842 shows the plans approved by the Commissioners twelve years earlier – including the condition that £600 was to go annually to the incumbent from the pew-rents and £20 to the clerk, with the remainder put towards building a parsonage – was being ignored. In practice, the incumbent claimed, the average annual pew-rent income was £750, but the £130 surplus was being used to erect another church, not a parsonage. The Commissioners' astonished

¹² Bristol Record Office, Bristol, P/StMK/V/2.

¹³ Church of England Record Centre, Bermondsey, ECE/7/1/11572, pt 1.

¹⁴ West Sussex Record Office, Chichester, Par/39/47.

secretary responded that even if all the rentable sittings were taken, the total revenue should only have been £633 10s., not £750. Asked to explain, the incumbent pleaded ignorance, stating that he only arrived at the church in 1836, but that one of the prior churchwardens had informed him that in 1833 – three years after the rents were set – the value of some sittings had improved due to the removal of the pulpit and reading desk elsewhere in the church, and their price was accordingly adjusted on a ‘Principle of equitable Adjustment’. The bishop, said the incumbent, had approved these variations, but no written record of this was likely to be found. When the Commissioners nevertheless requested to see such a document, the incumbent produced one in November 1842 – but that had been signed by the bishop only a month before, in October 1842.¹⁵

Discount was sometimes offered to those who took more than one sitting; in the 1860s, at St Margaret, Rochester, an entire pew could be rented containing six or seven sittings, while a single sitting cost between 20 and 27 per cent of the full pew.¹⁶ Only a few Anglican churches after 1818 were found to have charged the same price for each rented sitting. Rental periods were commonly six months or a year, or sometimes a quarter. Only two instances were found of a church renting out seats for a single Sunday.¹⁷

The business acumen of church officials

Where seat-letting existed before about 1790, it was seldom done with large profits in mind. In this period pews were generally leased for life, even for the lives of lessees’ children, allowing for little further negotiation between church and congregant. But few such leases were made much into the nineteenth century. And pew-renting seldom brought in enough money to warrant systematic efforts at enforcement. Thus at St Mary, Beverley, Yorkshire, the churchwardens’ accounts from the 1770s have only sporadic references to the practice, such as in 1772: ‘Mr. Wadforth Pew in North Loft, ~ 5 ~’ is mixed in with sums received for other purposes.¹⁸ By 1798, though, a book was devoted solely to detailed recording of St Mary’s pew-rents,¹⁹ facilitating changes in price due to supply or demand and closer scrutiny with more accurate realisation of non-payment.

But in about the last decade of the eighteenth century – and therefore prompted by something other than the Church Building Acts – pew-

¹⁵ Lambeth Palace Library, London, 5194.C6.

¹⁶ Medway Area Local Studies Centre, Gillingham, P305/5B/5/1.

¹⁷ Church of England Record Centre, ECE/7/1/11779; Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/203/3/6.

¹⁸ East Riding of Yorkshire Archives and Record Service, Beverley, PE1/114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* DDBC/14/24.

renting was administered more and more by local church officials in a profit-oriented fashion. Such behaviour is rarely discernable from earlier records. In 1835 the vestry of St Martin, Liskeard, Cornwall, ordered 'that rents of sittings & pews in arrear be immediately demanded and payment enforced'.²⁰

Yet sometimes pew-renting in a businesslike fashion might become plain dishonesty. Contemporaries suspected clergymen and other church officials of fiddling their figures, as in ecclesiastical financial dealings in general; for the 1851 Religious Census the minister of St George, Wrotham, included with his return a note accusing other clergy of 'frequent false representations' of their income, making the totals seem less than they actually were.²¹ Pew-letting might particularly engender distrust: in many returns the space for pew-rent in the endowment section of the census returns was left blank, while others drew lines through the answer area, and even more listed several types of endowment, possibly including pew-rents, simply as 'fees' or 'subscriptions'.

And evidence exists to substantiate suspicion in this regard. In 1880, for example, Archbishop Tait was called on to referee a dispute over a charge of deception in pew-renting in Dartford parish church. There a tablet stated that 'The Incorporated Society for Building the Churches – granted £50 A. D. 1877 towards Reseating and Restoring this Church. All the Seats are for the Free Use of the Parishioners according to Law.' The tablet had been hung 'in the Porch behind the Western Door' and thus 'practically out of sight'. The complainant, though, alleged that despite the tablet's clear language, 'all the sittings in the Nave are charged 15/- per sitting; the South Aisle 7/6 per sitting'. The archbishop requested a reply from church officials, whose letter claimed that the notice 'is too unsightly to be hung in a prominent place upon the Church Wall', and that the pew-rents were 'voluntary' and authorised by the desire of the 'parishioners, repeatedly expressed in Vestry & elsewhere, that Church Expenses should be met by a Voluntary Subscription upon certain of the sittings'. Although the notice was in blatant disregard of the facts, the archbishop's chaplain wrote to the complainant saying that Archbishop Tait did 'not consider, after giving full attention to the case, that he is called upon to interfere with the arrangements which he understands the Churchwarden to have made'.²²

And to make good the loss of rate in later Victorian times, some existing churches instituted schemes which – although risking cries of 'innovation' – consisted of pew-renting with creative names such as 'seat subscription', perhaps to avoid the hostile gaze of critics. The 1872 diocesan visitation return from Brasted, Kent, noted that the church had 'about

²⁰ Cornwall Record Office, Truro, P126/7/5.

²¹ *Religious worship in Kent: the census of 1851*, ed. Margaret Roake, Maidstone 1999, 121.

²² Lambeth Palace Library, TAIT 259 fos 259, 262–5, 268.

150 appropriated seats for wh. the occupiers pay a voluntary subscr. towards Church Expenses in lieu of a Church rate, but no seats are really let in the strict sense of the word'.²³ A return from the parish of Farningham, Dartford, similarly claimed that

There are no seats in the Church let in the strict sense of the word, but since the abolition of Church Rates, the occupiers of the appropriated sittings have agreed to pay the Ch:Wardens a definite annual sum (some more, some less) for general repairs of the Church & for lighting, warming, cleaning, & other incidental expenses for the due performance of divine service.²⁴

This pretext formed at least the appearance of deception.

And even if done to fund necessary church expenses or salaries, the reason for church officials' acquisitive and perhaps dishonest behaviour could not make their demeanour more palatable for congregants. Lady Cavendish felt 'considerably disgusted by the drive-a-good-bargain fashion' in which the official of St Martin-in-the-Fields rented herself and her husband a pew in 1865, 'certainly putting before one the odiousness of the pew system in most lively colours'.²⁵ An Anglican chapel in Hampstead in 1796 welcomed congregants at each one's first service, but on their second visit the pew-opener was to ask newcomers to pay a minimum annual fee of 10s. 6d.²⁶ This sort of behaviour was grist to the mill of those who spoke out against pew-renting – complaints were made not just on the principle but on the mechanics of the practice.

Due to sporadic use and questionable legal status, Anglican pew-renting can hardly be said to have been a church tradition before about 1800. And even despite its widespread use in Victorian times pew-renting cannot be said to have been particularly popular, and therefore to have gained the honour given to church 'tradition'; many objections to letting pews were raised, some from High churchmen and Anglo-Catholics who regarded church space as sacred and inappropriate as a source of rental income, and others from those offended by how sittings were let, or by the number or location of rented seats in particular churches.²⁷

While suspicion of the demands for money made by church officials has been common throughout history, pew-letting particularly triggered this feeling; when calling on a particular parishioner, at least one incumbent was told that he was merely 'looking after his pew-rents'.²⁸ Some opponents

²³ Ibid. VG3/4a.

²⁴ Ibid. VG3/4b.

²⁵ *The diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish*, ed. John Bailey, London 1927, i. 256.

²⁶ Paul Langford, *Public life and the propertied Englishman, 1689–1798*, Oxford 1991, 23.

²⁷ Mary Arseneau, 'Pews, periodicals and politics: the Rossetti women as High-Church controversialists', in David Clifford and Laurence Roussillon (eds), *Outsiders looking in: the Rossettis then and now*, London 2004, 97–114 at p. 98.

²⁸ Edward Ralph Wickham, *Church and people in an industrial city*, London 1957, 116; *Report from the select committee of the House of Lords*, 609.

did more than quietly speculate on this – one wrote a verse of poetry espousing that precise impression:

A'a! it's grand to ha plenty o' brass!
 Then th' parsons'll know where yo live;
 If yo're poor, it's mooast likely they'll pass,
 An call where fowk's summat to give.
 Yo may have a trifle o' sense,
 An yo may be booath upright an trew,
 But that's nowt, if yo can't stand th' expense
 Ov a whole or a pairt ov a pew.²⁹

Sometimes prices were raised due to high demand, although this appears to have been more common earlier in Victorian times than later. In the 1840s a Colonel Jarvis resided at Lincoln but held what he considered a prescriptive right to a pew at St Mary, Dover. In 1842 the churchwardens asked him to pay £6 a year for the pew – sittings there, they claimed, 'have been seised upon most greedily'. Deeming the £6 in lieu of various other payments such as Easter Offerings, lecture submissions and rate, Colonel Jarvis instructed his son to pay the sum but to protest 'against compromising his Prescriptive Claim to the pew'. His son accordingly paid £3, presumably for half the year, and had a lock put on the pew door, but was later informed that the rent would henceforth be £9 *per annum*.³⁰ The dispute's outcome is unknown.

Perhaps of more consequence to the average renter, church officials' desire for maximum revenue led to the size of each paid sitting being trimmed to what appears today to be almost an intolerable width, particularly when congregants' bottoms were widened by crinolines or bustles. In the later nineteenth century at St James, Westgate, each rented sitting was to be only twenty inches wide.³¹ And this was generous compared with the seventeen to eighteen inches allowed by Glaswegian churches,³² and particularly with the sixteen inches per sitting allotted by St Peter, Brighton, in 1872, which was deemed without apparent litotes to be 'rather close quarters'.³³ In 1829 an official of Holy Trinity, Tunbridge Wells, did not even bother tactfully to conceal the pecuniary motive involved in limiting the space allowed to each renter; he sent a proposed pew-rent scale to the Commissioners with a note that 'The above scale is made out on the allowance of 20 Inches to each sitting, in which case there will be a

²⁹ John Hartley, *Yorkshire lyrics: poems written in the dialect as spoken in the West Riding of Yorkshire: to which are added a selection of fugitive verses not in the dialect*, London 1898, at <<http://www.archive.org/stream/yorkshirelyrics1947ogut/19470.txt>>.

³⁰ Lincolnshire Archives, Lincoln, JARVIS 5P/11/17.

³¹ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/279/5/D1/D.

³² Brown, 'The costs of pew-renting', 356–7.

³³ East Sussex Record Office, Brighton, PAR 277/6/2/1.

surplus of 9 inches in each of the Gallery Pews, & Inches in those in the body', but 'at 18½ Inches per Sitting, the Pews in the Body would hold 8 instead of 7. – and at 18½ those in the Gallery would hold 9 instead of 8'.³⁴ Sometimes children's sittings were even smaller; for them SS Philip and Jacob, Bristol, approved thirteen- or fourteen-inch sittings, which can hardly have promoted proper church behaviour.³⁵ St George, Brandon Hill, Bristol, was an exception, since up to 1874 sittings for adults were between thirty-six and fifty-six inches, and the plans for reseating guaranteed fifty-six inches for each adult and forty-two for each child.³⁶ This is not particularly excessive considering that congregants likely needed space for coats, handbags, books, bustles and similar accessories.

Also, in the spirit of profit, pew-renters neglecting to inform churchwardens of their intent not to renew sittings might be asked to pay the rent none the less, or at least might expect repeated demands for payment. At All Saints, Cockermouth, a nineteenth-century congregant was 'somewhat annoyed at having received a second demand for a subscription of 7/- for [seats that] we have not occupied for the last three years, for the solid reason that the aforesaid seat has been, and still is used by other people ... We have given 7/- for the last two years for other peoples [*sic*] convenience'.³⁷

And although the 1819 Act required that rentable pews be offered to parishioners before non-parishioners,³⁸ some churches were eager to rent seats to holiday-makers without local connections. St Saviour, Westgate, in 1895 successfully applied for a faculty to remove twelve evidently rent-free pews designed for children and replace them with nine pews suitable for adult congregants – which would create forty-four seats to be let at 10s. 6d. each. The churchwardens later wrote that 'Our Season is now close upon us and the extra accommodation is even now very much needed'.³⁹ At Emmanuel Church, West Dulwich, from 1922 to 1935 the church made a bit more out of pew-rents by charging 6d. per sitting per year for a cushion, and almost every pew-renter paid the additional charge.⁴⁰ Church officials sometimes tried to raise revenue by hinting that those using rent-free sittings should pay something in lieu of pew-rent, such as at Christ Church, Herne Bay, which in the late 1860s in addition to pew-letting instituted 'Non Seat Holders Boxes'⁴¹ to receive donations.

A few churches enhanced their profits by levying assessments on sittings in addition to set rents. In 1898, at Holy Trinity, Tunbridge Wells, the vestry

³⁴ Church of England Record Centre, 18, 381.

³⁵ Bristol Record Office, P/St.P&J/M/7.

³⁶ Ibid. P/StGB/V/1(a).

³⁷ Cumbria Record Office and Local Studies Library, Whitehaven, YPR/26/150.

³⁸ 58 Geo. III, c. 45, ss. 32, 76.

³⁹ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, DCb/Westgate, St Saviour/3 (underlining in original).

⁴⁰ London Metropolitan Archives, P/85/EMM2/70.

⁴¹ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/282/8/A2.

resolved ‘That no Voluntary Church Rate be made but that in lieu of same, all seatholders in the Church be charged the usual $1/5^{\text{th}}$ extra for church expenses.’⁴² And at Christ Church, Highbury Grove, in the early 1860s and possibly earlier, the churchwardens were told to charge ‘an extra rate of 8/- per Sitting’ on top of the 25s. most renters paid, deemed necessary ‘for payment of the incidental expenses’. The churchwardens responded that they had been instructed that 33s. per sitting ‘is decidedly illegal, and could not be enforced’.⁴³ The same sort of additional charge was levied at Christ Church, Tunbridge Wells, in 1877.⁴⁴

The proceeds actually realised

Despite – or perhaps in light of – the behaviour of those administering pew-renting schemes, the evidence strongly suggests that Anglican pew-renting was not as profitable as has been assumed, particularly as the Victorian era wore on and certainly in the twentieth century. This was not due to the prices charged but because late Victorian and Edwardian congregants, whose numbers were dwindling in any event, appear to have been less willing to pay for sittings, particularly in not very advantageous areas of their churches.

Some, but comparatively few, churches dropped prices to create more demand. In 1858, at St James, Dover, a vestry committee realised that forty sittings were unlet ‘owing to their position being not sufficiently favorable to procure the rents at which they are offered’. The committee ‘therefore authorised the Collector to let those Sittings upon the best terms he can, as they are at present yielding no income’.⁴⁵ And at Christ Church, Luton, due to a dearth of renters in the 1870s, seat rental prices had ‘been reduced much below the prices authorised by’ the instrument setting them.⁴⁶

But most churches continued to charge the earlier price to the reduced numbers of congregants willing to pay, attempting to attract more renters rather than lower the sums charged. Thus, in 1912, at Holy Trinity, Dartford, in response to waning income from pew-renting, the church council decided to advertise the availability of sittings. Its minutes reflect that:

The Chairman [the vicar] suggested that members of the Council should ask their friends to take sittings and also try and get new-comers to do likewise. It was suggested and adopted that a notice should be placed on the Church Door to the

⁴² Kent History and Library Centre, Maidstone, P371L/8/2.

⁴³ London Metropolitan Archives, P83/CTC/10/4.

⁴⁴ Kent History and Library Centre, P371H/28/22.

⁴⁵ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/26/8/7/1.

⁴⁶ Bedfordshire and Luton Archives & Record Service, Bedford, P135/3/1.

effect that all seats were free as soon as the service had commenced, and also that notices should be placed in the pews to inform the Congregation of the price of sittings and requesting them to take some as the Church was not endowed. The Chairman and Mr Dines agreed to word this notice.⁴⁷

This is likely to have been because prices for sittings were low anyway, and a significant decrease in prices might make administering a scheme of pew-rents more trouble than it was worth, particularly considering the difficulty and expense of litigating instances of non-payment. And given some churches' urgent financial state, simply calling for more renters may have seemed a sound strategy. Pew-renting was also less profitable than has been thought because incumbents' earnings from this source were subject to the 1842 Income Tax Act,⁴⁸ and continued to be taxed in 1898.⁴⁹ The vicar of St Andrew, Clifton, Bristol, was thus assessed £6 8s. 9d. on £110 from sittings let.⁵⁰

Deciding who sat where

At St Dunstan-in-the-East, London, where pew-rents were instituted in Elizabethan times 'for avoyding contencion' among congregants,⁵¹ sittings were presumably assigned with this goal in mind. At Northam, seating decisions in 1747 were not a matter of discretion – the 'best Payers on the Church rate on their applying for it' could, on payment of 10s. 6d. for themselves and 1s. for their wives plus 1s, have their choice of seats in the church. Other sittings appear to have been auctioned off to the highest bidder.⁵²

Later, under the Church Building Acts, churchwardens were most often responsible for assigning rented sittings. In 1858, after hearing from many clerical and lay witnesses, a select committee of the House of Lords recommended that 'the right of placing parishioners [in pews] in the first instance will then remain with the churchwardens ... The Archdeacon, we think, may be safely intrusted [*sic*] with the power of remedying any evils which may arise from indiscretion in the churchwardens'.⁵³ Sometimes vestries both assigned the sittings and decided prices, as at St Michael, Coventry, in 1818.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ Medway Area Local Studies Centre, P110/8/12.

⁴⁸ TNA, Kew, IR 40/1279; 5 & 6 Vict., c. 35, s. 146.

⁴⁹ Cornwall Record Office, P152/2/48.

⁵⁰ Bristol Record Office, P/StA/ChW/10/2.

⁵¹ Guildhall Library, MS 4887, fos 96v, 129r.

⁵² North Devon Record Office, 1843A/PW 135.

⁵³ *Report from the select committee of the House of Lords*, 38.

⁵⁴ 'The city of Coventry: churches: churches built before 1800', in W. B. Stephens (ed.), *A history of the county of Warwick*, viii, Woodbridge 1969, 321–61.

But for whomever accepted the responsibility – and gained the incipient power – of making seat assignments, the business could be complicated. At St Philip, Maidstone, from 1858 to 1864, congregants often changed pews or were reseated; few sat in the same spaces for more than two years at a time.⁵⁵ Records sometimes reflect that a family rented seats in more than one pew, or that different family members rented sittings some distance away from each other, perhaps from necessity due to crowding, or perhaps not. In the 1937 list of renters at St Paul, Cliftonville, Margate, a Miss G. Watson of 44 Ethelbert Road rented two sittings in pew 3, while a Miss A. Watson, also of 44 Ethelbert Road, rented a single sitting, initially in pew 3 as well. However, the ‘3’ across from Miss A. Watson’s name is crossed out and replaced by a note that her sitting would henceforth be in pew 14 – then the ‘14’ is also scored through, and she was assigned a place in pew 9.⁵⁶ Whether this reflects a lack of space in pews 3 and 14, or the Watsons’ desire that they sit apart, cannot be ascertained.

Where employers paid for sittings for their servants, the latter were often assigned pews separate from those of their employers, often in remote galleries or isolated by screens.⁵⁷ At the turn of the nineteenth century at St Mary, Beverley, the servants’ pews – designated by the occupants’ employers’ names, for example, ‘Mr. Dobson’s Servants’ – were more likely not only to be more toward the back of each loft but laterally further away from the pulpit.⁵⁸ This practice continued in Victorian times.

The privilege of sitting in rented places could also be temporarily forfeited if the renters did not turn up for a particular service. Where rented seats were still empty at a certain time, such as a few minutes before a service began, or when it actually started, or – more commonly – at the end of the Psalms and the beginning of the first lesson, non-renters might be allowed to occupy the spaces. According to the Canterbury diocesan visitation returns, this practice was evidently more popular toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth than it had been earlier.⁵⁹ And much later, allowing non-renters to fill let but unoccupied sittings was common. Until the 1950s at Holy Trinity, Brompton, said a long-time parishioner, any non-renter – presumably if no space was available in free seats – ‘had to wait until five minutes to 11’ before being allowed to sit in vacant rented pews, ‘in case the occupiers were coming. So there was always a scrum waiting for a seat’.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Kent History and Library Centre, P241G/5/A/7.

⁵⁶ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/281/5/A1.

⁵⁷ *Useful toil: autobiographies of working toil from the 1820s to the 1920s*, ed. John Burnett, Hamroldsworth 1977, 174.

⁵⁸ East Riding of Yorkshire Archives and Record Service, DDBC/14/24; DDBC/14/25. ⁵⁹ Lambeth Palace Library, VG3–VG 11. ⁶⁰ <<http://htb.org.uk/features/2004/06/gothbirthday.htm>>.

Yet several Anglican churches in the 1851 census indicated that, on the contrary, they did not allow appropriated seats to be used by others even when those sittings were left empty throughout services.⁶¹ At St George's-in-the-East the poor were prevented from entering empty pews.⁶² In St Clement Danes in the Strand, on the other hand, the poor could not be persuaded to go into unused pews even if asked, preferring to stand near the free sittings.⁶³

Collecting the proceeds

Methods used to collect rents varied, although churchwardens tried to make remitting payments as convenient as possible. Some churchwardens sent bills to each tenant and, ideally, received the rent due. Others simply announced that pew-rents would be payable at a particular time and place and expected the tenants to appear and pay what they owed, or else trusted that renters would turn up and pay at their own convenience – or at the church officials' convenience. Early in the nineteenth century at St George, Kendal, Cumberland, pew-renters were expected to approach the collector on a particular day: a notice from St George's informed 'all Occupiers of Seates and Sittings' that they were 'Desired to have the Goodness to go to pay the Seat Money Due the 24 Dec^r 1824, at [the] Dwelling House of James Dockers' since he 'is not able to Collect it from House to House'.⁶⁴ And at All Saints, Hatcham Park, Kent, when sittings were rented quarterly in 1884, the churchwardens made it known in an annual report they would 'attend in the Vestry at the commencement of each quarter to receive Pew Rents, and to let Sittings'.⁶⁵ But this could be impractical. In 1885 the church council of St George, Deal – despite the fact that the councillors were largely pew-renters themselves – 'thought that Seat holders would fail to appear' if simply bidden to come and pay their pew-rents, and instead 'require to be waited on'.⁶⁶ In the parish of Smeeth, Kent, seat-letting was discontinued in 1901 since no one could be found to act as churchwarden, the 'chief reason' for which was the 'difficulty of collecting the seat rents'.⁶⁷

And defaulting on payment might be frequent. By 1845 churchwardens were legally required to gather both current rents and amounts in arrears.⁶⁸ Yet some churchwardens were in no position to take a firm

⁶¹ *Religious worship in Kent*, 28, 53, 65.

⁶² *Report from the select committee of the House of Lords*, 70, 162.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 117.

⁶⁴ Cumbria Record Office, Kendal, WPR31/2/3.

⁶⁵ London Metropolitan Archives, P75/ALL/25/6.

⁶⁶ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/67/8/1.

⁶⁷ Kent History and Library Centre, P4B/8/2.

⁶⁸ 8 & 9 Vict., c. 70, s. 6.

line on this. At Roehampton, Surrey, in about 1870 the churchwardens, both of them attorneys, were themselves said to be ‘habitually in arrear, to the extent of as many as three half-years, in the payment of their own Pew Rents’.⁶⁹ At the 1858 House of Lords select committee hearings, witnesses testified that non-payers were not usually prosecuted: ‘In some parishes the rent-charge is too minutely subdivided, and consists of several hundred trifling payments; and when the parties liable are indigent or ill-disposed, the clergyman is tempted to forego his right, rather than enforce it by legal process against large numbers of his parishioners.’⁷⁰ Although churchwardens certainly tried to oust non-payers, parishioners illegally renting pews could not legally be displaced even if they failed to pay, wrote a lawyer in 1851, since ‘*cæteris paribus* possession gives preference’.⁷¹

Later in the nineteenth century and afterwards, some churches turned to less formal methods of requesting payment. In the 1890s the churchwardens of Christ Church, Ellacombe, Torquay, sent notices asking that ‘in order to save the trouble and expense of collecting the pew-rents’, the money due be placed ‘in the Vicar’s box, just within the church door’, with the renter’s name, address and pew number, ‘next Sunday ... or the following Sunday’, or that the total be sent directly to the vicar, by cheque or postal order.⁷² In 1935 St Margaret, Brighton, distributed a printed notice stating that rents due could be paid quarterly, if the renters found that more convenient than annual payments, and that the sums could be paid either to the secretary in the vestry, ‘which is open Daily for the transaction of Church business between the hours of 10.30 a.m. and 12.30 p.m.’, or by ‘placing the amount in an envelope to be put in the plate at the Church Offertory’.⁷³

And at St George, Perry Hill, Southwark, notices of rents due were inscribed on the rented seats themselves – some pews there are said to still have ‘Victorian numbers and pew rent notices under a century of varnish’.⁷⁴ In the 1770s and 1780s the Foundling Hospital Chapel, London, solved the problem of default via a ticket system in which money due was collected when tickets were issued. The chapel’s accounts list ‘North & South Gallery Tickets to Christmas’, ‘Aile [*sic*] Tickets from Mich to Xmass at 1/6’, ‘Annual Aile [*sic*] tickets’, and ‘East Gallery Tickets’.⁷⁵

In many places churchwardens paid a salary to someone whom they designated to collect the pew-rent revenue. This was not new; historical

⁶⁹ Lambeth Palace Library, TAIT 172 fo. 159.

⁷⁰ *Report from the select committee of the House of Lords*, 431. ⁷¹ *Ibid.* 594.

⁷² Devon Record Office, Exeter, 3000A/PW1 (underlining in original).

⁷³ East Sussex Record Office, PAR /269/6/2. ⁷⁴ <<http://www.southwark.anglican.org/bridge/o103/page03.htm>>.

⁷⁵ London Metropolitan Archives, A/FH/B8/4/1.

precedent existed for paying agents to collect rental income, albeit for other types of church property, such as land-rents in the sixteenth century.⁷⁶ Victorian pew-rent collectors were commonly paid for their efforts, usually by a decent commission based on the total gathered. In 1887 St Philip, Maidstone, paid a Mr L. Howard £7 15s. 3d., and at St George, Deal, in 1859–60 a representative was allotted £5 for ‘Collecting Pew Rents’ and 5s. as a ‘Fee for letting seats’.⁷⁷ At Christ Church, Milton-next-Gravesend, in July 1922 the church paid 10s. to a Mr De Wardt to write out ‘Pew Rent Notices’ and to buy the stamps to send them.⁷⁸ And at Holy Trinity, Wordsley, Kingswinford, Staffordshire in the 1840s, the rector received the entire sum after ‘deducting 5 per Cent paid to Mr. Meredith for collection’.⁷⁹ The percentage was sometimes higher than that, making the position even more lucrative – in 1903 at St Stephen, Tonbridge, pew-rents due were collected by a Miss Seale, who received about 14 per cent of the sum that she gathered.⁸⁰ Even the job of writing receipts for payments could be very lucrative: in 1784, at St James, Piccadilly, a Mr Dyson was paid £17 5s. for making out 345 pew-rent receipts – a shilling each.⁸¹ But other collectors got only a ‘hearty vote of thanks’.

Distributing the sums collected

Although an evolving custom dictated that pew-rents belonged to the incumbent, the funds received might be put to a variety of causes. In the early sixteenth century the church courts asserted ownership of a portion of pew-rent revenues.⁸² After the Reformation the total was often paid to the incumbent, or might go to church upkeep, as in Gloucestershire in the 1540s.⁸³ The revenue might also be used to finance extra seating needed due to increased local population, as at St Leonard, Streatham, in the 1770s, and elsewhere.⁸⁴ At St Mary, Queen Square, Bath, in 1801

⁷⁶ *The Canterbury chantries and hospitals, together with some others in the neighbourhood*, in 1546, ed. Charles Cotton, Ashford 1934, 5, 35, 41.

⁷⁷ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/67/5/3; Kent History and Library Centre, P241G/5/A/7.

⁷⁸ Medway Area Local Studies Centre, P252C/8/2; P/252C/1/5/1.

⁷⁹ Dudley Archives and Local History Centre, Dudley, PR/KIN(W) II/4/3.

⁸⁰ Kent History and Library Centre, P371D/5/1 & P371B/8/1.

⁸¹ City of Westminster Archive Centre, 494/150.

⁸² Christopher Hill, *Economic problems of the Church from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament*, Oxford 1956, 168.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 169; Caroline Litzenger, *The English Reformation and the laity: Gloucestershire, 1540–1580*, Cambridge 1997, 50.

⁸⁴ London Metropolitan Archives, P95/LEN/225.

and 1802, pew-rents paid the salaries of the curate, sexton, clerk and trustees as well as many routine expenses.⁸⁵

The Church Building Acts tried to standardise the destination of pew-renting revenue in new churches. The 1819 act presumed that the proceeds would be substantial, requiring their use in the following order: first, 5 per cent for repair of the pews and for the stipends of the clergyman and clerk; second, either for church building or upkeep or to make up some of the church rate; third, to repay loans incurred for the church or land, to purchase government securities or to pay part of a house for the clergyman; finally, if any money was left over, to increase the minister's stipend, erect more seating in the church, or to lower existing pew-rents, according to the bishop's wish.⁸⁶

But the acts were optimistic in this regard. Few churches took in sufficient revenue from pew-letting to fund such expenses, and those that did rarely followed the 1819 dictate. St Peter, Southborough, was an exception. In 1841 St Peter's used pew-rent receipts to pay the incumbent £74, transferred £40 for 'annual disbursement', allotted £3 11s. 11*d.* to collectors, and paid a tailor's bill for £3 10s. for the beadle's coat, £1 15s. for masonry work, £2 1s. 3*d.* to a parish official in charge of handling the funds, and £4 11s. 1*d.* for new gates.⁸⁷

But at Trinity Church, Cranbrook, in 1851 the proceeds from pew-rents were reported to be 'swallowed up by expenses for Clerk, lighting etc'.⁸⁸ In 1893 a visitation return noted that about 150 sittings at St Mary, Ramsgate, were 'let for money – according to a special Act of Parliament, which settles how the Incumbent's stipend is to be paid, but he never receives a farthing from that source, as the pew-rents do not nearly cover the Church Expenses'.⁸⁹ And at Ironbridge in 1887 a churchwarden was imprisoned for twenty-eight days due to a suit by the incumbent, since the pew-rents proceeds, intended to be divided between the church and incumbent, were insufficient for both, and the churchwarden 'deemed it his duty to pay off the church debt before paying the incumbent'.⁹⁰

Benefits enjoyed by those letting sittings

Those paying for seats could legally be accorded privileges that other congregants did not enjoy. This included the right to elect their own churchwardens, for which the 1831 Church Building Act provided. Pew-renters'

⁸⁵ TNA, C/114/185. ⁸⁶ 59 Geo. III, c. 134, ss. 26, 27; 3 & 4 Vict. c. 60, s. 5.

⁸⁷ Kent History and Library Centre, P371B/8/1.

⁸⁸ *Religious worship in Kent*, 188; <<http://uk.geocities.com/twyorkroad/tw1855/colbrantunbridgewells1855.html>>.

⁸⁹ Lambeth Palace Library, VG3/gc.

⁹⁰ House of Commons, Deb. 26 August 1887 v. 320 c. 28.

churchwardens were accordingly elected at several parishes, such as St Mark, Stretford, Manchester,⁹¹ and St Paul, Clapham.⁹² At Southborough, Kent, in the 1850s, vestry meetings were described as ‘not vestry meetings in the proper sense of the term, but merely meetings of the incumbent and pew renters of the church ... for the appointment of churchwardens to manage the church and collect the pew rents’.⁹³

The extra privileges sometimes extended to choosing other church personnel. In 1825 the courts held that pew-renters and pew-owners contributing at least £50 each to a certain church had the legal right to elect trustees, who would in turn nominate the incumbent.⁹⁴ In 1851 the ‘Pew and Seat Renters’ of Holy Trinity, Sheerness, elected the church’s organist, who received all the proceeds from the pew-rents,⁹⁵ and in 1854 the pew-renters of St Leonard, Streatham, decided not only the salary of the organist but also of the blower and singers, who would also be paid from the receipts from let sittings.⁹⁶ In 1857 the pew-renters of Christ Church, Milton-next-Gravesend, had the power to employ and sack the organist.⁹⁷ And at St Barnabas, Openshaw, Manchester, the pew-renters had the privilege of auditing the churchwardens’ accounts from 1851 to 1853.⁹⁸

Sometimes a more tangible benefit was given: when pew-letting was finally abandoned at Christ Church, Helme, in 1952, the vicar’s letter in the parish magazine noted that ‘these Pew Rents have always carried the privilege of burial in our churchyard’.⁹⁹ St Andrew, Deal, provided hassocks for pew-renters’ use in 1903, a concession not extended to the rest of the congregation, although the renters were responsible for mending the hassocks in their pews.¹⁰⁰

The mechanics of pew-letting went through several general stages – from more or less haphazard renting of a few seats; to systematic and impersonal schemes in which officials might restrict the sizes of sittings and concomitant comfort, but could also be powerless to seek redress against defaulters; to more coaxing and less demanding requests for payment at each renter’s convenience.

⁹¹ Manchester Archives and Local Studies, Manchester, L89/1/10/1.

⁹² London Metropolitan Archives, P95/PAU1/18.

⁹³ *Viner v. Churchwardens*, 2 EL; EL. 9, 15 (1859).

⁹⁴ 5 Geo. IV, c. 103, s. 6 & 7.

⁹⁵ Kent History and Library Centre, P254B/28/1.

⁹⁶ Lambeth Archives Department, P/S/1/47.

⁹⁷ Medway Area Local Studies Centre, P252C/8/1.

⁹⁸ Manchester Archives & Local Studies, M389/3.

⁹⁹ West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield, WDP 177/10/1/6, 23 October 1952.

¹⁰⁰ Canterbury Cathedral Archives, U3/271/28/2.

In 1996 S. J. D. Green, in a study of churches and chapels in a city, a town and a village, all in the West Riding of Yorkshire from late Victorian times to just after the end of the First World War, delved deeply into the decline of pew-rents. Green noted that in 1870 almost all churches and chapels in the three areas in question let sittings, but that fifty years later virtually all pew-rents there had been abolished; he concluded that pew-letting was no longer economically viable due to widespread church-building, which had led to over-accommodation: 'The simple truth was that more and more churches were being built at a time when there was less and less hard evidence that there were congregations willing and able to bear the burden of their expense.'¹⁰¹

Yet at least in Anglican churches, the early and mid-Victorian methods used to administer rent pews cannot have made the schemes any more desirable and may well have hastened their decline, regardless of oversupply and reduced churchgoing. The disgust that Lady Cavendish felt at the 'drive a good bargain' method of letting sittings at St Martin-in-the-Field – a symptom of pew-renting's 'odiousness', as she put it – was surely felt by others. Combined with frequent other complaints about the practice's supposed impropriety and the viability of letting seats in the face of the offertory's apparent success, some potential renters were almost certainly dissuaded by churchwardens' attitudes and grasping methods, particularly up to late Victorian times. Green's conclusions are valid, but businesslike grasping in renting pews must also take its share of responsibility for the waning of pew-letting.

In any event, pew-letting in Anglican churches was a difficult business, and its profitability varied. Its popularity among renters is also likely to have varied in diverse situations; paying collectors a percentage of the 'take' could only raise suspicion, and squeezing in as many sittings as possible in order to augment revenue is likely to have caused anger as well as discomfort. Umbrage would be particularly likely where those who did rent seats received tangible special privileges, such as hassocks provided and the right of burial in the churchyard.

Particularly in the middle of the nineteenth century pew-letting could be extremely profitable, and an unexpected drop in revenue, whether due to a bad harvest or an unpopular incumbent, might have serious consequences for a church's budget. Where pew-renting persisted despite lesser profitability, church officials rarely dropped prices, which business acumen might have dictated; instead the officials tried to drum up seat-letting by becoming more persuasive. But regardless of the methods used, pew-renting eventually became entirely unprofitable in English Anglican churches.

¹⁰¹ S. J. D. Green, *Religion in the age of decline: organisation and experience in industrial Yorkshire, 1870–1920*, Cambridge 1997, 156.