

The Church, Langport Eastover, County of Somerset.

BY MR. W. BOND PAUL.

IN attempting to give the history of any of our ancient ecclesiastical edifices, it is difficult to say with any approach to certainty, except in a few instances, what their form, size, and structure originally were.

It is within the broad limits of possibility, and, I think, within the narrower limits of probability, that the present building stands within the precincts of the sacred area of the ancient Druids, enclosed and protected for their personal seclusion, and for the observance and performance of their religious rites and ceremonies. But it may not be on precisely the same spot, for the British altar would have been erected on the very apex of the hill, that it might serve as a conspicuous and prominent landmark. In this enclosure,—their sacred Lan or Llan,—the venerated priests continued to hold their sway until the arrival of an invading and remorseless foe.

The earliest Church of which there is any trace stood on the site of the present building. It was evidently Norman

work, in common with that of the larger Church at Huish Episcopi, with which it was connected and to which it was subject. [A Norman tympanum, rudely sculptured, may be observed over the doorway in the south porch. The original porch was Early English, which is indicated by a niche in the east wall.]

As the population of the town increased, the building was enlarged, and the Decorated style was introduced, of which there is evidence in the mullions of the windows of the north aisle, though the tracery of that period has been removed and Perpendicular tracery substituted. The windows in the south aisle are entirely of the latter period, but they doubtless formerly corresponded with the original windows in the north aisle, but had more rapidly fallen into decay.

The aisles, at the time of the enlargement of the ancient Norman structure, extended no farther than the chancel arch, and at the east end of the north aisle were the turret and steps leading to the rood-loft.

At the same end of the south aisle was an altar: the piscina, connected therewith, which still exists, and is in a good state of preservation. On the south side of this end of the last-named aisle was a chapel or chantry, erected and endowed by John Heron or Heyron, a gentleman possessing considerable landed property in the county. Of what family he was a member is not known; but it may be assumed, from the warm interest he appeared to take in the welfare and ministrations of the parish Church, that he resided within the precincts of the old borough, and may have been the owner and occupier of an important residence, long since ruthlessly destroyed, known as the Great House, which stood at the upper part of the hill and within a short distance of the spot to which his remains were consigned. The Purbeck marble slab which once covered the tomb was some time since removed to the vestry room, where it is now used as a convenient table. The brass plate which surrounded it, and which would have given much interesting

information, was wrenched away from its fastenings and appropriated by unscrupulous hands, perhaps ages ago.¹

The present chancel, north transept, and south transept were evidently all built at the same time and under the same architect. The Heron Chapel or Chantry² was then demolished, but its site may be satisfactorily imagined, if not accurately traced.

The former chancel was of smaller dimensions, the roof being much lower, as was clearly shown by the drip-stone which remained until the alteration of the arch at a comparatively recent period.

The east window contains fine painted glass of the fifteenth century, and it has been stated that the other windows of the chancel once contained glass of a similar character. The figures in the principal lights of this window are SS. Cecilia, Gabriel, Mary, Elizabeth, Laurence, Anthony, Clement, Peter, Gregory, and Joseph. In the tracery lights are the armorial bearings of the families of Pawlet and Rosse, and the figures of some British saints. The latter are probably very ancient, and may have been taken from a window which existed before the later dedication to "All Saints" was adopted.

The window on the east side of the north transept was unquestionably the east window of the former chancel, and, according to Collinson, contained even after its removal several heraldic shields, which he describes.

The old rood-loft turret may be observed in what was the north-east angle of the north aisle; but it was subject to some alteration in the course of the new work. Adjoining this, a

(1.) At the meeting of the Society, the Rev. F. W. Weaver stated that he had found the will of John Heyron, who built and endowed a chantry in the Church at Langport. The will is dated 1499, and was proved at Lambeth in 1501. As he was buried in his chantry chapel, it would appear that the present chancel and transepts were not commenced till many years after that period, and therefore later than has hitherto been supposed.

(2.) See Paper by Mr. Weaver on this subject printed in Part II. [Ed.]

corbel in the most easterly pier indicates that there was a detached chapel, enclosed with a screen and termed a *parclose*, from which the elevation of the Host could be seen through the squint in the north pillar of the chancel arch.

At the west of this aisle a small square window may be noticed. It was blocked up for many years, but was opened by the late Rev. E. P. Henslowe. This was evidently at one period a *dole window*, through which the necessitous poor were assisted by the distribution of charitable gifts. From some iron pins that were then in the stone sill, but which were unfortunately removed by over-zealous workmen, it was evident that the opening was closed by two sliding wooden shutters, so that the interior of the *dole-chamber* should not be exposed to the vulgar gaze in the absence of the priest.

The south transept is frequently called the "*Heron Chapel*," from the fact, perhaps, that it enclosed the site of the *Heron Chantry*, on which site the usual Mass was celebrated until the endowment was taken from the Church and transferred to the revenues of the Crown. In this chapel or transept are, or were, certain armorial bearings, once supposed to be those of John Heron. They are "*per fess sable and argent, a pale counterchanged three herons' heads of the second*"; but they are *not* those of the founder of the chantry. They are the arms of a family named Rosse, who came from Yorkshire into Somerset at an early period, and were located in Langport and at other places in the neighbourhood. The various shields of arms in the cornice of the transept, and at one time in the windows also, as well as in the east window of the chancel, are those of families who contributed towards the reconstruction and enlargement of this portion of the Church.

The present tower is not the original one. To what period the latter belonged it would be difficult to determine in the absence of authentic records. It might have been Norman, Early English, or Decorated. At a remote period the corporate authority of the borough adopted as their arms an

“embattled tower,” an impression of which came under the notice of Collinson. This may have been, even if a rough representation of the old tower without correct details, sufficient to determine the particular style of architecture to which it belonged.

The existing tower was built in the time of Henry VII, and, it has been said, by Margaret Beaufort, the King’s mother. The authority may be only that of the Beaufort *badge* (the portcullis), which is several times repeated on the battlement of the tower. It contains some fine fan tracery vaulting and an excellent west window, the design of which is not of a common character. Both the vaulting and the window consist of Douling stone.

In the tower are five bells, all cast at Bridgwater in 1772. They have on them the following inscriptions respectively :—

- 1.—“My treble voice makes hearts rejoice.”
- 2.—“Good ringing yeild great delight.”
- 3.—“Health, Peace and Plenty to this neighbourhood.”
- 4.—“Faith Hope and Grace attend this place.”
- 5.—“Me resonare jubent Pietas Mors atque Voluntas.”

The churchyard at one period extended farther north, and included the space now occupied by the road and pavement, and Priest’s Lane led directly into it.

The principal entrance, however, was through the south porch, by a footway communicating with Watley Green, and skirting the market place, which was then on the hill.

It has been stated that many years ago the foundation of a cross was visible near the tower. It may be assumed that it stood within the original boundary of the churchyard and not far from the dole window.

A fire took place about fifty years ago, caused by an overheated flue, which entirely destroyed the roof of the nave and the fine old vaulted ceiling, with its moulded ribs, ornamented with bosses at many of the intersections. A despicable ceiling

was substituted, which good taste has removed, replacing it by one of very creditable design.

On the south pier of the chancel arch are two canopied niches, each of which probably contained the figure of a saint; but all such figures were swept away under the power of the stringent laws that were enacted at the period of the Reformation.

On the north side of the tower doorway traces of a stoup in a mutilated condition may be noticed.

A reredos was placed in the chancel in 1887, and canopies were added to the sedilia.