

## Screenwork in the Churches of the Minehead District.

BY F. BLIGH BOND, F.R.I.B.A.

SOMERSET is a county rich in ancient woodwork, and it would perhaps be difficult to find a locality in which the imaginative genius of the skilled craftsmen of olden days, as exemplified in the interior fittings and furniture of its churches, is more delightfully expressed.

The sister county of Devon can perhaps boast a numerical advantage in surviving examples of screens, pulpits, and benches—at all events of the pre-Reformation era,—but there are still one or two favoured districts in the county of Somerset where these interesting survivals cluster thickly, and this is notably the case around Minehead and Dunster, in the stretch of country from the foothills of Exmoor eastward to the Quantocks.

This pre-eminence would be still more marked, had it not been for the ravages of XIX Century vandalism, which under the greatly abused name of 'restoration' has despoiled the district of nearly half of those screens which were known to have been standing before the modern rage for renovation came in.

Dulverton, King's Brompton, Luccombe, Selworthy, Williton, St. Audries, Brompton Ralph, Combe Florey,—all these parishes can tell the same sad story of beautiful remains swept away, either to destruction, or to rest in private hands, their fragments in some cases relegated to secular uses.

It is more particularly of the screens that I purpose to deal with in this paper, since to speak of the benches and carved pulpits, except incidentally, would be to traverse too wide a field.

The screenwork in the county of Somerset is remarkable in more ways than one. It exhibits, for one thing, a diversity both of type and of detail, which goes much deeper than we are apt to find in other parts : and with this radical difference of form co-exists for the most part a high average order of artistic merit, and much ingenuity of design. Many screens being of unique pattern, form a class by themselves. Let me briefly mention the following, though strictly speaking, out of our district—namely the screen at Fitzhead, (now restored to its proper place), that at Curry Rivel, and the little screen of Enmore, now at Huish Episcopi.

The Somerset screens do not, for this reason, fall quite so readily into groups as do those of Devon, which in spite of the great difference of feeling in the character of their detail, present for the most part a decided family likeness.

Nevertheless there are some well-marked groups in the county, and of these none stands out more distinctly than the little group of 'fan-groined' screens in the Minehead district.

This group of screens is affiliated to those of Devon by the similarity of their general form, consisting of a series of arched fenestrations, or window-like openings, divided by slender moulded mullions, and their heads filled with delicate tracery of the Perpendicular type. Between these lights rise, from stout bead-moulded standards, the graceful fan-vaulting which is their most conspicuous ornament.

This, like most of the Devonshire examples, consists of panels enriched with sunk geometric tracery, divided by moulded ribs. Over all runs a cornice enriched by several rows of conventional vine-leaf and pomegranate enrichments divided by beads, and each had originally a carved upright cresting above, and underneath, a smaller inverted one.

All these screens supported rood-lofts, of an average breadth of some six feet in most cases,<sup>1</sup> and these were originally all fenced in by upright balcony fronts, those to the westward, or nave side, being generally of a very elaborate nature.

Most of these were removed at the Reformation, and their place was taken by a plainer framework, the loft being generally used in post-Reformation days as a singers' or minstrels' gallery, whilst in later years it was often turned into a pew for school-children, sometimes for "grown-ups."

In the case of the screen at Minehead the churchwardens' accounts shew that the loft was thus re-used and fitted with seats in 1630. The Rev. Dr. J. C. Cox, writing in the *Athenæum* for Sept. 29th, 1906, says that these seats remained, and were in use by the school-children, up to the restoration in 1887-9.

At King's Brompton there was, until comparatively recent years, a fine screen, with its rood-loft, containing some original panels. Unfortunately, when the church underwent a somewhat drastic restoration under a late incumbent, the screen was removed entirely, and was deposited in the vicarage stable-loft. Upon the resignation of this vicar some years later, all his goods were sold, and the greater part were bought by a woman-broker of Tiverton, who without any authority, claimed and removed the screen, and it has since been impossible to discover its whereabouts, in spite of the earnest endeavours of the present vicar and his churchwardens.

In addition to the group of fine "fan-vaulted" screens above described, still standing in the Minehead district, there are to be found others, of an earlier and simpler type.

The vaulted or groined screens, with their elaborate cornices and other enrichments belong to a period not long antecedent to the Reformation. It has been thought by competent judges

1. The width of the Minehead rood-loft is exceptional, being about 8ft. That of Withycombe is 5ft. 8ins.

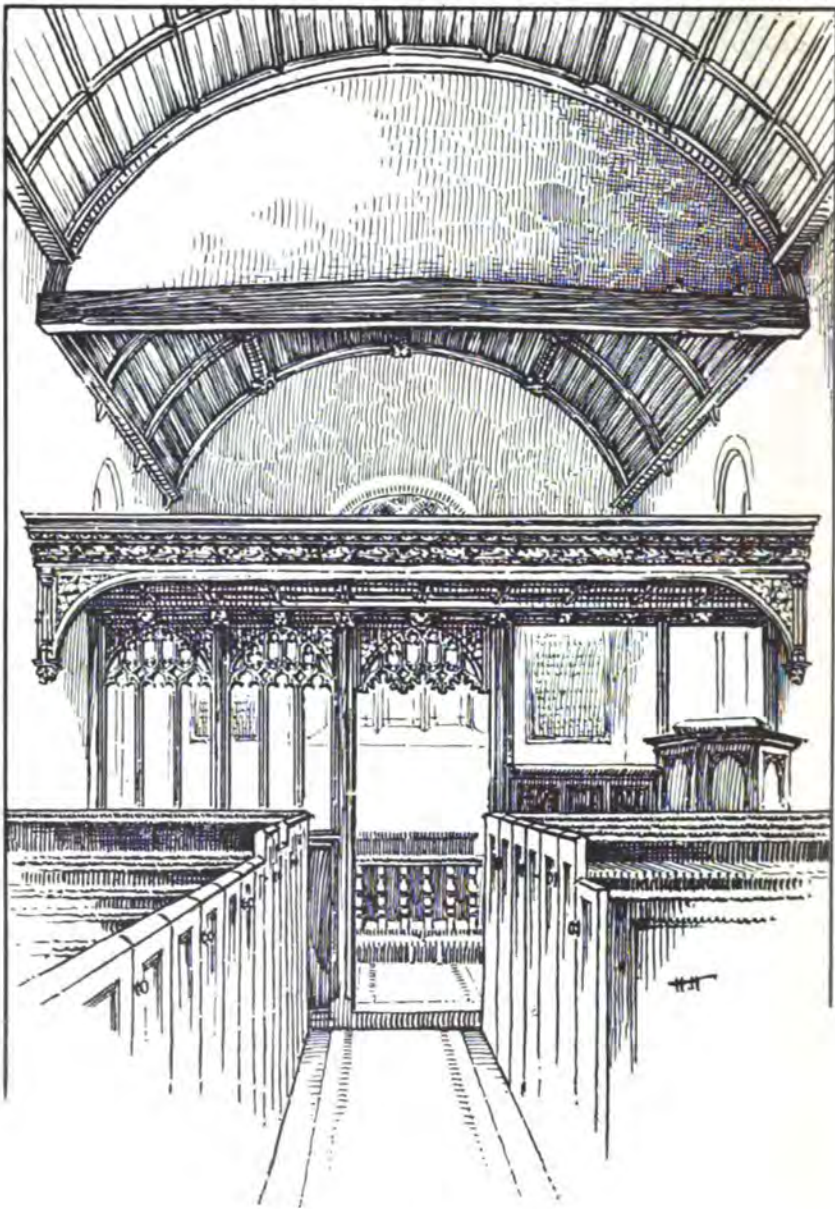
that they were mostly erected between 1450 and 1530, or thereabouts.

The recorded dates for several of the Devonshire examples of this order, tend to bear out this opinion, though there are some groined screens earlier than 1450, such as that of Torbrian, for which the date 1430 is given; whilst the screens at Halberton, and Uffculme, which are sister screens, probably both date from 1420. But an examination of the tracery and other detail of these reveal a certain character in their design indicative of an early stage of development, and a heaviness of proportion not found in the later work.

The later vaulted screens are usually found in connection with a particular type of church. This type, which is almost universal in Devonshire, and is found very largely in West Somerset, possesses no structural division between nave and chancel. The barrel roof runs continuously from east to west and the walls are without a break internally, the aisles being generally continued eastward, flanking the chancel. There being no chancel arch, the rood-screen assumes a character of prime importance and necessity, a practical as well as a symbolic or liturgical value. Hence the accentuation of dignity and respect bestowed upon this feature in the West country.

In the Minehead district are several churches of this kind, and hence the groined screens are relatively numerous. Minehead, Selworthy, Porlock, and Dulverton, are amongst those churches which offer examples of the continuous roof; while St. Decuman's exhibits a slender arch which is a mere stone rib following the curve of the roof over the chancel opening, and the aisles are, as in a Devonshire church, continuous north and south of the chancel.

An examination of any of these churches of the south-western type will readily enable one to gauge the importance of the screens in their internal economy. Their injudicious removal has but too often left the churches thus cleared a mere empty shell, naked and forlorn.



RADDINGTON.

The frequency of this type of church in the south-west arises from the fact that towards the close of the XV Century, a great era of church building and church enlargement was inaugurated, and churches in Somerset and Devon were very largely rebuilt under the influence of a school of church building associated with those counties which were more peculiarly the home of the Celtic men, and in which the customs and traditions of the original British church still lingered.

In the process, there was a general tendency to discard the fittings which had done duty in the more ancient structures, in favour of more elaborate woodwork, of more ample proportions. This is notably the case in Devon and Cornwall, where, as the late George E. Street observed, all the older stalls, benches, and carved screens seem to have been systematically swept away by the carvers of the XV Century.

But in Somerset this process was not carried out quite so relentlessly, as there remains still a fair number of examples of the earlier sort of woodwork in the county. There are still standing in the Minehead district a few screens undoubtedly dating from an earlier period, and the comparative simplicity of these is noteworthy.

#### EARLY WEST SOMERSET SCREENS.

RADDINGTON.—There is a screen at Raddington, the proportion and arrangement of which is typical of the XIV Century, and in spite of the apparently Perpendicular character of its traceried lights, I should not venture to assign to it any later date than 1400. Some years ago it was badly mutilated, the front beam of the loft being carried back and attached to the head of the screen itself, the feet of the two carved triangular spandrel-brackets, which supported it at each end, being cut off, together with the bases of the little shafts attached to them.

In Plate I, these brackets are shewn restored to their original

form, and the beam brought forward to its proper place, some feet westward of the screen, the space between being panelled with a hollow coving, supporting the loft. The rood-loft itself I have not endeavoured to restore in the sketch, but the rood-beam, with its "tympanum" above it, is still there, the latter being now plastered over. Doubtless once it formed the background for a rood and statuary, and possibly, like so many others, displayed some sort of sacred picture.

ELWORTHY.—Another very early screen, or the remains of one, is to be found at Elworthy. (Plate II.) Here the traceried lights are of a distinctively Decorated order, different to anything else now remaining in the district. I have seen some similar heads at Glastonbury, worked into a cottage window. The Elworthy panels have been incorporated with a screen of Laudian date, along the cornice of which runs the quaint legend:—

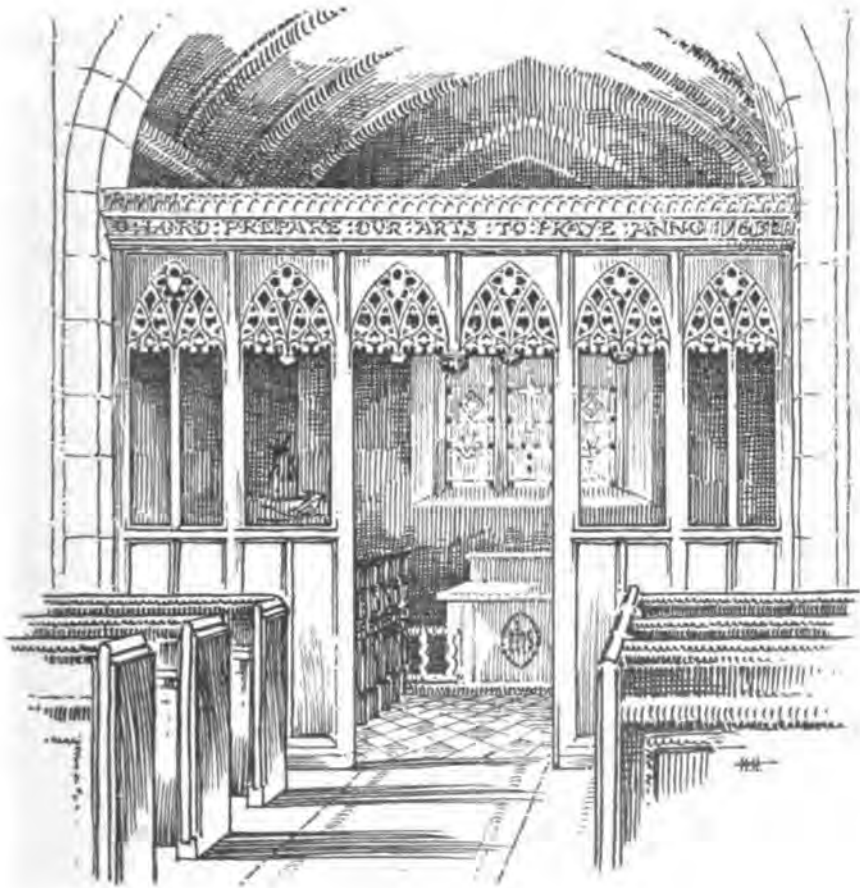
"O Lord, prepare our *arts* to praye: Anno 1632."

COMBE FLOREY.—At Combe Florey, an adjoining parish, was another screen, standing perfect with its doors in 1845. What has become of it, I do not know.

BROMPTON RALPH.—Yet another neighbouring church, Brompton Ralph, possessed a chancel-screen, which is mentioned by Jeboult as standing in 1873, being then well preserved, and worthy of particular notice. It was cleared out by the then vicar who rebuilt the chancel and altered its proportions, and after being stored for awhile in a loft in the village, it was removed to his residence, Hartrow Manor, where the remains are still preserved.

By the courtesy of the Rev. Sweet Escott, son of the late vicar, and present lord of the manor, I have been enabled to see some of the remnants still existing in his carpenter's shed.

There are several of these fragments, probably quite sufficient to reconstruct the work on the old lines, but a good deal has been used up by the carpenter from time to time, and some of the carved work has apparently gone to decorate

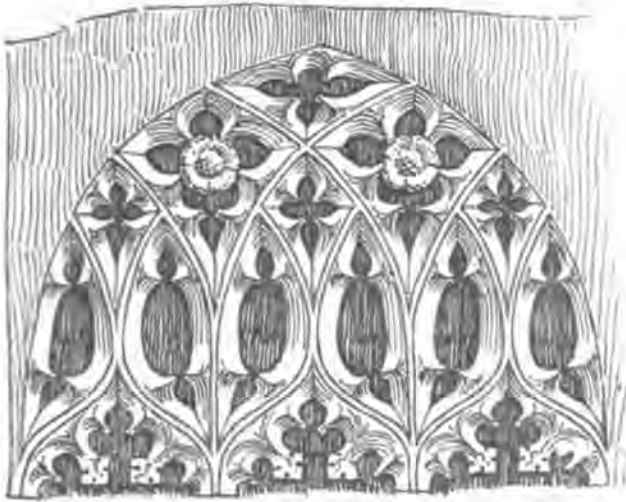


ELWORTHY.



furniture. The tracery-heads are extremely fine, and recall those in the screen at Elworthy, though they are rather later in design, as the illustration shews. It would indeed be an excellent thing if these beautiful remains could be saved, and once more devoted to the pious purpose of the original donors.

Both Elworthy and Brompton Ralph shew a type of screen with arcaded openings, but with flat spandrels between. It is



Portion of the Screen, Brompton Ralph.

doubtful whether they were ever groined. In both cases the flat surfaces exhibit more or less modern colouring, and I am inclined to think that illumination would have been the original mode of treatment of these spaces.

**EAST QUANTOXHEAD.**—Yet another screen of the earlier type survives at East Quantoxhead, (Plate IX), in a little church whose interior possesses a singular old-world charm of mellow tones, and presents a wonderful completeness and harmony of detail. This screen is square-headed, and contains good tracery, with other interesting ornament.

CULBONE.—But the gem of the district is perhaps Culbone, (Plate III), which is fascinating from its diminutive proportions. The screen here is probably no later than 1380, the tracery heads being of the massive quality peculiar to the earlier work. The original character is somewhat marred by the substitution of later and thinner mullions for the original shafts, whilst the cornices are incomplete, a very poverty-stricken piece of fretwork now doing duty as a creating.

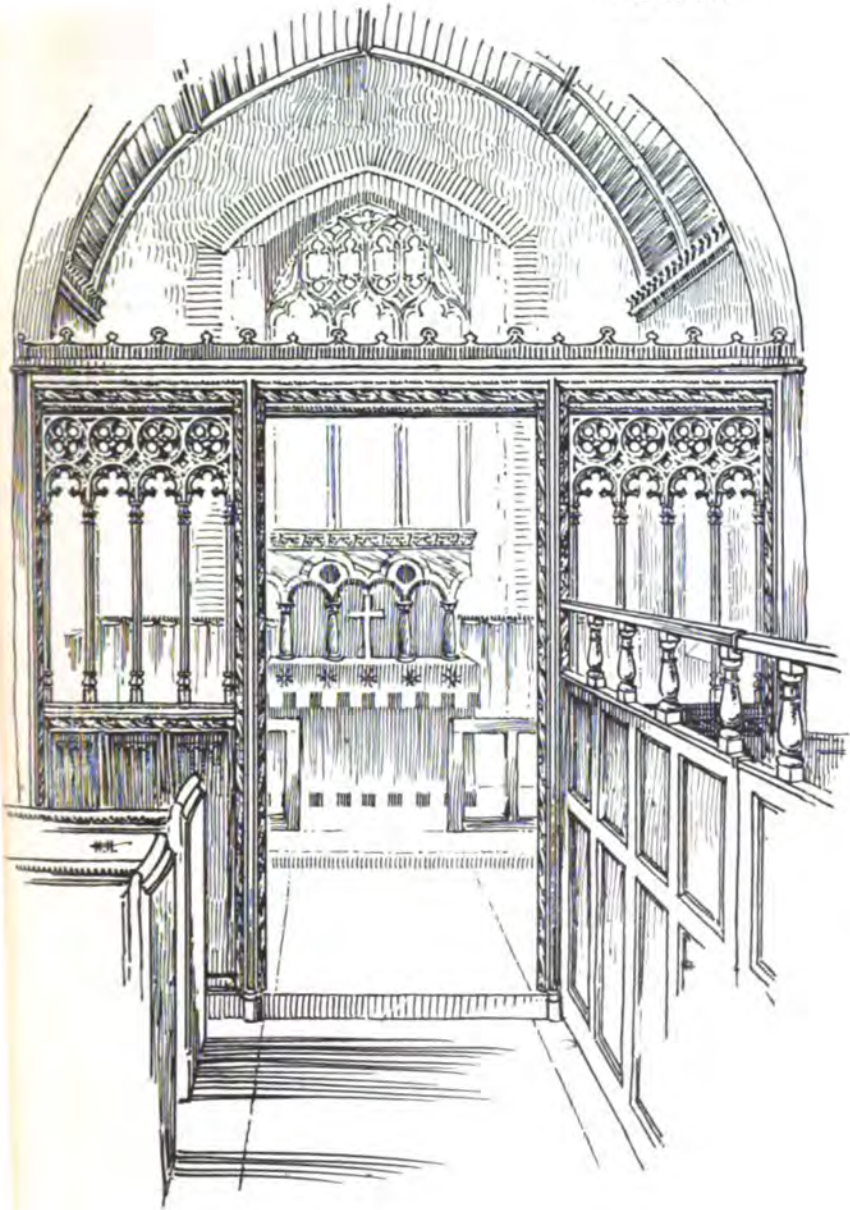
The rood-loft here would have projected to the westward, very much after the manner of the Raddington example; whilst overhead, the rood-beam, an entirely independent structure, would have traversed the chancel wall on its western face, where the remains of a bracket still testify to its former position. The framework of the screen is enriched with the twisted leaf-scroll so often found in Devon screens.

MONKSILVER.—Monksilver, a church replete with ancient carvings, possesses an oak screen, with pulpit and wonderfully wrought bench-ends, all apparently co-eval. The screen is one whose real type it is difficult to ascertain, since in 1844 it underwent well-meant but most injudicious renovation, involving some mutilation of the tracery-heads, which now exist in an obviously altered form. Nevertheless there is much fine work remaining, and the lower panels of the screen are peculiarly good.

#### FAN-VAULTED SCREENS.

I come now to a more individual consideration of the later screens—the fan-vaulted series, above mentioned.

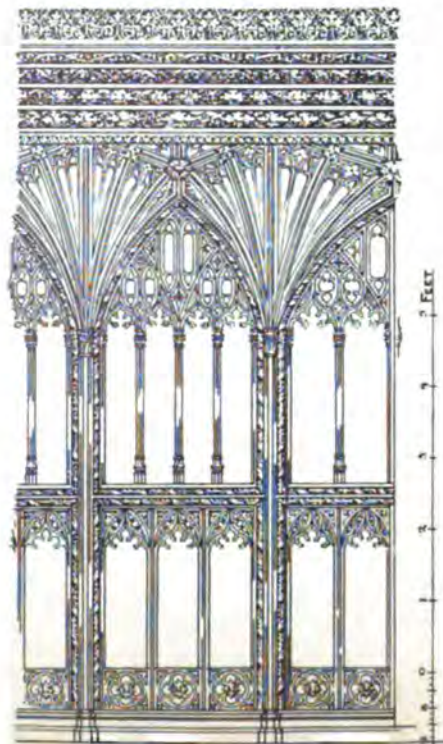
Of these there remain the following examples, viz., those of Dunster, Minehead, Timberscombe, Carhampton, Withycombe, Bicknoller, Saint Decuman's, West Quantoxhead (St. Audries), and lastly a screen included in the series on account of its affinity of character, but a little more remote in point of locality—that of Brushford, near Dulverton. Of these the



CULBONE.

ROOD SCREEN S<sup>t</sup> AUDRIES W. SOMERSET.  
 FROM OLD CHURCH PULLED DOWN IN 1858.

PLATE IV.



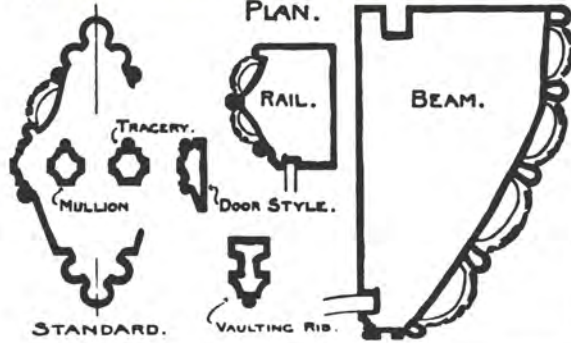
BAY. DOOR.  
 PART ELEVATION.



ELEVATION.



PLAN.



following are in a fairly perfect, or complete state—Dunster, Minehead, Carhampton, and Withycombe.

The screens at Bicknoller and Timberscombe only survive in part—the nave section alone standing,—whilst the Withycombe screen has had its slender mullions removed from under the tracery-heads. The Brushford screen has undergone a much more serious mutilation: here the whole of the tracery has been cut clean away, leaving the openings quite clear. At Saint Decuman's the vaulting has disappeared, its place being taken now by flat carved spandrels.

ST. AUDRIES.—The screen of St. Audries Church, which I have included in my list, exists, I am sorry to say, only in a piece-meal condition at present. It attracted the attention of a writer in the early forties, and was recommended to would-be restorers as a model of what a screen should be. This appreciative notice, which I unearthed in an early publication of the Camden Society, led me to seek it, and great was my sorrow when I found that the church had been rebuilt in 1858, and the screen had disappeared—whither, no one seemed to know. After some enquiry, however, I found a man in the employment of the lord of the manor, who recalled the circumstance of its removal forty-six years before, and he remembered that the parts, after being taken down, had been removed to a lumber-room at the manor house.

By the kind permission of the present squire, I have been enabled to bring this screen once more to the light of day, and roughly to reconstruct on paper its original proportions, from measurements and photographs. The result is embodied in Plate IV which appeared, with a short notice of the screen, in the first section of an article on English Screens in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, for Oct. 15th, 1904, and which, by the courtesy of the editor, I am able to reproduce.

It is with great pleasure I am now in a position to record that, owing to the renewed attention thus drawn to this

screen, the interest of a well-known local antiquary has been aroused, and he has taken prompt steps to secure the preservation of this beautiful work, and its restoration to the ancient purpose. The remains, which are singularly complete, are now in his custody, and it is hoped that ere long it may be possible to reconstruct the whole screen, practically in its original form.

It was a screen of seven bays, fully groined on both sides, with four rows of very delicate vineleaf and pomegranate enrichments in the cornices. The fenestrations were slender and graceful in proportion, as the illustration shews, and the tracery is very satisfactory.

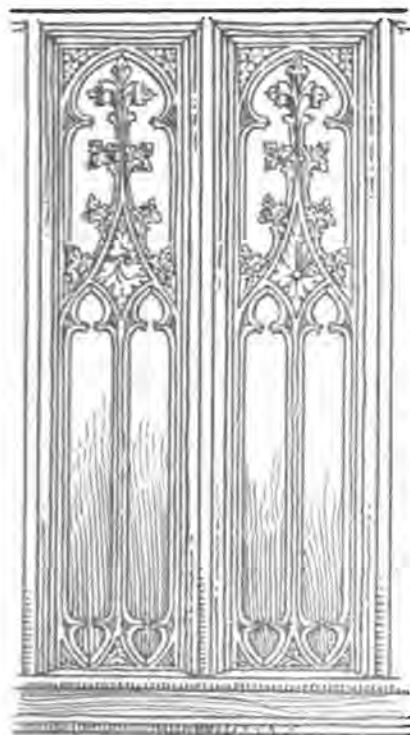
DUNSTER.—The church at Dunster contains what is perhaps the most celebrated example of screenwork in this district. (Plate V). Its history is elsewhere recorded, and as to this, I need do no more than remind my readers that it was erected in 1499 to furnish a division between the parochial and the monastic parts of the church. It stretches the whole width of the church, from north to south, having no less than fifteen compartments, including the central doorway. Above the groining, which is perfect, are the enriched cornices. On the west side these consist of four rows of very delicate conventional ornament, carved in hollow relief, and attached to concave surfaces, or 'casement' mouldings in the beam, divided by beads. In one of these rows the original ornament has disappeared and its place is taken by fragments of a small cresting from another part. The original hanging or inverted cresting remains below the beam, but of the uppermost or erect cresting only a trace remains. The tracery-heads are of peculiar shape, being more segmental than usual, and low in proportion to their width. This was often done to give better development and straighter or less hollow ribs to the vaulting. Around the openings is seen the stem and twisted leaf-ornament, and below the cill the solid sections are panelled in a manner characteristic of work in this neighbourhood.



DUNSTER.

*From a Photograph by Dr. F. J. Allen.*

The design of these lower panels, which consists of a couple of short trefoiled panels under an ogee canopy, enriched with carved crockets and finial, is noteworthy, and I here reproduce it. It is peculiar to the district, and may be traced in slightly



Panels from South Aisle, St. Decuman's, exhibiting the Dunster formula.

varying forms at St. Decuman's, Bicknoller, and elsewhere in local screens which were probably erected at a somewhat later date, under the influence of the Dunster screen, as their prototype.

In distinction to these, it will be observed that the lower panels of the screens at Timberscombe, Minehead, St. Audries, and others, exhibit a very different arrangement, and one which is common to Devonshire screens—namely, four flat panels, with tracery in the heads, and a row of quatrefoils at the foot. These points of detail may prove to have a practical value, as well

as an interest, if they serve to furnish a means of tracing the origin of the work.

It is often the case that a screen is reputed to have come from some local monastery, and this is said of several screens in Devonshire, and of some in Somerset. This does not necessarily imply that the work was removed from such and such an abbey or priory at the Dissolution, though this may be sometimes the case, as at Brushford, where I understand



there is documentary evidence to shew that the screen was removed from Barlinch Priory, but it is far more likely, generally speaking, that this saying simply means that the screen in question was carved by the craftsmen, whether monks or lay brethren, attached to certain monasteries.

Thus in the case of Dunster, I think evidence goes to shew that such a school of wood-craft has existed in this monastery, and has left its mark on the surrounding district.

What I may call the Dunster *formula*, namely, this little arrangement of the twin lights under a canopy, is to be seen in some very early timber framework at the back of the Luttrell Arms Hotel. We also have it in a very graceful and delicate form in the screen which was formerly the altar-screen, or eastern enclosure, of the parochial part of the church at Dunster, now standing in the south transept. (Plate VI.) This screen is of much earlier date than the nave-screen, probably not later than the close of the XIV Century, and the feature in question is perhaps its leading ornament, being repeated in series above and below the transom-bars. This ornament has been faithfully copied on the late XV Century nave-screen.

Before taking leave of the latter, I should like to call attention to a most interesting feature which is unique in the district,—the rectangular projection over the vaulting eastward of the choir doors. The object of this was probably the accommodation of a choir organ, which was a customary part of the equipment of these lofts for some time prior to the Reformation; though it may also be argued with some shew of plausibility, that this space may have been used for the reception of the oak "calvary" forming the foot of the Great Rood—a heavy oak baulk with sockets for the cross, or crosses, such as we still see preserved in Cullompton Church, where it came from just such a position. I however incline in this instance to the "organ" theory, in view of the strength of the evidence as to the universality of these instruments, in such a place.



SCREEN ACROSS SOUTH ENTRANCE TO THE PRIORY CHURCH, DUNSTER.

*From a Photograph by J. Reginald H. Weaver.*



MINEHEAD.

*From a Photograph by J. Reginald H. Weaver.*

MINEHEAD.—The screen at Minehead (Plate VII) in respect of its general proportions, bears a great resemblance to that of Dunster. The tracery in the groining panels is however different, as well as that of the lower compartments of the screen, already noted. There are three very fine rows of vine-leaf enrichment between the beads on the western face of the beam, and the hanging cresting is particularly good ; but here again the top one is gone.

CARHAMPTON.—The screen at Carhampton has tracery heads of a very different proportion,—more pointed,—but the character is hardly so good. The groining is vigorous in line, and well proportioned, and the cornices are remarkable, even for this district, seeing that they consist of no less than five perfect rows of very delicate work, all quite different, and the crestings are perfect at top and bottom. The whole was repaired and re-painted in 1862-3. The painting is unfortunately overdone, the colours being too brilliant, and the right quality of paint has not been employed. The ancients used a medium which gave a delicate bloom, and did not conceal the natural texture of the wood, but modern restorers have too often be-daubed good oak with shiny paint, a process which quite alters for the worse the appearance and texture of the surface, and gives rise to unpleasant sensations of newness.

TIMBERSCOMBE.—The screen at Timberscombe (Plate VIII) has also its groinings perfect, but it is to be regretted that here a worse blunder has been perpetrated in the colouring and the panels are smothered with coatings of pale blue and sickly salmon, alternately. The same treatment is applied to the cornices, of which there are the customary four rows of well executed carvings to the west, the eastern face having equivalent features in section, but uncarved. The tracery heads are narrow, and pointed, the general proportion of the openings being slender, as was the case at St. Audries. Only five bays remain of this beautiful little screen.

WITHYCOMBE.—In the next example, Withycombe, (Plate

IX) we have a very perfect instance—almost identical in character with that of Carhampton, but conveying a totally different impression on account of its being unpainted. The cornice originally had five rows of enrichments, but the lowest has been removed, and unfortunately the crestings have also disappeared. The character of the work in the lower panels is debased, suggestive of a very late date. They are similar in execution to much of the Jacobean imitation of Gothic work found elsewhere in the county.

BICKNOLLER.—The screen at Bicknoller exhibits a very pleasing proportion, the vaulting being perfect and excellent in contour, the panels between the vaulting ribs being enriched with sunk tracery similar to that of the St. Audries' screen, having a pattern rather simpler than that of the others. The tracery of the arcaded lights follows the usual Perpendicular character. The lower panels of the screen are the same as those at Dunster. The cornices are very good, and consist of four rows of enrichments, divided in the customary manner by single beads, and finished with crestings above and below. Unfortunately the north aisle section of the screen has disappeared, and what remains is none too well restored, being rather loosely held together in parts. The doors are perfect.

ST. DECUMAN'S.—Lastly, there remains the screen at St. Decuman's. This has several peculiarities. It is, for one thing in separate sections, the nave-screen exhibiting a design distinct from that in the south aisle. The north aisle section has disappeared, and was probably carried away in the XVII Century, when the big mural tablet was placed over the rood-loft door.

It is noteworthy that the rood-loft stair on the south side of the church stands a full bay westward of the other, and there seems little doubt that the southern section of the screen originally stood in line with this opening, and many feet in advance of the others—that is, unless the western opening is the older one, and at the rebuilding of the church after the demolition of



TIMBERSCOMBE.

*From a Photograph by J. Reginald H. Weaver.*



WITHYCOMBE.



EAST QUANTOXHEAD.

*From Photographs by F. Bligh Bond, F.R.I.B.A.*

the old central tower (as the Rev. C. H. Heale suggests) the nave was extended one bay to the eastward and the screens all replaced in that position.

St. Decuman's screen has unfortunately lost all its groining. For the rest, it exhibits the customary character of tracery, though in the south aisle we get as a variant, a thickened centre mullion, dividing the arched heads vertically, as at Banwell, Hartland, Buckerell, Long Sutton, etc. The lower panels exhibit several varieties of design, mostly inspired by the Dunster idea, and there are considerable traces of ancient colour, chiefly bluish-green, and red, with twists of red and white, black and white, and green and white, on the beads. There is also a parclose screen of simple Perpendicular character.

In my description of the screens of this district, I have omitted the mention of one example, that of Crowcombe, but this belongs to the category of post-Reformation screens, and these I hope to deal with specially in a future number of these *Proceedings*.

Also I have been under the necessity of limiting my field in a rather arbitrary manner, by the exclusion of such examples as are furnished by the Lydeards, Fitzhead or Halse. These however present distinct features, and may well be reserved for treatment in a future contribution.

I cannot conclude my present paper without expressing my sincere thanks to the local clergy, and those officers and members of this Society who have assisted me with much valuable information, and to the Editors of *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries* for their kind loan of the excellent illustrations of the Timberscombe and Dunster screens, reproduced from Mr. Reginald Weaver's photographs.