

# St Leonard's Tower was Falling Down

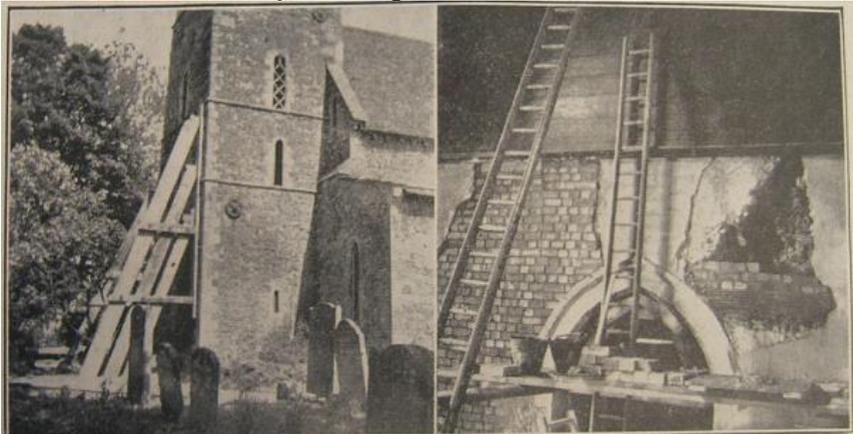
On Thursday 11th May 1939 the Rector, Rev A.J.C. Young, reported to Little Downham Parochial Church Council of a problem with the church tower. He had recently noticed that a crack in the south side of the tower, which had long been visible, had obviously widened and lengthened and that the wall at the west end of the church above the belfry arch was also showing signs of displacement. Two experts were called in, Professor Richardson, Professor of Architecture at London University, and Robert Marriott of Rushden. They agreed that the trouble was mainly due to the addition about forty years previously of a heavy and ill-designed top storey to the tower which was never intended to carry such a load.

It was agreed by the Parochial Council that the trouble should be dealt with at once without giving it any time to become more serious, and an estimate submitted for the work amounting to £115 (approximately) was accepted.

The nave, with its widely splayed clerestory windows, dates from about 1220, and the main entrance doorway, a piece of Transitional Norman work, is believed to be a survivor from an older church. The tower (except for the modern top storey) is thought to be older than the nave and dates from between 1100 and 1150. Norman work of this early date is all "short" in the materials used, being made of small stones which have little or no bonding quality and therefore unable to withstand additional pressure from above. Parish records show that sixty years before this incident the tower was giving anxiety and iron ties were inserted in several places but ten years later the extra storey was added which then caused the new problems.

Work was quickly started on Tuesday 23rd May. Three men, employed by Mr Marriott, began on the inside of the west wall where it had become apparent that something was wrong. Before they had gone far, a heavy fall of loose masonry, or rubble, revealed a disturbing state of affairs. Messrs. Ashby obliged with a load of bricks immediately and the work of building a pier to fill the gap, which was like an open chimney space some 20 feet high, which the fall of rubble had left, was begun at about 3pm. The work went on without ceasing, except for brief intervals for refreshments, until 7

o'clock on Wednesday morning.



The repair consisted of a pier of brickwork from the floor level up to the base of the old boarding which bears the royal arms, laid in cement and grouted up to a depth of nearly four feet. It had been hoped that this supporting pier would have been completed by 1am, but a further fall, leaving a larger cavity in the wall, made many more hours work necessary. The salient angle of the tower have been underpinned with reinforced concrete to a depth of ten feet. In

A committee was formed fully representative of the whole parish, the work of secretary being undertaken by Mr. C. A. Hull, of Ely, and the Rev. R. C. Frith (curate) with Mr. J. Garner (Rector's warden) treasurer. Promises of subscriptions were made at the meeting as published below, and it was known that offers from others not present would be forthcoming, some being on a monthly or weekly basis. Further lists will be published from time to time. Amounts promised at the meeting were:

	£	s	d
The Rector (Rev. A. J. C. Young)	50	0	0
Rev. R. C. Frith	5	0	0
Miss B. Fretwell	2	10	0
Mrs. Fryett	1	0	0
Mr. and Mrs. P. Green	2	10	0
Mr. and Mrs. H. J. Garner	2	10	0
Mr. J. Garner	5	0	0
Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Hull	10	0	0
Miss Knights	1	0	0
Mrs. and Miss Samuels	2	2	0
Mrs. J. H. Stevens and Miss E. Stevens	5	5	0
Mr. and Mrs. B. C. Stevens	21	0	0
Rev. Canon C. J. Smith	3	3	0
Mr. H. J. Smith	5	0	0
Mr. Wm. Taylor	1	0	0
Mr. W. Wallis	5	0	0
Mrs. Chas. Young	2	10	0
Mr. F. G. H. Stockdale	4	4	0
Mrs. P. Smith	2	2	0
Total	£130	16	0

the interior surface of the belfry on the first floor level a collar of reinforced concrete has been inserted to prevent the widening of cracks. An early morning passer-by was surprised to see the Rector, in a dressing gown, carrying a tray of hot tea into the church at about 6am.

Judging from the number of visitors to the church during repair operations it was obviously a matter of interest extending beyond the village and it was decided to open a repair fund to give everyone an opportunity to subscribe.

**Robin Pearl**