

Screenwork in Churches of the Taunton District.

(Paper No. 3 of the Series).

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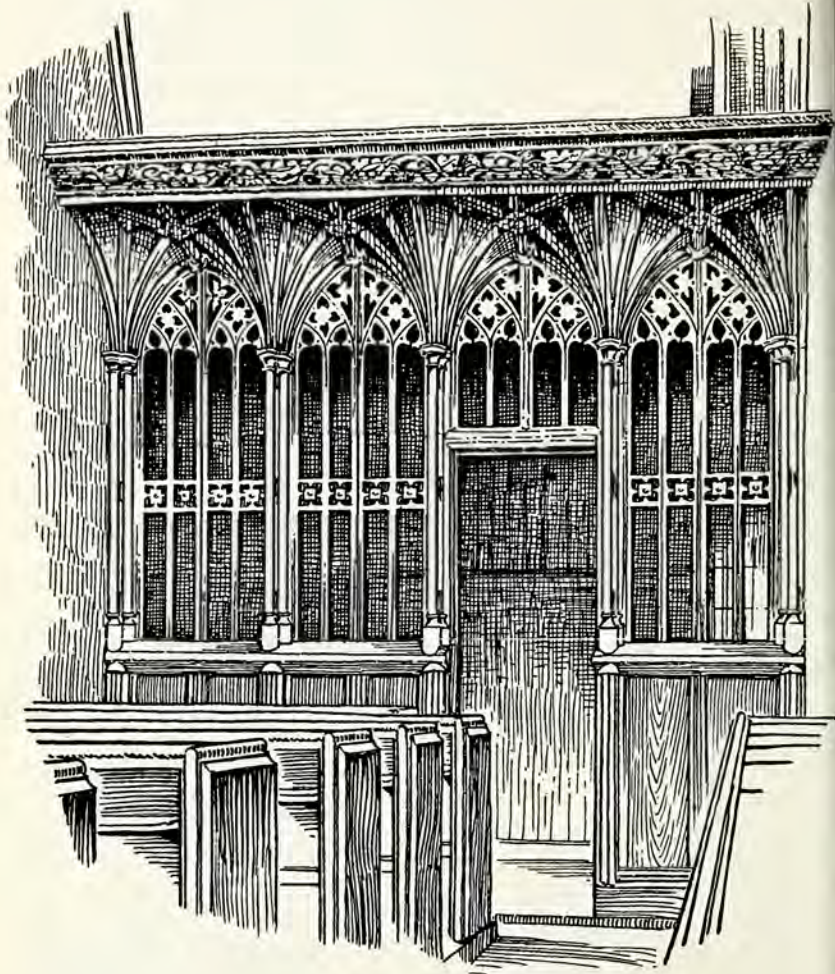
THE small group of churches whose screenwork is the subject of this year's contribution to the *Proceedings*, lies within a short radius of the county town.

The ecclesiastical woodwork in this district offers a great diversity of pattern. This is peculiarly evident in the remains of screenwork, which differ so markedly in general design, as well as in detail, that they must be attributed in most cases to quite independent schools of design.

The woodwork is usually of a richer and more elaborate description than that met with in the northern parts of the county, and a great deal of it dates from the Tudor period (Henry VII and VIII), when so many of our local churches underwent alteration on an extensive scale, frequently amounting to a rebuilding of their fabric.

The graceful towers which are so notable a feature of the churches of this district are paralleled by fine woodwork within, and seem often contemporaneous. A great number of the churches are aisled beyond the chancel limit, and the rood-screens were thus often continuous, as they were in the churches of the Minehead district.

Some, like the church at Trull, follow the west-country model in having no stone-built chancel-arch, whilst on the other hand many shew this feature. At Trull, a tympanum of lath and plaster is visible over the rood-loft, and against this



CURRY RIVEL.
NORTHERN SECTION OF THE SCREEN

the rood and images would almost certainly have stood in the old days. The tympanum sometimes co-existed with the chancel-arch, the latter being rebated for the reception of the boarded partition.

The earliest remains of screenwork in the district are those at Curry Rivel and at Staple Fitzpaine, but probably neither of these possess the same degree of antiquity as some of those early and simple works which have been referred to in the foregoing numbers of this essay. That of Curry Rivel is the older, if we may judge by the massiveness of its parts and the rudeness of their execution—also by a certain sense of the *experimental* which a study of its design engenders. But it is a fan-vaulted screen, and as such, goes into the later class of screens. The remains at Staple Fitzpaine, on the other hand, are of the earlier or rectangular-headed type. The detail, however, is of well-developed XV Century character in both the screens in that church.

Quite the most remarkable screenwork in the district is that of Trull, as it offers a peculiarity of arrangement which, so far as I am aware, is visible nowhere else in the county.

I will now proceed to detail under their separate headings the screens chosen for notice.

CURRY RIVEL (Plate I).—Originally it would appear that the rood-screen ran continuously across nave and aisles. Now the aisle sections alone remain. These are of similar character, and consist each of four bays or divisions, standing perfect with their vaulting and cornices. The lights are arcaded and are traceried in the heads, each light being subdivided by a stout central mullion running to the apex of the arch, as is seen in the screen at Banwell, and in some of the Devonshire screens. There are lighter mullions further subdividing each opening into four.

The tracery, as may be seen in the illustration, Plate I (which represents the northern section of the screen), is of a Decorated order, but is strangely irregular in execution, being

in some places quite wildly uneven. It will be seen that the lights are transomed in a most unusual way. The transom pieces are like square tablets, pierced with quatrefoils (a carved patera between their cusps) let in between the mullions and recessed a little behind them. These also are very irregular in shape.

The screens are enormously massive—another proof of their early date. The vaulting also does not spring from the main standards, but from a series of turned shafts standing clear in front of the screen. These rest at foot upon the projecting dado-rail, which here stands out far in advance of the screen-panels and framework generally. The whole of the execution is heavy, and suggests the work of a man accustomed to design of a coarser order than wood screenwork. But on the other hand the fan-vaults are skilfully developed and have a very graceful sweep. The cornice enrichment has a large vine-leaf of an early character.

Altogether the indications go to shew that these screens would not be likely to date much later than the last quarter of the XIV Century, and they might well be earlier than this.

The church contains also some fine oak benches with poppy-heads, and some ancient stalls in the chancel.

Worth's "Guide to Somerset."

Proc. Som. Arch. Soc., XI, pt. i, p. 21; and XL, pt. i, p. 28.

NORTON FITZWARREN.—There are three screens in this church—a chancel screen, another in the north aisle, and a parclose on the north side of the chancel. The two former are fan-vaulted, and designed for a continuous rood-loft. The vaulting remains in a fairly perfect condition on the west side, but on the east it has been removed. The screens have undergone a great deal of alteration and patching.

The tracery is remarkable, and quite unlike anything else in the neighbourhood. Attached to the face of the mullions are small pinnacled buttress-form standards supporting crocketed canopies, forming a series of little gables between

the upright divisions in lieu of tracery proper. These have a very good appearance. At Aldenham, Herts, is a similar design, and others might be instanced, but no examples of this design are to be found in the district. All the details and forms in these screens are, in fact, different from local work. The vaulting ribs, contrary to the usual rule, are not mitred, and the filling panels run right out to the bressummer without intersection of any spandrel pieces. The conoids or fans of the vaulting do not rise in elevation towards their outward edge, and this gives a peculiarly heavy and shadowy appearance to the vaulting. The fillings have a plain surface, relieved with small embossed suns or stars, once probably gilt. This feature is rare, and may be seen elsewhere, at Bishop's Lydeard and on the parclose screens at Trull; but perhaps these are the only other local examples.

The cornices are a striking feature of these two screens, and shew four rows of rich ornament, the lowest of which is cut in the solid, and exhibits the legend of the Dragon of Rhodes and his victims. Above this come three rows of foliage enrichments, the first and third being vine-leaf, and the intermediate a water-crowfoot or some similar plant. The lower vine-leaf band is of exceptional beauty and originality, free in design, and well cut.

It has been questioned whether the dragon carving really belongs to this screen. A local antiquary has stated that the ornament was placed there by a former vicar, who bought it in an old furniture shop at Taunton. The screen at Old Cleeve is said to have possessed a similar feature, and as this disappeared many years ago from the church, together with all the upper part of the screen, it is just possible that it went to enrich the screen at Norton Fitzwarren. But, if so, this must have taken place a very long time ago, for it is certain that this ornament has been on the screen at Norton for sixty-six years past, since it is mentioned in the Camden Society's publications of that period.

There is further an old legend or fable anent this Dragon which I am informed is current among the villagers of the place.

The date of the screen is late XV or early XVI Century ; 1500 is quite a probable date for it. The name, "Ralphe Harris. Churchwarden" (*see accompanying illustration*), is carved upon the cornice, and has been thought to be evidence of local execution.

RALPHE HARRIS G.M.

A *restoration* of these screens took place in 1870, and there has been another and more recent renovation. Mentioned in 1842 as having a magnificent rood-loft, it was one of those listed by the Camden Society as a model to future screen-builders.

The rood-loft stair, which was on the north side, seems to have been removed during some XVIII Century alterations.

Until some time in the XIX Century the screens were covered with an oak graining. They have since been cleaned, and shew traces of original gold and colour.

The rood-screen shews a peculiarity in its divisions, which are five in number. The two extreme openings are each of two lights, whilst those next the door are four-light : the doors remain. It will be noted that the lower panels of the screen are quite plain, without any tracery. This is rather unusual, but may be seen also at Long Sutton, Chew Magna, and some of the earlier screens. The doorway has a very beautiful head, a depressed ogee in form, richly crocketed above.

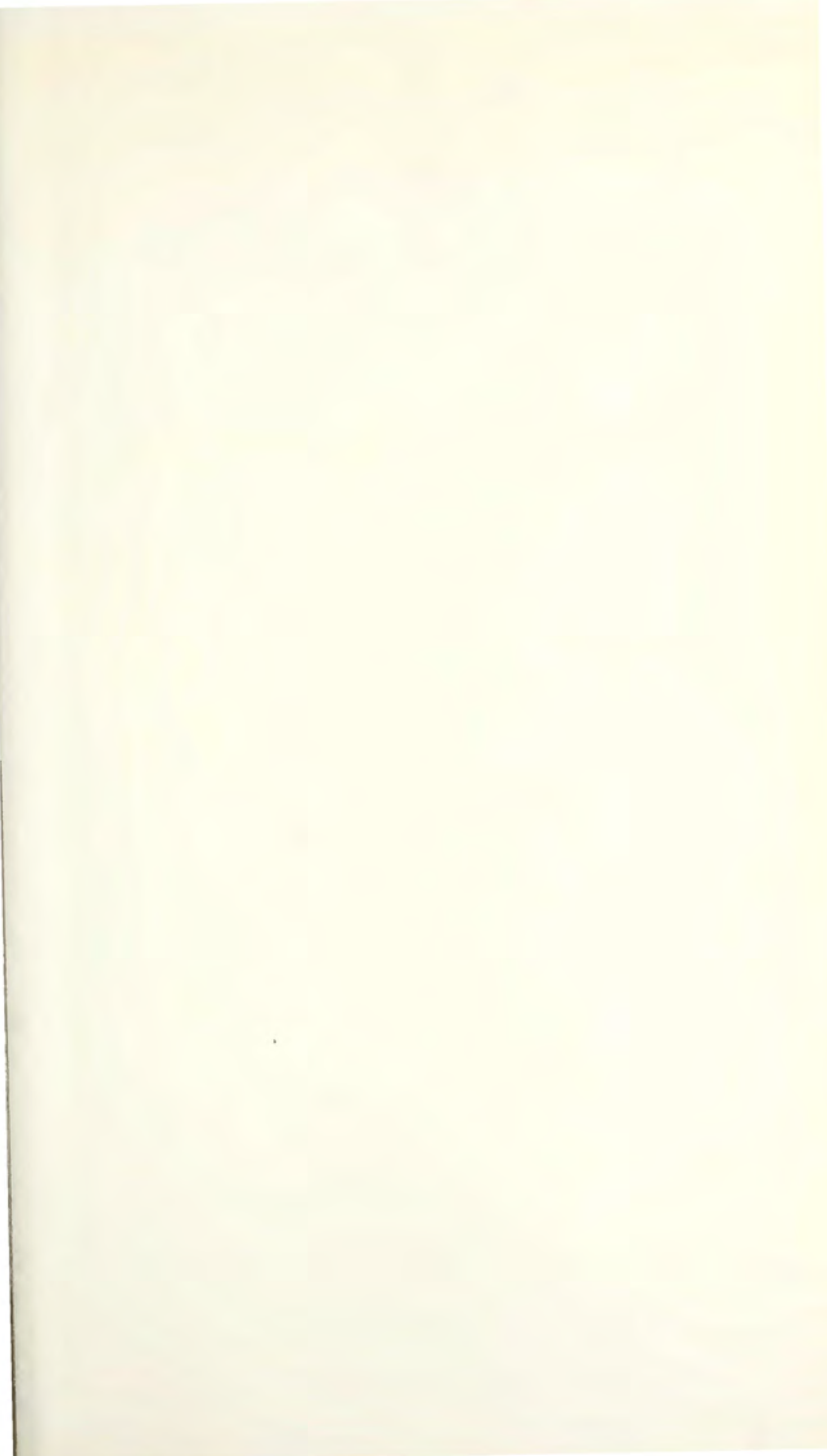
A carved rood with the crucified figure, and the traditional attendant images of SS. Mary and John, has been placed over the screen within recent years.

Jeboult's "West Somerset," II, p. 67.

Worth's "Guide to Somerset."

Hints to Church Builders. (Camden Soc., 1842.)

Proc. Som. Arch. Soc., XVIII, pt. i, p. 42, with legend of dragon.



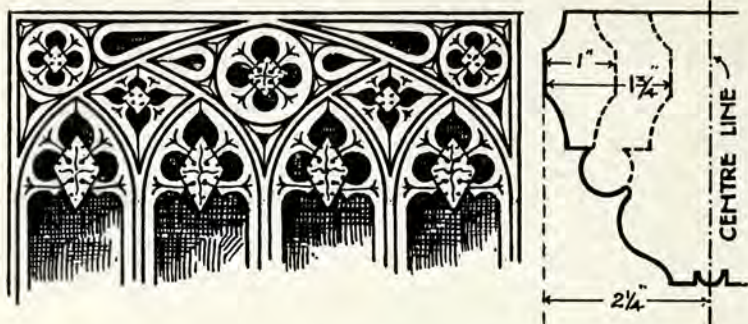


FIG. 1.—DETAIL OF TRACERY-HEADS IN CHANCEL SCREEN.

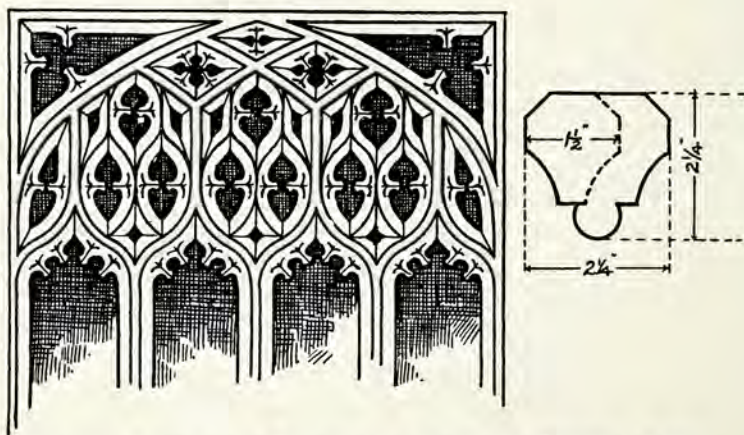


FIG. 2.—DETAIL OF TRACERY-HEAD FROM SCREEN (NOW FORMING THE BACK OF THE CLERGY SEAT). TWO MORE SECTIONS FORM THE ENCLOSURE TO VESTRY.

STAPLE FITZPAINE. St. Peter. (Plate II).—(1) The screen now standing beneath the chancel arch is not the original rood-screen of the church. It has an unsightly gap in the centre, due to the fact that it was never intended to fill so wide an arch. The two halves of this screen, which still contain the doors, have been drawn apart, and the space bridged over by a lintel, and a continuation of the cornice, which is a plain piece of work consisting of a row of mouldings about 11 inches deep, containing a pierced tracery band, battlemented above, as a cresting.

The tracery-heads of the lights are interesting and rather pretty. A sketch is given (Plate II, fig. 1). They are very small, their total height being only 10 inches from the springing, and the width of the minor divisions $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches from centre to centre. The lower panels are of the Dunster pattern. The framework of the screen is mostly modern. This little screen is said to have come from Bickenhall Church—a small Norman structure demolished by a late incumbent.

(2). Another and more interesting piece of screenwork now furnishes a partition to the vestry from the chancel. It consists of two divisions only, in dark oak, each having a well designed tracery-head of Early Perpendicular character, and both heads are different. They are arched with a four-centre curve, set in a rectangular framework with pierced tracery spandrels. Each division is subdivided into four tracery-lights by small mullions. The screen is on a rather larger scale than the other, and it seems fairly evident that it represents almost all that is left of the original rood-screen of this unfortunate church, which has been vandalised in a shocking manner some time during the past century.

(3). There is a third tracery-head of this screen surviving, and it now forms the back of the rector's seat behind the reading-pew. Its tracery again is different from the other two heads, and it looks as if the original screen must have been singularly varied in its design, since these three are all quite different. One is illustrated in Plate II, fig. 2.

TRULL (Plate III).—There are invaluable remains of old screenwork and other mediæval fittings in this church.

(1) *The Rood Screen.*

This fine example is unfortunately to some extent mutilated, being, like that of Brushford, despoiled of its tracery, which has been cut away from its arched framework. It is of three bays, spanning the nave. These are of extraordinary width, and look depressed without the stout central standard or main mullion which at one time divided them, running up into the head like those of Curry Rivel, Banwell, and other screens. This is needed to restore to the openings their proper proportion.

The screen is very massive, and retains its fan-vaulting, the ribs of which are multiplied (seven free ribs to each fan). The fillings of the fan-vaulting are exceedingly rich and effective, being covered with embossed foliations and other ornament like some of the best Devonshire screens (*e.g.* Hartland or Burrington). The cornices are among the best in the county, and consist (on the west side) of four tiers of magnificent vignette enrichment, held by single beads, the lower or pendent cresting remaining, though the upper is missing. Similar cornices are to be found in the county at Brushford (near Dulverton), Halse, Withercombe, and Bicknoller.

The unique feature of this screen is this, that although placed in a church of the true west-country type, without chancel-arch, and with aisles continued without a break to the eastward, yet it was never designed to go across the aisles themselves, and the rood-loft was confined to the nave. Not only is there no provision in the aisle walls for a rood-loft staircase such as we find in other churches, but within the thickness of the pier on the north side of the screen (which stands between two flat piers) is contrived a most curious and steep little staircase for approaching the loft. The very constricted proportions and extreme steepness of this stair render

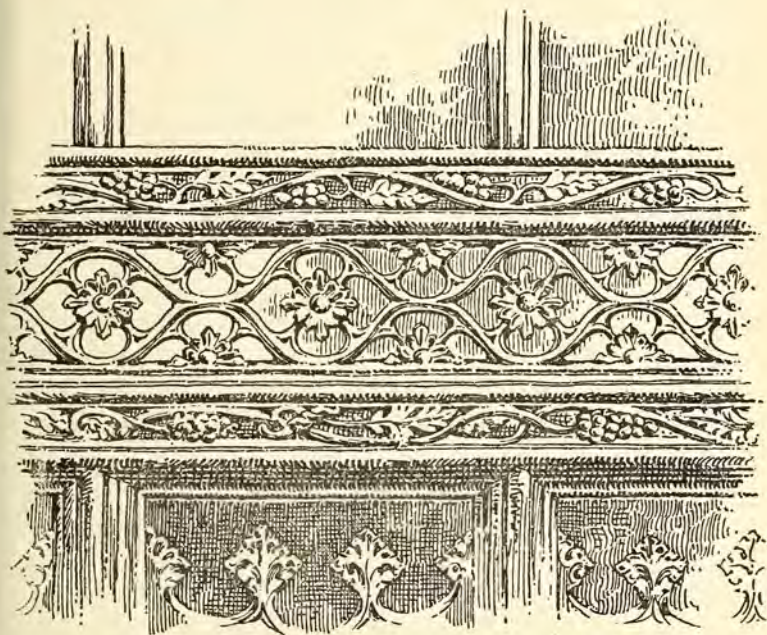


TRULL.

From a Photograph by J. Reginald H. Weaver.

it improbable that anyone larger than a mere boy could have made use of this loft. Above the screen is a beam filled up to the roof of the church by a solid tympanum. This now shows a plain plaster face, but in the mediæval period it probably supported the rood and figures, and displayed a painted background representing the "Doom," after the traditional manner.

(2). Side by side with the rood-screen stand two screens



Detail in Parclose Screen, South Aisle, Trull Church.

of a widely different type to the last. These are of the nature of parclooses, and are not constructed to carry a loft, but merely to fence the chancel chapels, which here, as in so many cases, occupied the eastward extremity of north and south aisles in the XV Century church.

These screens are not of local design. They correspond more nearly with a type of work found in East Anglia. This is the case in respect of the tracery, and in the divided dado-rail, with its beautifully traceried perforation, we have a feature most rare in this locality. The early XV Century screen now in the south transept of Dunster Church exhibits a like feature, but the detail there corresponds far more closely with local work. A slight sketch of this member is given in the accompanying illustration (p. 151).

Over the head of the doorway in the northern screen is the following obscure inscription :

Tomaes ꝥe heþer Doan Bien

The lower panels of both screens are refined examples of the linen-fold panelling of the latter part of the XV Century.

Unfortunately a great deal of wanton damage has lately been done to them by the schoolboys who have been seated in the pews which abut against the screens. This church is situated in a growing district, and is overfull of pews—which have choked the gangway that should have been preserved in front of the screens.

The rest of the woodwork in this church is described in the excursion notes for the current year, and will not require further mention here.

The foregoing by no means exhausts the list of screens in the neighbourhood of Taunton, but owing to the exigencies of space in the present volume, the mention of others is held over for a future number of the *Proceedings*. The beautiful examples surviving at Bishop's Lydeard, Halse, and Fitzhead, are further examples of the richness and variety of design in the locality, and may be advantageously compared with those we have already described.