

TWO SOUTH SOMERSET CHURCHES

BY EDWARD T. LONG, F.S.A.

BRYMPTON

The Church of St. Andrew is one of several small Churches in this part of Somerset which retain, wholly or in part, their original simple form and dimensions of chancel, nave and bell-cote. Brympton, it is true, has been enlarged since its rebuilding *c.* 1300, but much of the original fabric is still *in situ*. Externally it has survived the Victorian "restorers" almost unscathed, but within it has been less fortunate, as the scraped walls and crowded and uninspired fittings clearly demonstrate. It consists of chancel, north chapel, nave, north and south transepts, south porch and west bell-cote. The core of the nave may be 13th century, though there is no visible evidence of this. Round about 1300 the south transept was added and somewhat later the north. The chancel was rebuilt *c.* 1400 and the chancel arch removed. Towards the middle of the 15th century the west wall of the nave was rebuilt, the present window inserted and probably the bell-cote erected, though this may be later. The bell-cote, which has a somewhat heavy appearance, resembles those at Ashington and Chilthorne Domer. Finally *c.* 1460 the north chapel was added by John Sydenham (d. 1468), who had acquired the estate by his marriage with the co-heiress of John Stourton of Preston Plucknett; his son Walter in his will of 1469 refers to it as "the new isle of the Parish Church of Brympton". Walter left 20 shillings to make a hanging pyx for the Blessed Sacrament to be placed over the high altar, and directed that the silver fittings of his sword should be used for this purpose; he further bequeathed a rent charge on lands at Montacute for the maintenance of a lamp to burn before it. At the same time the north transept was made one externally with the chapel by a continuous embattled parapet. The small porch is of uncertain date but is probably post-medieval.

The Church was re-roofed at the restoration about a century ago with the exception of the north transept and chapel, which retain 15th century timber roofs — the former of the flat panelled type, and the latter similar but slightly cambered and with carved bosses including a shield with the Stourton arms.

The chapel is ashlar faced in the best local manner. The end window of the south transept is a particularly good example of early 14th century design; on the gable above is a contemporary foliated cross.

The south transept opens to the nave by a narrow, trefoil-headed arch set west of the centre, to the east of which is a later square-framed opening of uncertain date and purpose. The arch to the north transept is plain and segmental headed, but presumably 14th century. In the east wall of this transept is the framework of a wide niche, which has been cut through to form an opening to the chapel, access

to which is by a 15th century doorway on the right. The chapel has three windows of three lights, the east being flanked by canopied niches.

The fittings and monuments are of considerable interest. The octagonal font with cinquefoiled panels and shafted base is early 14th century; it has a flat 17th century cover. The 15th century stone rood screen resembles others over the Dorset border at Bradford Abbas, Nether Compton and Thornford; it formerly possessed a wooden loft, of which the only survival is the carved and coloured beam, now resting on the top but originally supporting the overhang; it exhibits the arms of Stourton, Wynford and Beauchin. On the west face are two stone seats, a most unusual feature in this position, but apparently contemporary with the screen. The stone elbow-rests on the east face formed part of the return stalls in the chancel.

There are three late medieval bench-ends surviving, two in the nave and one in the south transept. The Jacobean pulpit rests on a modern stone base. The lectern incorporates some of the early 18th century twisted balusters of the altar rails broken up by the "restorers". At the west end are attractive boards painted with the Lord's Prayer and the Creed dated 1700; the companion panel with the Commandments has been lost. In the north transept are 18th century canvas paintings of St. Peter, St. Andrew, St. Matthew and St. Thomas. The four attractive chandeliers are 18th century.

There are scattered fragments of medieval painted glass. In the north-west window of the chapel is a 14th century panel with the Visitation, and in the end window of the south transept are other 14th century fragments consisting of grisaille quarries and pattern work. The west window of the nave has an elaborate early 15th century canopy. All three windows of the chapel contain remains of contemporary glass, the east exhibiting three deacons — St. Stephen, St. Laurence and another — and below remains of large figures in brilliant colours and of high quality.

The monuments include four effigies not *in situ*: an early 14th century knight; a priest *c.* 1310 under a 15th century canopy with the Annunciation and Adoration of the Magi carved in the spandrels; a lady *c.* 1325 under a renewed canopy; a large figure of a lady *c.* 1440. The knight and priest were considerably renovated *c.* 1860. In the centre of the chapel is a Purbeck marble tomb base, which may have supported the table tomb now in the churchyard; it has been utilised for an inscription to sir John Sydenham (1696). Beneath the east arch on the north of the chancel is an elaborate, canopied table tomb to John Sydenham (1626).

The circular steps of the churchyard cross may be 13th century, but the base block is later and the shaft has been completely destroyed.

SUTTON BINGHAM

The small Church of All Saints retains much of its 12th century character in spite of some later refashioning. The nave is still essentially of this period with an original window in each of the lateral walls, as well as original north and south doorways, the latter now partially blocked and converted into a window. There is an early 13th century lancet at the north-east of the nave and, opposite this, one of the end of the same century with trefoiled head. The chancel was rebuilt late in the 13th century and exhibits the cusped rere-arches to its windows which are characteristic of this period in South Somerset. The west window of the nave is mid 14th century as are probably the two arched recesses for bells in the gable and the plain north porch. The arch collar braced roof of the nave, only recently discovered above a plaster ceiling, may also well be of this period. The chancel roof is still concealed by a plain plaster barrel-shaped ceiling; so its date is uncertain.

The most striking architectural feature is the noble 12th century chancel arch of three enriched orders, but only six feet wide. The font is also 12th century with cable moulding round the deep circular bowl.

When the interior underwent restoration in 1868, an interesting series of late 13th century mural paintings was discovered in the chancel. They were not obliterated as was so often the case in those days, but on the other hand attempts were made to renovate them in a very amateurish manner with disastrous results. Recently efforts were made to undo the harm and also reveal more, as a result of which two small kneeling figures of uncertain significance and a consecration cross came to light. The numerous figures of saints may well have reference to the dedication of the Church. It was apparently found possible only to recover one of the figures previously touched up, i.e. a bishop on the north splay of the east window. On the north wall is a crudely repainted Coronation of Our Lady, which must have been a striking composition in its original state. On the west wall of the chancel is a typical masonry pattern design with a conventional flower in each division; this patterning is characteristic of the period and served also as the background of the figure subjects.

Some years ago further paintings came to light in the nave and these have fortunately escaped "restoration". On the north wall just to the west of the door is part of a Crucifixion, while to the east of the door is a most interesting representation of the Death of Our Lady, both late 13th century work. The considerable artistic merit of this latter picture has been emphasised by recent cleaning. Our Lady reclines on a low couch with the Apostles in attendance, led by St. Peter, who is administering the Sacred Host; St. John is supporting the Blessed Virgin's head and in the background are two angels. Her soul is depicted rising from her body in the form of a

small figure with upraised hands. On the south wall of the nave is a consecration cross.

In the churchyard is a cross of unusual type; the shaft rises from the west end of a low stone structure resembling a 15th century table tomb; the head is unfortunately missing as is so often the case. It would seem probable that this structure served as a preaching cross.