



SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH FROM THE S.E., 1833.

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Shepton Mallet Church: its Architectural History.

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THIS church is a very complex building, made up of portions built in many periods, beginning at a very early time, possibly before the Norman Conquest. It has suffered severely from vandalism, both at the Reformation and in the Victorian period; but the portions of the ancient fabric that remain are of high quality or uncommon character, so that the building has more antiquarian interest than many of our more handsome churches. A special feature is the abundant evidence of changes in the past presented by its masonry.

In Plate I, which is from Buckler's drawing made in 1833 for the Smyth-Pigott collection, now in our Museum at Taunton, it may be seen that the south side had an aile, a porch, a transeptal wing, and a chapel on the south of the chancel. A plan of the old church, made at the time of the

alterations soon afterwards, shows similar adjuncts on the north side also. But since that time all these adjuncts have been destroyed, the two-storeyed vestry gutted, and the chancel partly rebuilt. Of the ancient church there remain the tower, nave, walls of the vestry, and part of the chancel.

It will be convenient to dispose of the *modern changes* first, and afterwards to trace the development of the *ancient building*.

I. MODERN CHANGES.

The modern vandalism began with the Victorian era in 1837. In that year the ailes, porches, transepts and chapels were destroyed, and replaced by large plain ailes extending far beyond the area of the buildings destroyed. As seen from the outside the new ailes are huge and ugly; but internally they are less offensive, as their ungainly size is masked by the great galleries, which also conceal the poverty of the windows. The gallery of 1837 was continued right across the west end of the nave, where it reached as far eastward as the first pier of the arcade, and the organ was placed in this gallery, in front of the tower arch. A new font was introduced, the ancient one being banished and used as a flower-pot in the rectory garden.

The next alteration was of a more conservative kind. When Canon Pratt came into the living in 1847, the chancel was dilapidated, and he reconstructed the eastern portion, also the roof. The ancient piscina was retained, also the corbels supporting the chancel roof, and possibly some of the carved oak in the same, which is of good quality, whether old or new. It is uncertain whether the east window is intended to be a reproduction of the previous one: Buckler's drawing (Plate I) shows a three-light window of 14th century character, but plainer than the present one, perhaps owing to loss of some of its tracery.

In 1859 the west window was filled with new tracery and glass, as a memorial to the previous rector, the Rev. W. P. T. Wickham. To render the window visible from within, it was



SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH.

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

necessary to remove the organ and the gallery built twenty years earlier across the western third of the nave. Though the new west window is ugly, the removal of the obstruction at the west end of the church was an advantage: but the rest of the alteration at that time was as foolish as it was vandalous. The beautiful two-storeyed vestry was robbed of its partition floor, stone staircase, etc.; the organ was maimed and bottled up in it; and an archway and some small holes were made, to give exit to a portion of the sound. Then, the vestry being destroyed, a new one was built on the opposite side, where of course a proper organ annexe might have been built.

Shortly afterwards the ancient approach to the rood-loft was opened up, and used for the pulpit stair.

Since that time the alterations in the church have been directed towards remedying the effects of vandalism. About twenty years ago the present oak benches were substituted for the high-backed deal pews of 1837, the clerestory windows were fitted with tracery instead of the plain mullions of 1682 (see below), and the ancient font was repaired and reinstated.

The most important of the reparative changes has taken place within the last 18 months, under the direction of Mr. Edmund Buckle. No structural alteration has been made,—only a few necessary repairs,—but a great disfigurement has been removed from the walls. Among the barbarities of 1837 was the plastering over of most of the ancient walls internally with a kind of grey rough-cast, which gave the interior a very common appearance. It was decided to remove this, and replace it if necessary with something more appropriate. The removal has however disclosed so much of interest, that it becomes questionable whether it ought to be covered up.

When the builders of old built rough rubble walls, they intended them to be plastered; and where such walls have been stripped, they may give a church the appearance, as Prof. Freeman was wont to say, of being turned inside out.

This is notably the case at Mells, where the area of rubble wall is extensive and monotonous : but at Shepton the amount of rubble is so small, and the stone-work so bristling with historical evidence, that it may be pardonable to leave it open for the study of builders and antiquaries in the future.

II. THE ANCIENT BUILDING.

The oldest portion consists of the eastern two-thirds of the nave, with so much of the ancient chancel as has escaped rebuilding. On entering the church one may notice that the nave arcade consists of three very large arches on each side ; and that these are of two periods, the two eastern bays on both sides being of the Transition-Norman period, and the western bay being a later rough imitation (Plate II). The span of the Transitional arches is nearly 17ft., which is much wider than the nave itself (14ft. 5in.), and even wider than the arches of the arcade in Wells Cathedral. Such excessively large and disproportionate arches are not likely to have been designed when the very narrow nave was planned ; and the writer had suggested years ago that the arches may have been inserted into a previously existing wall. The recent removal of the plaster has provided confirmation of this hypothesis, by bringing to light the quoins of the original building, which are visible on the aisle side of the wall between the second and third arches, both north and south. These quoins (Fig. 1, Plate III) are unmistakably *external* ; i.e., there were no aisles, and consequently no arches. Moreover, the end of the older wall is over the *middle* of the arch pier ; so that only half the width of the pier belongs to the older wall, and that would not have given sufficient abutment to the arch, or sufficient thickness for the west wall. (See Plan, page 14).

We may allow, however, that a lower aisle may have existed below the position of these external quoins ; in which case there would have been an arcade lower than the present, with possibly two arches to each of the present single ones : but of



FIG. 1.—EARLY QUOINS IN S. AILE.



FIG. 2.—MARKS OF (?) ROOD-LOFT, S.E. CORNER OF NAVE.

SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH.

From Photographs by Dr. F. J. Allen.

this there is no evidence to hand. Some twenty years ago, when the floor was taken up for repairs before introducing the new benches, it was hoped that the foundations of the original church might be discovered : but the ground proved to be so riddled with burial vaults that no evidence of foundations was left.

The accompanying plan (page 14) shows the relation of the present nave to the original building, so far as indicated by the existing remains. The shaded parts appear to be remnants of the original masonry. The primitive nave measured internally 37ft. 2in. in length, only 14ft. 5in. in width, and about 25ft. in height (without the clerestory, which was added some centuries later). These dimensions are very peculiar : they indicate a tall and narrow building, shaped like a shallow band-box standing on its side. Such a nave may be seen in the Saxon church at Bradford-on-Avon, or still better in the Saxon church at Escomb, county Durham, where the dimensions are almost identical with those at Shepton.

We may therefore infer that the original nave at Shepton was built in the Anglo-Saxon period, or at least so early in the Norman period that Anglo-Saxon dimensions persisted. In Norman times the churches were made wider and lower ; as may be seen at Chesterblade, where the nave is half as wide again as that at Shepton, though only half as high.

There is no carving or characteristic masonry left *in situ*, by which the date of the original church at Shepton can be fixed : but in the course of the recent repairs a fragment of an engaged column was found, which had formed a part of an external doorway, if we may judge by its weather-worn state. It is 9in. high, and carved (Fig. 1, Plate V) with an interlacing pattern of early character, from which the date may possibly be guessed by connoisseurs of Norman and Saxon ornament. This pattern was frequently used in pre-Norman times for decorating flat surfaces, but it is unusual on a column.

Another relic of the original church may be the Old Font (see Plate II, right-hand side). The proper base is lost, and the new base may give the font a modern appearance: but the stem and bowl are ancient, and of almost exactly the same pattern as the font at Aller, which may or may not be the one which King Alfred used in baptizing Guthrum the Dane.

The Cornice (Plate III, Fig. 2), which formed the top of the nave wall before the clerestory was added, is very unevenly carved, having no smooth surface, no sharp edge, no straight line: in fact it seems to have been cut with blunt tools, and therefore to be of very early date, not later than early Norman. It reaches from end to end of the nave, and thus suggests that the western extension of the nave walls was added in the early Norman times.

The remains of the old chancel walls, next the chancel arch, may be portions of the primitive church. They show the marks of innumerable alterations; and the arches which they contain seem to be insertions, for they have no relation to the other features of the walls. The complexity of these marks can only be understood by studying the real thing, but a slight notion may be obtained from Fig. 1, Plate IV, showing the aisle side of the south chancel wall: the north wall is equally complex, though different. Among other features are the following:—(1) Bonding stones, which are not external quoins. They are back to back with the inner angle of the nave, and may have bonded the original nave to the chancel or central tower, or to a transept which has been cut away. (2) Marks of the wall separating the transept and chapel destroyed in 1837. (3) Marks of some smaller and earlier appendage.

To return to the Transition-Norman work,—the arches are very large, over 20ft. high, and with a span varying from 16ft. 8in. to 16ft. 10½in. They are obtusely pointed, and the mode of their support is very unusual. The piers are nearly square in section, with chamfered edges, the chamfer starting at the ground and continuing right round the outer member of



FIG. 1.—MASONRY AT E. END OF S. AISLE.



FIG. 2.—STONE PULPIT.

the arch. A second chamfered member arises from corbelled half columns or "responds" of characteristic form (Figs. 2 and 3, Plate V). Some of these have been restored with stucco (in 1837?), but three or four seem to be genuine. The capitals are of the form named "the pollard willow" by Mr. Francis Bond. The unusual form of the piers may be due to their consisting of portions of the original wall left when the arches were inserted.

The label moulding of all the nave arches and of the chancel arch was added during the recent repairs, as there was evidence that a former label had been cut away, perhaps to facilitate the plastering of 1837. This was the only piece of restoration or falsification, and it may be regretted that the label was not made of a different stone to show that it is not the original. *

The nave arches should be compared with those at Pilton, which have similar mouldings; the pollard willow capitals at Pilton are however much larger and are applied to the main columns, not to corbels. The date of the arches at Pilton and Shepton may be placed at about 1180. Some remarkable corbelled responds with pollard willow capitals may be seen at East Lambrook near Martock. These buildings are the work of the same masons as the oldest part of Wells Cathedral, *i.e.* the tower arches and north transept, date 1174-92; but at Wells the pollard willow capital, one of the last relics of the Norman style, was relinquished.

The Chancel Arch at Shepton was doubtless inserted into a previously existing wall, in place of an earlier round-headed arch. It is distinctly more advanced in style than the nave arches, and may be called fairly mature Early English. The corbelled responds with foliage capitals (Fig. 1, Plate VI), of the highest quality of their period, are extremely like those in the eastern part of the nave at Wells, built between the death of Reginald and the accession of Jocelyn, *i.e.* about 1200.

To about the same date as the chancel arch belong the

arches next to it on the north and south sides of the chancel. These are plain flattened or segmental arches of a type rather frequent in the Early English of this county. Both of them seem to have been inserted into the walls of the pre-existing chancel. The arch on the north side underwent alteration subsequently in the Perpendicular period, but that on the south (Fig. 1, Plate IV) seems to be *in statu quo*. These arches formerly opened into chapels, one on each side of the chancel, probably the burial chapels or chantries of the lords of the manor. On their tombs in these chapels almost certainly rested the two stone effigies of knights in armour, which now lie on window sills in the N. aisle, whither they were moved in 1837. These belong to the 13th century; and whether they commemorated members of the Malet family, or their heirs and successors de Vivonne and Poyntz is a question which might perhaps be decided by an expert who could judge the date accurately from the form of the armour.

The Piscina (Fig. 2, Plate VI) is double, under a single trefoil arch, and is a very graceful specimen of the middle Early English period, corresponding in mouldings to the W. front at Wells, which was consecrated in 1239.

Through the south pier of the chancel arch is a squint, which gave a view of the altar to the worshippers in the south transept. It is of uncertain date: the wall on its south side has been pulled away, and replaced with the stones turned through a quarter of the compass, so that they nearly block the opening. The squint was concealed under the plaster of 1837.

In the 14th century some additions seem to have been made to the church, for Buckler's drawing (Plate I) shows windows of 14th century character in the chancel, south chapel and south transept. But these have all been destroyed, and the only relics of the Decorated period are the corbels which support the roof of the chancel.

During the last few years of the 14th century, while the



FIG. 1.—FRAGMENT OF EARLY
COLUMN.



FIG. 2.—TRANSITION-NORMAN PIER.
SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH.



FIG. 3.
TRANSITION-NORMAN
RESPOND.

Perpendicular style was still young, the tower was built. It is of interest as being the earliest extant of the great towers of Somerset, showing the germ of their design, and its origin from a spired form. Several later towers are more ornate, but none have excelled this in refinement of detail, gradation of light and shade, or sense of repose. Even the pyramid roof gives it a quaintness which would be ill exchanged for the more commonplace effect of a spire. (For illustration and further description see the *Proceedings*, vol. I, pt. ii, p. 6).

The fan-vault in the tower is not contemporary, but of later date, belonging to the latter part of the 15th century. It is very similar in design to the fan-vault in the central tower at Wells Cathedral.

After the tower was built, the western nave arch on each side was let in between the older part of the nave and the new tower. As mentioned above, the nave was probably lengthened westward in the Norman times; so these arches, like many others in the church, are inserted, not built *de novo*. The insertion is roughly done, and these two arches are the poorest work in the church. They are of Perpendicular character, in distant imitation of the older arches. Their curves are slightly four-centred, and the responds are of crude and miserable design, as if unfinished. It is just possible however that the present responds are a product of the year 1837, when the gallery was carried under these western arches, or of 1859, when it was removed.

The two-storeyed vestry, adjoining the north side of the chancel, is of Perpendicular character, but whether early or late in the period, I will not venture to decide. Only the walls remain, with a picturesque pair of deep-set lancet windows on the east, and a remnant of the spiral stair, the whole interior having been destroyed in 1859. A two-storeyed vestry exists at Croscombe also. I am unable to say whether the upper room of these buildings was used as a muniment room, a library, or a living room for the priest.

The original church had no clerestory : the roof rested on the cornice above the nave arcade, as is shown by the gable-shaped mark on the tower wall at the west end of the nave. The Clerestory was added to the nave in the late Perpendicular period. Its details are according to the fashion of about the year 1500, the most brilliant and original period of English architecture, the period which produced those masterpieces of English art, St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle, King's College Chapel at Cambridge, and Magdalen Tower at Oxford.

The exterior of the clerestory is pleasing, its effect depending upon the excellence of the parapet, the gurgoyles, and the canopied niche at the east end. The interior, before its defacement, was of exceptional brilliancy. The most astonishing fact revealed by the recent removal of the plaster was the former existence of a series of canopied niches on the interior of the clerestory, similar to the external niche at the east end. There had been six of these on each side ; and in addition there had been a kind of pedestal on each window sill. But the whole of the work had been coarsely hacked away, from which we may infer that the niches and pedestals had held statues, which excited the Puritans to destroy them. There is reason to believe that the windows were knocked out at the same time, on account their containing "idolatrous" painted glass ; for in the Churchwardens' Accounts for 1682-83 it appears that the churchwarden, Thomas Browne, was summoned before the Archdeacon's court "about repaireing the Church & Churchyard," and among his disbursements the following are mentioned :—

To Thomas Lambert, for setting up the new freestone
munnells in y^e upper windows of the Church. Being for
85 foot of Muñell stone and for setting of it up at 9^d p^r
foot is as p^r recit 3 3 9
P^d for cariage of the s^d stones frō Doulton 4 6

* * * * *



FIG. 1.—RESPOND OF CHANCEL ARCH.



FIG. 2.—DOUBLE PISCINA.

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From Photographs by Dr. F. J. Allen.

To Roger Tomas for Plum̄ing & Glazeing work vid^t

	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
for new Glazeing the Belfry Windows	1	7	6				
for new Glazeing y ^e upper windows in y ^e church	3	11	0				
for new Leding & Glazeing and bindeing of other Windows in the Church	2	11	8				
	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

Thus the repairs to the clerestory windows largely exceeded those to the other windows of the church.

These “munnells,” which were plain mullions without tracery, remained until 1880 or later, when the present tracery was substituted: but the stumps of the “munnells” still remain at the bases of the new mullions (see Plate I).

By the addition of the clerestory the internal height of the nave was raised to within a fraction of 40 feet, from floor to middle of ceiling. As the width is only 14ft. 5in., the ratio of height to width is 2·77 to 1,—quite a French ratio, the English ratio being generally less than 2 to 1.

The clerestory, with its probable coloured windows, its canopied niches, and its many statues, was fitly crowned with the splendid carved oak ceiling, which is the most distinguished feature of our church. This ceiling is of the wagon-head form: as seen from below, it presents a framework of square compartments, through which the panels appear like portions of the wagon tilt. But whereas in an actual wagon head the frame supports the tilt, the case is reversed in the roof, for *the panels support the frame: i.e.* the panels are carved in rows on planks, these planks are nailed to the roof-timbers, and the visible frame is nailed to the panelled planks.

There are many good wagon-head roofs in the west of England, for example at Croscombe; and there are a few flat ceilings with carved panels in small numbers, as at Brent Knoll; but there is no instance where the wagon-head and the carved panel are combined with such a wealth and variety of design as at Shepton. The number of carved panels is

350, and their designs are all different. The bosses or rosettes are also all different, and their number is even greater than that of the panels. Besides these there are eighteen angels as "supporters" on each side, thirty-six in all, and a number of other interesting details. In fact this ceiling is by far the finest of its kind in existence. The next best that I know is that at Cullompton, Devon; but that has only 144 panels, and only eighteen different patterns of panel and rosette.

When the recent repairs to our church were in progress, the Rector mounted the scaffold with cameras, and secured no less than forty-six photographs of the ceiling, embracing every detail from end to end. From the complete series which he kindly placed at my disposal it is unhappily impossible, on grounds of expense, to reproduce more than two (Plate VII).

The ceiling has never been coloured or varnished, and though it has been carefully overhauled and strengthened, it has escaped the calamity of restoration.

Mr. Marchant of Shepton, and his assistant Mr. Shaw, who carried out the repairs to the church under Mr. Buckle's direction, have kindly supplied me with the following information:—The rafters of the roof are of oak timber 8in. x 7in. in section, and are about 1ft. apart. Each pair of rafters has a short tie-beam placed high up, and curved trusses intervene between this outer frame and the visible ceiling within. The lower ends of the rafters are imbedded in the walls, which are very thick. This very heavy roof and thick-walled clerestory are supported on only three nave arches on each side, and the weight borne by each pier must be very great. Except at the tower end, there is no buttress, and the outward thrust is opposed only by the slight resistance of the flat aisle-roofs. Let future builders be cautious in moving any of the supporting structures!

THE CHANCEL-SCREEN, ROOD LOFT, PULPIT AND BRASS.

The Chancel-Screen was probably low, reaching between the



OAK CEILING, SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH.
Specimens of the 350 different Designs.

From Photographs by the Rev. R. L. Jones.

plain wall-surfaces below the responds of the chancel arch. The Rood-Loft *in early times* must also have been low, since the approach to it (now leading to the pulpit) is so low as to be almost unique. It is evident that the smallness of the chancel arch at Shepton must have made the Rood and its belongings very crowded; and it seems that when the clerestory was built, a new and larger rood-loft was placed *above* the chancel arch. This is the probable explanation of the scars on the wall above the chancel arch and on the adjoining walls north and south. There have been large holes in the north and south walls, and a great breach extending right across the east wall (Fig. 2, Plate III). These look as if they had supported the timbers of a fairly large rood-loft. The holes in the north and south walls were filled in at some unknown date; but the breach in the east wall was found still open when the plaster was taken off, last year. The breach has been filled with an oak beam, under the advice of Mr. Buckle.

The Doom-Picture was probably painted on the wall behind the rood, where the Commandments are now displayed. Had it not been for the doom-picture, a window should have been there. But instead of this the wall is solid, with a niche outside.

In the course of last year's repairs the painting of the Commandments was taken down temporarily, but the doom-picture was not found, for the wall had been denuded of the plaster on which the picture might have been painted. There were however in the middle of the wall several plug-holes arranged in the form of a cross, showing probably where the Rood had been fixed. The Rector has secured a photograph of this interesting piece of evidence.

The method of ascent to the later rood-loft is not very clear; but it may have been through the wall high up in the north-east corner, where the masonry shows signs of patching; while there is a stopped doorway high on the north side of the north wall,—placed, however, further east than one would expect to find it.

The Pulpit is, I believe, the finest stone pulpit in the county,

and one of the finest in England (Fig. 2, Plate IV): but it is a very late piece of work, belonging to the period when Gothic art had begun to feel the influence of the Classic revival. It has, mixed with Gothic details, the Roman *cornu copie* and *modillion*. Its date may be as late as 1550.

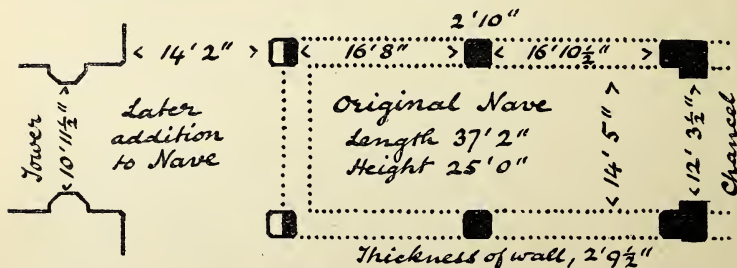
Under the tower are some memorials of the Strode and Barnard families. Among these the Brass deserves notice: it is of the year 1639, the time of debasement in monumental brass-work; but it is good of its kind, of large size, elaborate in design, and quaint in drawing and wording.

Slight traces of painting remain here and there, chiefly on the ashlar masonry; but the original plaster, with any fresco painting it may have possessed, was removed either by the Puritans or during the destructions of 1837.

The church is built mostly of the so-called "bastard free-stone," a hard and durable white stone from the Lias formation, where it rests against the carboniferous limestone on the north side of the town. The softer Doultong stone is used for the carved capitals and some of the mouldings.

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In conclusion, I desire to express my hearty thanks to the Rector, the Rev. R. L. Jones, for facilities always allowed in the study of the church, for information derived from the churchwardens' accounts, and for many photographs, especially his unique views of the ceiling, figured in Plate VII.



Plan of Nave of Shepton Mallet Church, showing relation of present structure to the original nave.

Shaded portions represent remnants of the original masonry.