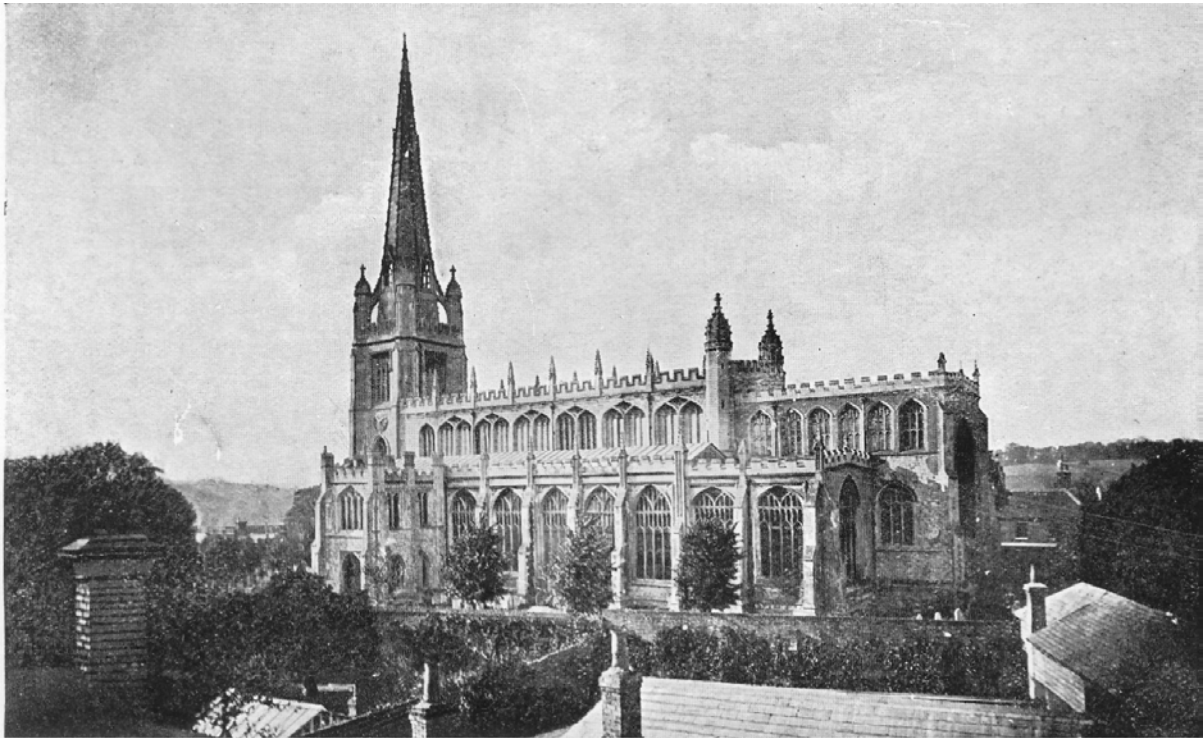


AN OUTLINE SURVEY OF SAFFRON WALDEN AND ITS REGION
(By Members of the Saffron Walden Survey Society.)
EDITED BY G. MORRIS.



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SAFFRON WALDEN CHURCH.

Messrs. Hart & Sons, Saffron Walden.

Section XII.-THE PARISH CHURCH, SAFFRON WALDEN.

By the Rev. G. MONTAGU BENTON, M.A.

The Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Saffron Walden, is not only one of the two finest parish churches in Essex, but takes a high place, from an architectural point of view, among the parish churches of England : it has even been said that in a degree it may not unworthily compare with Wykeham's nave at Winchester. Our medieval architecture, in common with that on the Continent, grew out of the Romanesque, but owing to the influence of racial characteristics, the art of each nation gradually developed along its own lines, until abroad it found its culmination in the exuberance of the Flamboyant style, and in England in the restrained "Perpendicular." Walden church, therefore, being of this style, represents the fruits of our national insularity-it is English of the English. But beautiful as the building is to-day, it is in comparison with its first glory-

when painted walls and screenwork, rich hangings and stained glass were merged in one blaze of harmonious colour- like a mutilated casket bereft of its jewels.

When the church was built, the population of the town was not much more than a third of its present size, and England was comparatively poor and thinly populated; these facts only increase our wonder at the piety and skill of olden days, which enabled men to bequeath to us so glorious a sanctuary. We cannot do more here, however, than briefly summarise the chief factors in the erection of the building. They were an intense and united religious feeling (not unmixed probably with a spirit of emulation), stimulated more especially by the growth of local gild life, and by the fact that the body of the church was the common hall of the parish and the property of the parishioners.

In attempting to trace the historical growth of the building, we are unable to assign to Walden a pre-Norman church, and Domesday is silent in the matter. We know, however, that a church existed here in 1086, for in that year Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex, founded the monastery, or rather the priory of Walden, and bestowed upon it, among other churches, "the parish church of the Blessed Mary of Walden." If, as is likely, this building stood on the site of the present structure, every trace of its existence has disappeared in the successive re-buildings. As far as can be discovered, there is only one small fragment of worked stone in the present fabric possibly dating from the 12th century ; this relic, which perchance was associated with the Norman edifice, consists of part of a cross-head, and may be seen built into the base of the east exterior wall of the south porch.

About 1300, or a decade or two earlier, the church was rebuilt on probably an altogether larger scale, and various portions of this building are incorporated in the present church, viz. : the chancel arcade; the western arches of the north and south chapels; the inner doorway, and part of the hood-mouldings of the windows of the south porch; and the crypt or bone-hole which is situated partly under the south aisle and partly under the

south porch. These remains indicate that this later building was of dignified proportions; and from their position it may be inferred that in plan it conformed to that of the present building, in as far as it consisted of a chancel with north and south chapels, a nave with north and south aisles, and a south porch. We may also presume that there was a tower, but for the present its position must remain conjectural. It is possible that in addition to the chancel chapels, there were either north and south transepts or transeptal chapels occupying the site of the two eastern bays of the present aisles, and that the foundations and lower part of the existing outer walls date from c. 1300, and represent respectively the north and south walls of these supposed transepts or chapels. The church may thus have been cruciform in plan, and it is therefore conceivable that there was a central tower. This hypothesis was first advanced by Mr. J. Murray Kendall, F.S.A., of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, as the result of working out the plan, when surveying the church in 1913. Mr. Kendall argues that the position of the crypt indicates the existence of a south aisle of less width than the present one, and as the spacing does not allow for the arch from the chapel to the aisle, there is ground for inferring that this arch opened into a transept. Moreover he considers that the spacing of the two eastern bays of the south wall of the aisle confirms this theory; also that the similar north chapel arch, and the spacing of the north wall of the north aisle points to there having been a corresponding north transept. He further maintains that this spacing is quite consistent with the existence of a central tower, or at least a crossing. Excavation might prove or possibly disprove the hypothesis, at any rate the evidence is such as to make the conjecture a reasonable probability.

This late thirteenth century building served the parish until well into the fifteenth century, although detailed changes were effected from time to time. The enriched canopy-work now in the north aisle dates from c. 1360 and must have therefore belonged to this earlier church. Constructional alterations were also going on spasmodically from 1438, if not earlier.

Fortunately the Churchwardens' accounts from 1438 to 1484 are extant: they are written in French, Latin, and English, and the accuracy of detail

which characterises the entries enable us to form a fairly graphic picture of the interior of the church as it appeared just prior to the re-building, or at any rate before the fabric it would seem had suffered material change. But we must pass on to the existing church.

Although, with the exception of details already noted, it is of one uniform style, throughout, we must not suppose that preparatory to its erection, its predecessor was practically demolished. Even in spite of re-building, a mediaeval church never ceased to be used, and it was so arranged that services could be held in some part of the building without a break. Thus the work progressed slowly, and was perforce done by instalments. Sometimes, too, lack of funds would further retard matters. We can see then how impossible it is, in the absence of definite evidence, to fix an exact date when the scheme of re-building Walden Church on the present scale was first inaugurated ; but nevertheless the style of architecture, together with such documentary evidence as we possess, enable us to arrive at an approximate date for the work as a whole.

(To be continued.)



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SAFFRON WALDEN CHURCH: INTERIOR.

Section XII. (contd.)-THE PARISH CHURCH.

By the REV. G. MONTAGU BENTON, M.A.

No one who has seen the two churches can fail to be struck by the extraordinary resemblance between the nave of Walden Church and that of S. Mary the Great, Cambridge. Fortunately we know when the church at Cambridge was rebuilding: the first stone was laid in 1478, and the fabric was finished in 1519, with the exception of the tower which, although begun in 149r, was not finally completed until 1608. From their remarkable affinity we may presume that the two buildings are more or less coeval, and thus we are led to assign on architectural grounds alone, the last quarter of the fifteenth, and the first quarter of the sixteenth century, as a probable date for the re-building of Walden Church; and we find that this comparative evidence is supported by the documentary evidence afforded by ancient wills relating to the parish. I have been at pains to gather extracts from a number of early local wills, and these proved that the years 1485 to 1526 covered a period of great building activity. That the work was practically completed by 1526 is shown by a will of that date, which bequeathed 3s. 4d. towards the finishing of the new works begun. Having then established an approximate date for the main body of the work, we may now endeavour to trace the steps whereby the thirteenth century church was replaced by the present stately building.

The old chancel was retained, and heightened by the addition of a clerestory; the floor was raised (up to 1859 it was some four feet higher than at present) and a crypt built below it. This retention of the chancel, the shallowness of which spoils the *ensemble*, is due to the fact that it was the property of Walden Abbey, which was naturally less active in church building than the parishioners to whom the nave belonged.

Leaving the chancel, it is obvious that the nave arcades were set out from east to west, and before they were completed certainly, possibly before they were begun, the west tower was built to the west of, and apart from, the older nave. This allowed time for settlement which, if the lighter work

of the nave were already attached, would have endangered the stability of the structure: it is easy to see from the incomplete western-most bays of the arcades, exactly how the nave was joined up to the tower. The north and south aisles and the south porch were rebuilt with the nave; and it is interesting to notice outside that the west walls of the aisles practically cover the faces of the two lower stages of the north-east and southeast buttresses of the tower. The north porch was built a little later, c. 1500, and is clearly an addition, concealing as it does part of the rectangular hood-mould of the inner door. The nave arcade and aisles seem to have been completed, or nearly so, a decade or two before the magnificent clerestory was finished. The chancel arch, or at least the upper half, and the turrets flanking it, were built at the same time as the clerestory. Possibly the crocketed cupolas of the angle-turrets, and the pinnacles which rise above the nave and aisle roofs, were suggested by King's College Chapel, Cambridge, the vault, pinnacles and corner towers of which were built between 1512 and 1515; but this by the way.

The rebuilding of the chancel chapels was perhaps the last work undertaken. Inserted in the outer wall, below the east window, of the north chapel, there is the matrix of a brass inscription, with the date "AO d" 1526," incised on the stone below: this might well be the year in which the chapel was re-edified. The south chapel, as we learn from his will, was rebuilt by Thomas Lord Audley (d. 1544), whose tomb stands under the east window.

Apart from restorations, the fabric remained for three hundred years as it left the builders' hands in the sixteenth century. In 1831 a leaden-covered timber spire (68 feet high) was replaced by the present lofty erection which, with the tower, rises to a height of 193 feet. It was designed by Messrs. Rickman and Hutchinson, and for its period must be considered an achievement. The architect, Thos. Rickman, well known as a pioneer of the Gothic Revival, was, strange to say, a Quaker for the greater part of his life. He resided in Walden for a short time during his earlier days, having come to the town in 1799 to serve as journeyman to a firm of grocers.

Having traced the historical development of the fabric, it is natural to ask who were the chief promoters of the rebuilding; for although we may be sure that the parishioners rose to the occasion, they must have had outside help. Two of the most prominent badges among those carved in the spandrils of the nave arcade, and elsewhere, are the knot of the Bouchiers and the five-pointed star or mullet of the De Veres ; from these we may infer that Henry Bouchier, second Earl of Essex, who possessed the manor of Manhall in this parish, and was also a member of the local guild of the Holy Trinity; and John de Vere, thirteenth Earl of Oxford, who was active in church building, were generous benefactors. Another conspicuous device is the Catherine-wheel, which we may reasonably conjecture alludes to Katherine Semar, who was a foundress of the local gild, and therefore a probable contributor to the fabric fund. But one name stands out pre-eminent, namely, John Leche, vicar from 1489 to 1521. There is evidence to show that this generously disposed priest zealously helped on the work, and did his utmost towards bringing it to a successful issue. His plain high tomb, with marginal inscription, is in the north chapel. It is highly probable that Leche's wealthy sister, Dame Jane Bradbury, widow of Thomas Bradbury, Lord Mayor of London, was also a considerable benefactor, since she was a loyal supporter of her brother, and was generously disposed. But the bed-roll of those who remembered the "Church of our Lady of Walden" for good must have been a long one, and if their very names are mainly forgotten, the church itself stands as the silent witness of their thankful and self-sacrificing hearts.