Medieval Embroidery in Somerset Churches

BY DOM ETHELBERT HORNE, F.S.A.

THE list of pieces of pre-Reformation ecclesiastical embroidery existing in the parish churches of this county is not an extensive one, for only in eight churches have examples been discovered.

It may be well to say something about the various stitches used in medieval vestment embroidery, that we may see under which head the examples we have can be classed.

1. We can omit stitches used in tapestry, hangings, kneeling cushions, etc., as these were of too coarse a description to be used in vestment adornment.

2. This will leave us with two stitches which were most in use, although many writers would sub-divide these again under various heads. The first, and the commonest, is the 'opus plumarium', the second, and much the more beautiful of the two, is the 'opus Anglicum, or Anglicanum'.

The opus plumarium was so called because all the stitches lay side by side in the same direction, like the feathers of a bird. These stitches could be so small that the result looked more like a painting than work done with a needle, or so coarse and bold that the design would tell at a considerable distance.

The opus Anglicum was really a very fine chain stitch, made by passing the needle through the small loop formed by the previous stitch. If a figure was being worked, the chain began in the middle of the cheek and proceeded round and round in a coil. Then a thin iron rod, ending in a smooth bulb or knob, was brought into use. It was slightly heated, and the knob pressed into the cheeks and throat where it produced a hollow,



COPE: OTHERY CHURCH

From a Photograph by the Rev. Father E. Horne

which made the work look at a short distance as if done in low relief. The rest of the garments were worked in chain stitch in straight lines, following the folds. One of the finest examples of this class of work is the Syon cope in the South Kensington Museum (*see* Catalogue of Ecclesiastical Embroideries of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, Victoria and Albert Museum). None of the pieces of embroidery still existing in our parish churches is of this type, but there is one good example of it among the old vestments at Downside Abbey. All the pieces described below are the ordinary opus plumarium, and there is no piece with work of distinction except perhaps the example at Othery Church (Plates IX, X). The eight churches in alphabetical order are :

1. Bruton. This piece is now enclosed in a case which is screwed up and fixed to the W. wall of the church, so that it cannot be opened for examination. The material measures 52 in. the upright way, by 45 in. across. It is composed of five strips of velvet, the centre one and the two on the outsides are blue, and the intermediate strips are red. Both have the usual fifteenth-century patterns on them, with the addition of a design that looks like intertwined initials. It is probably part of a cope. A little over thirty years ago, on visiting this church with my friend the Rev. F. W. Weaver, F.S.A., I found this piece of embroidery on the floor underneath an oak chest in the room in the N. tower, where, to judge from the dust on it, it had been undisturbed for many years. Some more strips of the same material, which had been used for wiping out the lamp chimneys, were recovered from another place in the church, and these together with the larger piece have been beautifully joined together, cleaned and restored. The embroidery appears to be late fifteenth century, and is of a fairly good type of work.

2. Chapel Allerton. This piece is now in the County Museum at Taunton, where it is framed and fixed to the wall in a position that makes a photograph of it an impossibility. It is 88 in. in length and 36 in. in width. The label attached to the case says that the work was ' probably made in Flanders, perhaps at Bruges '. This may be so, but the cherubim are shown standing on wheels, and this is very typical of English

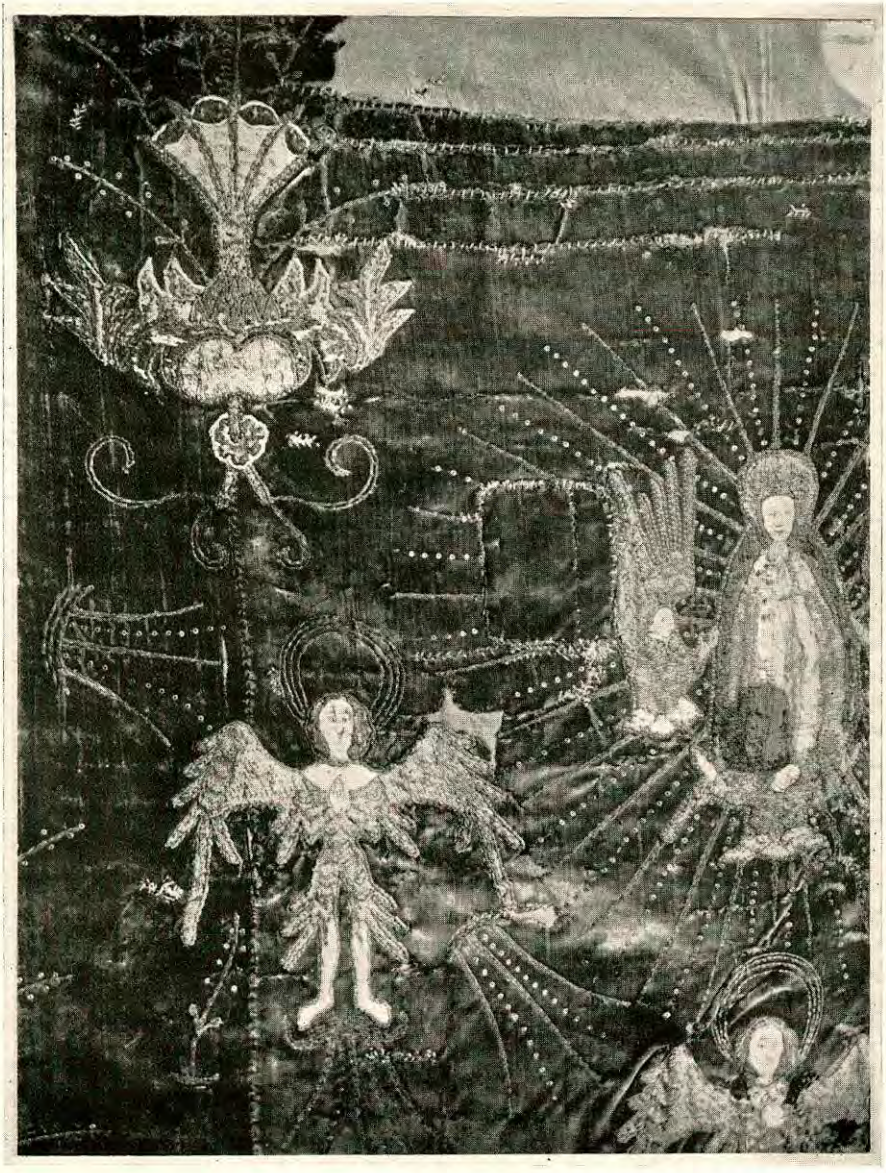
work (see *Textile Fabrics*, by Rev. Daniel Rock, D.D.LOND., 1870). In our *Proceedings* for 1871 Mr. M. J. C. Buckley gives the following description : ' The Allerton cope is white satin or rather baudekyn. . . . In the centre is the . . . Assumption of the B. V. M. Two angels support her on either side ; a glory and a nimbus surround her body and head ; thirty-one rays mixed with spangles dart from the glory ; three kerubim standing on wheels are at her feet. . . . The rest of the ground is powdered with pomegranate flowers, of which the green and blue colours are still remaining in parts.' The work seems to be late fifteenth century and is in good condition.

3. CHEDZOY. The description of this piece of embroidery may be best given in the words of a writer in our *Proceedings* for 1871. ' This Chedzoy cope must once have been a very sumptuous one. . . . No traces of the former faces and hands are remaining ; all is of modern restoration, and of a most deplorable description is this same restoration.'

The figures have been cut from their original foundation and fastened down on to modern silks to form various coloured frontals for the Communion Table. Besides removing the embroidery from its old background, most of it has been sewn over with bright coloured modern silks so that now it is worthless as a sample of medieval work. There are groups of wheeled cherubim, a figure of the B. Virgin and other saints, under late canopies, and the work may date from about 1500.

4. GLASTONBURY. In St. John's Church, well preserved in a case, is a funeral pall made from a late fifteenth-century cope of red velvet and some blue orphreys. In colour it is now a reddish brown and its condition is fairly good. The pall measures 108 in. in length and 48 in. in width. The length measurement includes the two flaps intended for covering the ends of the coffin. The embroidery follows the usual designs of the period, the water-flowers being particularly good examples. There is an Assumption group in the centre, but there are no silver spangles on the rays surrounding the figure, which are present in most work of this date.

5. OTHERY. A portion of what was once probably a dark green velvet cope, beautifully embroidered with fifteenth-



DETAIL OF COPE: OTHERY CHURCH

From a Photograph by the Rev. Father E. Horne

century work, is carefully preserved in a case in this church. In length it is 86 in. and in width 36 in. The design is the usual one of the Assumption of the B. Virgin as the central figure, with angels round her bearing her up, and a ring of cherubim a little further away. Beyond these are conventional patterns such as were always being used on work of this date. Compared with the other examples in Somerset, this piece seems to be the most delicate in work and feeling, and from the absence of wheels beneath the feet of the cherubim, it would appear to be foreign. There are silver spangles used in the rays of glory which surround the central figure. These spangles are much alike in all the work in the different churches, except that a much larger size is used in the Yatton example than anywhere else. This embroidery was said to have been found hidden under the pulpit. The same story attaches to other pieces as well (Plates IX, X).

6. Pilton. In a box, under the tower, two pieces of embroidery belonging to this church are kept, folded up. The first is 60 in. by 45 in. in size, and is a piece of ordinary red cloth of some age, to which the moths have paid considerable attention. Sewn on to this foundation are pieces of embroidery that in all probability have been cut from a cope. They consist of two separate Assumptions of our Lady with attendant angels—one with several more angels than the other,—cherubim to the number of a dozen, without wheels beneath their feet and their bodies finishing in rays, which may be intended for wings ; a quantity of fleur-de-lys ; and a large and handsome lily plant with flowers and buds, growing out of a two-handled vase. The work is highly raised, with quantities of coarse gold thread and bright coloured silks used in its composition. It is barbaric in style, and must be very late.

The other piece measures 87 in. in length by 60 in. in width, and it is made up of blue and white silk in strips. The three pieces of blue each measure $16\frac{1}{2}$ in. in width, and the two white pieces are each 7 in. in width. Some eight-and-thirty years ago, when this church was visited by our Society, the Rev. T. S. Holmes gave the following account of this piece of work : ' One is a hanging, made out of strips of two vestments sewn

alternately together; the one of white silk, and the other of plum-coloured silk with symbols and figures in high relief worked upon them. On one of the pieces of white silk is the inscription, "E dono Ricardi Pomeroy cujus animæ Deus propicietur"' (*Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* 1888, ii, 67).

It is much to be regretted that since the above account was written the whole of the silk face of this piece has been eaten off by spiders, and now nothing remains but the flax foundation in the form of separate threads. The original material was one of the forms of what was known as 'baudekin', having flax threads across and silk running downwards, and it produced a material of great durability. As the cross threads are dyed plum colour, we may conjecture that this was also the colour of the silk which once covered them.

The inscription given above was not quite correctly rendered, and it should read, *Ex dono* (*?*) *domini Ricardi pomeroy Cujus anime propicietur iheus amen.*

This Richard Pomeroy may very probably be the one of that name who was a Vicar Choral and custodian of the fabric of Wells Cathedral in 1492, and whose arms are in the common hall of the Vicars Choral, to which foundation he was a benefactor.

7. PRIDDY. The beautiful altar frontal belonging to this church is unlike any other piece of embroidery in our Somerset collection. It measures 104 in. in length and 41 in. in width, and is not made out of some destroyed vestment, but appears to have been designed from the first as a frontal. The ground is a fine Italian brocade or damask. The colour is now so faded that it is difficult to describe, but it is generally of a pale greenish hue, the brocade pattern being in a slightly darker shade. Sewn on to it at intervals is a fine design in English work of what was called the 'water-flower'. These are worked on a canvas foundation with gold thread and green and yellow silk. The water-flower is most probably a very conventional iris and is certainly not a water-lily. A margin or border runs along the frontal from end to end, at a short distance from its outer edges, and a series of separate designs are enclosed within this space, the central one being a sacred monogram.

8. YATTON. The embroidery possessed by Yatton Church



From a Photograph by] DOWNSIDE ABBEY: OPUS ANGLICANUM [*the Rev. Father E. Horne*

is probably the finest piece in the county. In length it is 72 in., and in width 50 in. It was originally a blue velvet dalmatic which was afterwards converted into a funeral pall. It was split down the sides and laid out flat, and broad embroidered orphreys were let into it to make it wide enough for its new purpose. The orphreys may have come off the back of the dalmatic or they may be the orphreys from a cope. They are fifteenth-century needlework of a good class, and they have many details of interest. The background for the figures is made by ' couching ', that is, sewing down gold strands with silk on to the foundation. These gold strands are not brought down in straight lines, but they are taken zig-zag from top to bottom and produce a very rich effect. The figures themselves are of the ordinary types of embroidery of that date, and David, Moses, St. Andrew, St. Thomas, St. Stephen and St. Laurence can be identified. The piece has been most carefully mounted and is enclosed in an excellent case.

It is a matter for congratulation that six out of the eight pieces of medieval embroidery existing in Somerset are now carefully preserved in cases.

Other pieces of medieval embroidery in the county are at St. John's Church, South Parade, Bath, where there are some fine examples of fifteenth-century work on vestments that are still in use, and at Downside Abbey is a vestment with a beautiful specimen of ' opus Anglicanum ' needlework, of which an illustration is given (Plate XI), and there are some four or five more pieces of late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century embroidery on various vestments.

Although it does not belong to the period covered by the title of this paper, the curious tapestry work in Axbridge Church, made by Mrs. Anne Prowse (1720) as a cover for the Communion Table in the S. aisle, should be noted.