

Part 4. The Refectory, Vicarage, Orchard and Paddock



The Refectory – c 1930. Courtesy of Ray Atwell. Note the end of a greenhouse on the right hand side.

"From what you say this building (the Refectory) was the Vicarage from the first. I confess I was surprised at that it makes the longest record of continuous occupation as a parsonage that I have found in the country."

From a letter signed by an A. Savidge for the Church Commissioners in London in reply to a letter from Alex Cran, vicar of Congresbury 1948-73, dated 29 July 1958.

"For its extraordinary good preservation of over five hundred years, it is of national, not merely local importance as a piece of late medieval domestic architecture."

Somerset Countryman. October – December 1958. Article by Brian Little.

In 1348, Edward 111 granted a licence to the Bishop for land in Congresbury to be set aside for the vicar "*he not having any common dwelling place.*"

Date of Construction of the Refectory

The arms of Bishop Bekynton (or Beckington) are carved on a shield over the entrance to the Refectory porch and show three bucks' heads, a bishop's mitre with ribbons extended and three barbed arrow heads.

Nikolaus Pevsner, in the North Somerset and Bristol volume of his series of books about the buildings of England, states that the Refectory was built c1465 - 1470 by the executors of Bishop Beckynton.

Margaret Wood in her classic book about English medieval houses mentions the arms of Bishop Beckington carved on the Refectory porch and says that it was built during his bishopric, 1443-64, or by his executors.

In 1983 Commander E H D Williams and R G Gilson examined the building. They noted that the Listing Description gave the date of 1446 but dated the porch as 1465.

Bishop Beckynton's will makes no mention of Congresbury or its vicarage.

The exact date it was built will probably remain unknown.

The style of the building is reflected in Ashbury Manor, Berkshire (c1488), which belonged to Glastonbury Abbey.

From the 15th century the building provided excellent accommodation, by the standards of the times, for numerous Congresbury vicars.

In 1634 a listing of the vicar's tithe payments mentions that in addition to the vicarage house there was a stable, dove house, garden and backside (yard) all contained in two acres.

Another Vicar in Trouble

Congresbury's vicar, Mr Christopher Sadbury, is recorded in a manorial court roll dated 15th October 1655 as having pulled down the vicarage stable. He was ordered to rebuild it "*by the 23rd March next*" under a penalty of £20. At the court of 7th April 1656, he was again ordered to rebuild the stable, this time with a penalty of £40 if it was not done by 24th June. Sadbury also forfeited the £20. In the same court because the kitchen at the vicarage was "*out of repair*" he was ordered to "*amend the same by 24th June next.*" The repairs must have been carried out as he is not mentioned again in court.

Christopher Sadbury, according to the Hearth tax records in 1665, had "*beaten up*" two of his ten hearths so that he only had to pay tax on eight hearths at 2s each per year. (N.B. In 1823 only three hearths are recorded).

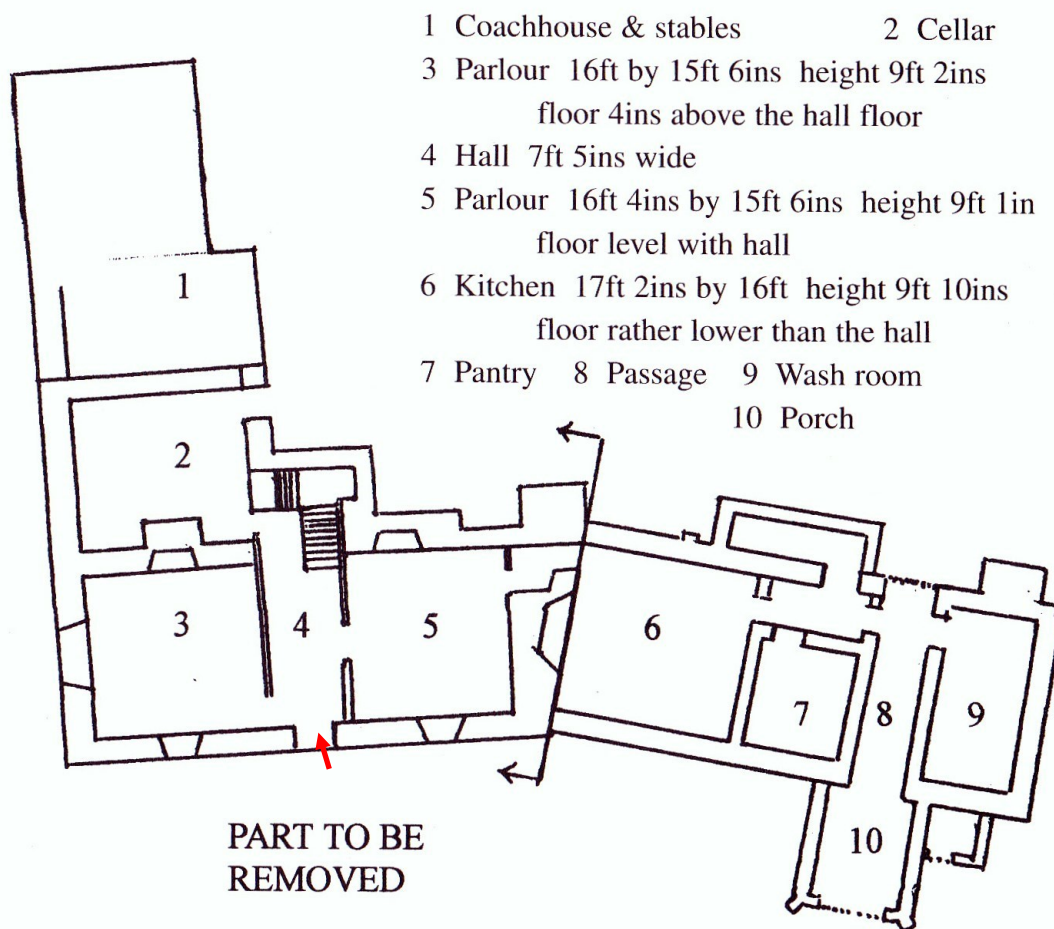
John Miller, the vicar in 1670, was exempted from paying the hearth tax, presumably because of his poverty!

In 1815 the vicarage was described as "*good but the situation is damp and unhealthy,*" however, in 1820 the widow of the Rev Doctor Small (vicar from 1799-1814) was given £270 for dilapidations.

New Vicarage

In 1823 Joseph Haythorne was appointed vicar at the large annual salary of £150 but with the requirement that he live in the parish. Almost immediately he applied for the old vicarage to be rebuilt as the vicarage house was

~ so old and in every respect so low, damp and incommodious as to render it impossible to reside therein with any degree of comfort, without great alteration and expense."



NB The Refectory appears to have no windows!

1823 Plan. Courtesy of the Rev Matthew Thomson.

The red arrow has been added to show the part of the old building that was demolished.

A plan dating from 1823, which is reproduced above, shows that part of the old vicarage (Refectory) which was pulled down. In its place the current vicarage, of late Georgian style and probably by a Bristol architect, was completed by April 1824.



An 1829 engraving of the Refectory from John Rutter's "Delineations of the North Western Division of the County of Somerset."



An early postcard of the vicarage. Courtesy of Ray Atwell.

Joseph Haythorne the vicar seems not to have kept the agreement to live in the parish as a "rustic" told the "Churchgoer" in 1850 that *"tis curious he (the vicar) is so often away from it"* and that the vicar went *"to foreign parts"* for months at a time!

The Twentieth Century

Bridget Colquhoun, the vicar's daughter, lived in the vicarage for seven years from 1928 to 1935 and remembers that the only heating was coal fires and there was no mains water. All water was pumped from a cistern under the building which collected rainwater from the roof. The room in the Refectory, on the right hand side of the passage as you go in, was the pump room, where a boy was employed to pump water up into the tank - every day. The Refectory hall was in regular use for parish meetings and on one occasion the Colquhoun family celebrated Christmas there. She also recalled that her father (Rev. Robert Woods Colquhoun) employed a resident cook and *"maid of all work."* Her father had no car and so walked everywhere. He enjoyed visiting the surrounding farms.

Alex Cran, vicar from 1948 to 1973, recalled that well before his time

" the domestics lived in the Refectory, which contained a slipper bath and, before World War 1, Owen Taylor used to fill the water tank (mentioned above) for a shilling a week."

Alex took over as vicar in 1948 when both the church, and the two parts of the vicarage were in need of major repairs. Little had been spent on the buildings for many years and restrictions were imposed on what could be done both during and sometime after the war.

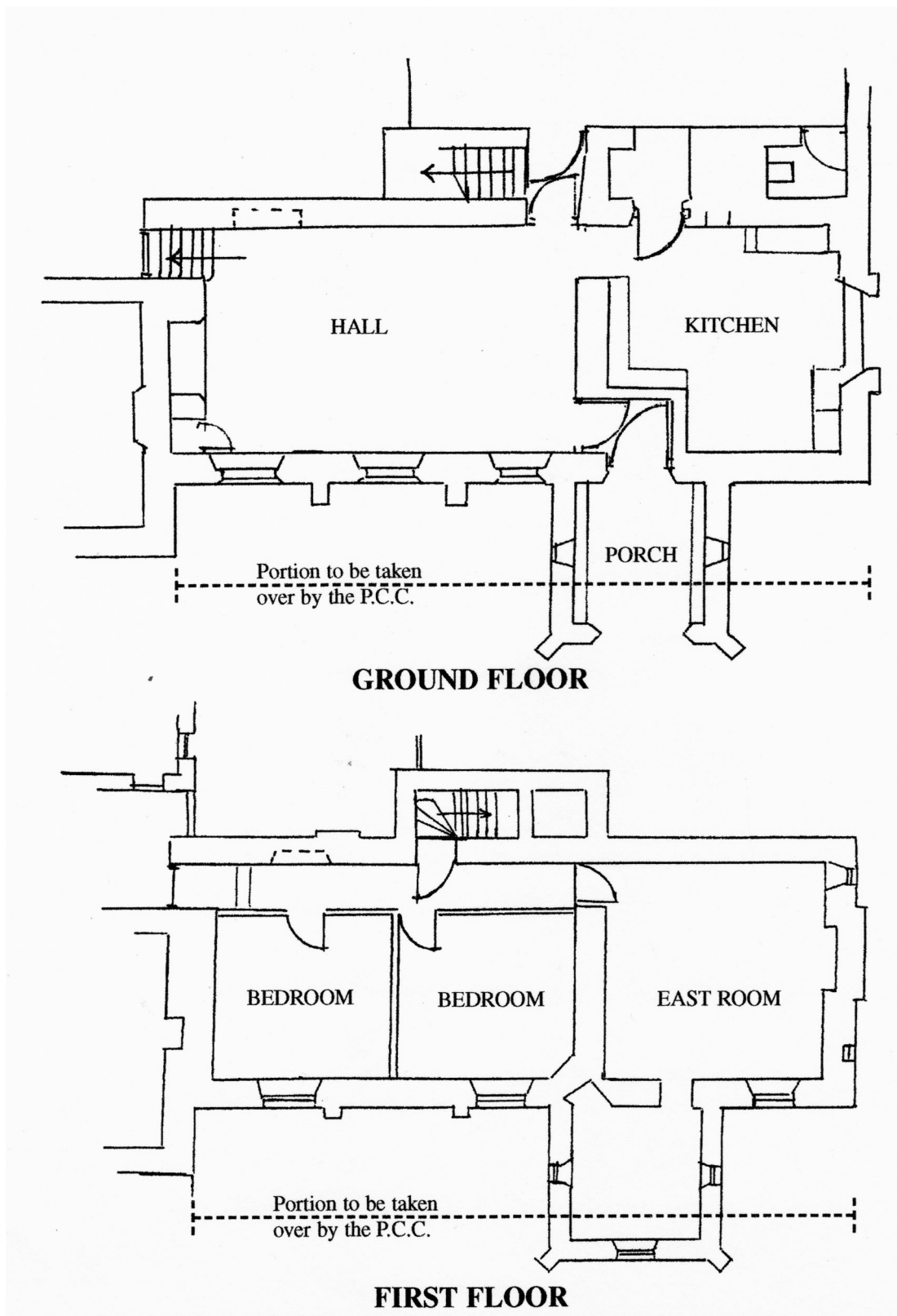
Refectory Plan Dated 1955

A plan of the Refectory dated 1955, which follows, shows the layout at that time.

On the ground floor it can be seen that entering the building via the porch there was no through passage as there is now (2014). Entry was via a doorway immediately on the left which led directly into the lower hall. From this hall a door on the north east gave access to the kitchen. Both these doors are now cupboards.

A window on the north side of the lower hall, now also behind cupboard doors, was blocked when an extension was added to the 19th century building. Outside against the back wall was a toilet (right on the plan) and the original enclosed stone staircase to the upper floor (left on the plan).

Upstairs, as Bridget remembers, the plan shows that the current upper hall had a corridor, which could be accessed via the 19th century vicarage and led to two bedrooms and the east room.



Plan of Refectory 1955. Courtesy of the Rev Matthew Thomson.

Nearly £3500 was required in the 1950s to renovate the Refectory, which had death watch beetle.

In 1956 it was proposed that the Refectory be sold to the Parochial Church Council PCC to be used solely as a church hall and not for commercial purposes.

That same year the Ministry of Works agreed to grant £2000 towards repairs of both the 19th century and the 15th century buildings with the latter to be taken over by the PCC. The Ministry stated that the Refectory

"should be open to inspection by members of the public from May to September each summer inclusive provided an appointment was made for the purpose."

In January 1959 the Church Commissioners approved the sale of the Refectory to the Diocesan Board of Finance in trust for the PCC at a purchase price of just £5, but it appears that the PCC was to be responsible for finding £2200 for the repairs and alterations.



The rear of the Refectory – 1950s. Courtesy of Prebendary Alex Cran.

Alex Cran recalled the terrible floods in 1968 and how the water came to the top of the cellar steps in the vicarage.



Above: The Refectory in 1963. Courtesy of Congresbury History Group.

Right:

The stone slab in front of the Refectory is a pig salting slab removed from the (now demolished) pig larder at the rear of the building.



More Modern Times

In the 1990s there was a desire to make more use of the Refectory and the main problem was to improve the access to the upper hall. The stone steps were badly and unevenly worn making them quite dangerous. In addition there was an urgent need for modern toilets and better heating. The problem was compounded by the Grade 1 listing of the building. However, eventually all went well. The work was completed in 1994 and the original stone steps are still in place. The cost was:

£42922 for the new wooden staircase, toilets and gas central heating, £4936 for the architect and £1129 for the structural engineer. Total £48987, which was paid by St Andrew's Trust.

In 1996/7 the kitchen was refurbished and in 2000 the church office was set up next door in the Refectory.

Following refurbishment of the old stables the church office was removed from the Refectory in the spring of 2006.

Current Use of the Refectory

The building continues its active part in village life. Currently (2014) it is used by the Toddler Drop-in, Vine Counselling Service, youth groups and for church meetings. It is also let along with the paddock for outside group meetings, birthday parties, funeral wakes and weddings (with a marquee on the paddock).



May Day 1934. The vicar's wife Mrs Maunsel Eyre and children outside the Refectory. Courtesy of Ivor Standen.



Love Congresbury. Picnic on the paddock. 20th July 2014.

A Guide to the Refectory



The Refectory in February 2009.

It is worth spending time studying the south face of the Refectory. Margaret Wood in her book about the English medieval house says that the Refectory is,

"remarkably unspoilt and has many original windows."

Notice the carved faces on the window surrounds. Some of them are rather unusual.



Top – far left



Bottom – far left



Middle lower



Top right hand side

Bottom - right hand side



Porch - left hand side

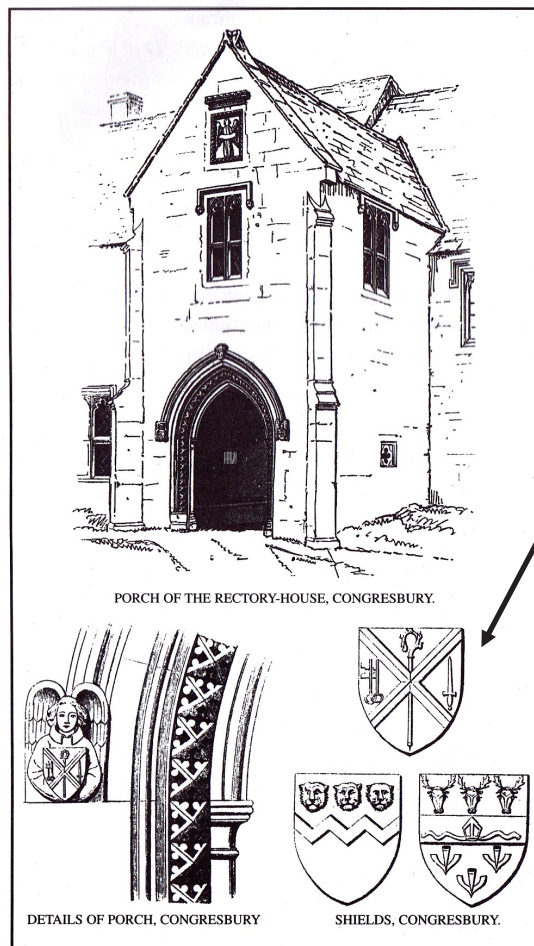


Front of porch



Right hand wall of porch





*Above : Details of the Refectory 1860.
From Somerset Archaeology Society, Vol X,
p9. Courtesy of Somerset Archeological &
Natural History Society.
Right : The shields as they are today.*

The two storey porch has dogtooth carving around the doorway (usually a 13th century device) and the remains of three angels holding shields. The drawings above show the details, some of which have been lost.

The shield with the three bucks' heads and a bishop's mitre is that of Bishop Beyknton or Beckington and is over the entrance. The arms of the See (An early composite coat of arms of the diocese), are on the left and the Pulteney family arms are on the right. The Pulteney or Poultney or Pountey) family, oddly has no known connection with Congresbury.



Above the doorway is another, but most unusual, angel whose legs are covered in feathers. The inscription "Laus Deo" is latin for "Praise God."

Looking to the left on the ground floor, the window nearest the porch seems to be squeezed in, which suggests that the porch was added after the main building was completed.

The roofline suggests that the building was constructed in two stages. (Or are the two roof levels possibly the result of unrecorded damage at some time?)

Inside it is clear that the Refectory is of a cross passage design, with a large hall to the left and what was the kitchen or buttery to the right of the passage. The 1823 plan shows this clearly.

The layout from the porch is now different to that of 1955. The passage runs through the whole building as in the 15th century and the hall's entrance, on the left, is through a doorway which is probably the original 15th century entrance.

The two 1955 doors are now cupboards either side of this entrance.

Enter on your left and you are in the hall, which originally the priest used as a reception room and for church affairs. This was never open to the roof but was built as two storeys and retains its original ceiling. The stairs to the right of the fireplace (said to be completely rebuilt and impossible to date) give access to the 19th century vicarage.



The lower hall. Note the original ceiling.

In the cupboard to the right of the staircase is a blocked window. The other windows in the hall have at some time each been reduced in height.

The original well-worn stone staircase built against the north wall turns anticlockwise. (In lay houses they usually turn clockwise). Since the new staircase was built it is only possible to see the first four steps by looking inside the second cupboard, which is to the right of the cupboard with the blocked window.

Go back into the passage. In front of you what was a single room has been split into a kitchen and office (now used as an office/counselling room by Vine Counselling).

Continue to the end of the passage where you reach a doorway to the modern extension with toilets on the right and access, via a new staircase on the left, to the upper floor.

Upper Floor

Go up the modern staircase and through the original doorway into the upper room with its collar-beam roof and three tiers of wind braces - a lovely room. Sadly none of the timbers are original. In 1955 it was suggested that a hole be made in the then ceiling of this room to determine the state of the roof. It was then, presumably, that the death watch beetle was found.



The upstairs hall, December 2008.

This room is the same size as the hall below and with the new staircase can now be easily used for meetings and displays. A blocked window in the north wall can be clearly seen.

Through the door on the left of the east wall is a room with a high hipped ceiling and an attractive fireplace which probably came from the former manor house in Kingston Seymour (burnt down in the 19th century). This was the Rev Maunsell-Eyre's study during his time as vicar (1883 to 1920).



The Rev Maunsell - Eyre's crowded study. Courtesy of Congresbury History Group.

Go into the room over the porch by entering the door on the south of the room. This small room may have been the priest's chapel or oratory. Re-enter the upper hall via the other door. End of tour.

Old Rectory, High Street, Congresbury

There is another rectory in the village. The Old Rectory, formerly The Rectory, was where the Dean and Chapter held court and according to the Parish Magazine for August 1951 was, sometime before 1900, the home of the curate of Congresbury church.

This Grade 11 listed building has a mid 18th century facade, but the rear of the building suggests a 17th century date. It is now split into two houses.

Left –The Old Rectory in 2014.



The Orchard

The orchard in 2007.



Bridget Colquhoun recalled how, in the 1920s, the current orchard was a kitchen garden with peaches, figs and plums and that the next vicar (Thomas Goodchild) turned it into an orchard. When Alex Cran was vicar a Roman glass vessel was found in a sewage trench in the orchard.



The Roman vessel is 16 cm (6 ½ inches long). Courtesy of Miss Elizabeth Cran.

In 2008 a small scale archeological excavation was undertaken in the orchard by R.A Broomhead B. A., Field Archaeologist. This revealed the walls of a building, 14th century pottery sherds and wall plaster indicating a building of some significance.



A geophysical survey by YCCCART in 2010 revealed more evidence of the building/s which appear extensive.

The Bishop's Court

In 1215 there is mention of

"The garden on the east side of the church and the bishop's court"

and in 1262 of a

"croft... between the way which leads to the cemetery of C'ongresburi on the north side of the church and the manse of the aforesaid William."

These descriptions fit well with the location of the building/s revealed by the 2008 excavation and 2010 geophysical surveys.

In all probability they therefore relate to the Bishops' Court demolished by order it seems in 1391.

A visit to the orchard will take you to the most tranquil place in the village. Whilst there note the wall to the north which seems to have earlier foundations.



The north wall.



The west wall. Inset are the modern fountain and possible scratch dial.

The west wall dividing the orchard from the vicarage garden is also of interest. It contains what appears to be another scratch dial.



In 2007 repairs to the Refectory revealed what appears to be a blocked window on the east wall facing the orchard as indicated above.



Also, is this another now blocked window, the other side of the existing window (indicated by the red arrow)?

The Paddock

In 2014 a YCCART geophysical resistivity survey revealed possible buildings on the paddock in front of the Refectory.

What other secrets could the church be keeping?

Right: John Wilcox and Anne Dimmock of YCCART undertaking the resistivity survey.

