

ST. NICHOLAS' CHURCH, ICKFORD, BUCKS.

THE following Report, by Mr. W. H. St. John Hope, M.A., Assistant Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries, upon St. Nicholas' Church, Ickford, was furnished to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings at its meeting on Thursday, March 18th, 1897.

The report will be all the more interesting as members of our Society, accompanied by Mr. Cocks, have recently inspected this church, and a resolution has been passed expressing the desire of the Society to co-operate, if practicable, with Mr. Hope in any suggestions and advice in reference to its repair.

In issuing the report, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings describes the church as "undeniably a work of art of particularly interesting and rather unusual character." ED.

The parish church of St. Nicholas, Ickford, in the county of Buckingham, is of great interest, inasmuch as, with the exception of the chancel, it has hitherto escaped "restoration;" it consequently retains many qualities that would otherwise inevitably have been lost.

The church consists of a chancel, 25 feet long and 13 feet 3 inches wide; a nave of the same width, 41 feet long, with narrow north and south aisles, 6 feet wide, of the same length as the nave; a western tower; and a south porch.

At first sight the church appears to be Transitional Norman with a chancel of somewhat later date, but it has not been built all at one time, and the lower part of the tower may be Norman, while its upper story is clearly later than the chancel. The differences in date are such as may be easily accounted for if the church were slowly rebuilt by degrees from an earlier structure.

The chancel is Early English with inner and outer

stringcourses, and has two narrow lancet windows on each side, with a south door of the same period. There is a good Early English drain in the usual place, south of the altar. The east wall has been rebuilt, with angle buttresses, and now contains a three-light Decorated window of the "net" pattern in which are some interesting fragments of the original glazing, including a shield of the arms of Sir John de Grey, who held lands in the parish when the window was built. A buttress of the same date as the east wall has been added on each side of the chancel. Towards the end of the fourteenth century a fine square-headed two-light window was inserted to the south of the altar. A low-side window, with a transom and rebate for a shutter, has also been inserted at the west end of the same wall. There was apparently a like low-side window opposite, but this has been destroyed. The open cross-raftered roof is of the thirteenth or fourteenth century, with a tie beam midway. The chancel arch has massive responds which do not carry mouldings to correspond, and it seems as if a change in the design was made before the arch itself was built. It is highly improbable that any part of the arch has been removed.

The chancel underwent "restoration" in 1856, when the floor was raised, a step inserted at the chancel arch, and a particularly offensive tile pavement laid down. The walls were badly replastered, and quire fittings introduced. A large Elizabethan monument which stood to the north of the altar and blocked one of the small lancet windows, was taken down at the same time and set up in the north aisle, where it now blocks a doorway and another window.

The nave is of three bays with circular piers and pointed arches of excellent character and in good order. The roof appears to be an ancient cross-rafter one of high pitch with tie beams, but is underdrawn. There has never been a clerestory. In the north-west corner is a corbel of very singular design.

The north aisle has a small two-light window in each end and in the western part of the north wall. In the middle of this wall is a pointed doorway, now blocked internally by the monument aforesaid, and almost above it is a late Norman window which has apparently been removed from an earlier church. To the east of the door-

way is a remarkable Early English lancet with cusped and ornamented rear-arch, and east of this again is a richly moulded window of Early Decorated character of three lights under a square head. Beneath the east window, externally, is a curious projection or thickening of the wall, after the manner of a buttress, but extending the whole width of the aisle. As the east window is at an unusual height from the floor, this projection may have something to do with the reredos of the altar, but there is nothing to be seen inside the church. The drain for the altar is in the form of a projecting bowl set in the respond of the arcade, and is fortunately perfect.

The south aisle has a projection similar to that on the north aisle outside its east wall. Over it is a round headed window of one light, and beside it internally, on the south side, a pretty cusped niche. The greater part of the south wall, east of the porch, is filled with a wide and plain seventeenth century window of four lights, without tracery and under a square head. The south doorway is of the thirteenth century and has a four-centred arch, set within a pointed drop-arch, with a single order resting on jamb shafts with square abaci. The lower part of the porch is of the same date, but the upper part has been rebuilt at two different periods. The original door of the church has been displaced by a new door, and rehung in the entrance of the porch where no door was before. To the west of the porch is a modern three-light window copied from that in the north aisle. The west window of this aisle is a small quatrefoil placed high up; it is of very doubtful date, and it is possible that a larger window has been blocked up below it.

The lower story of the tower opens into the church by a low pointed arch, the innermost order of which is carried on each side by a shaft with carved capital of good design, and is lighted by a widely splayed lancet in the west wall. The stage above, which is reached by a ladder, has three widely splayed Norman windows on the north, west, and south sides respectively, but the two last are now walled up. Externally, the tower is without plinth or break until a few feet above these windows, where a slight set off occurs.

There is, however, a low buttress on each side against the aisle, and another buttress stands on the north side

upon the aisle wall itself, but the corresponding one on the south has been taken away. These upper buttresses did not extend above the set off referred to. Above this level was originally an upper story containing in every side a pair of wide trefoiled lights, each within a pointed arch, all of the purest and most refined work of the beginning of the thirteenth century. Of these windows, unfortunately, only the westernmost remains, the others having been destroyed towards the end of the Decorated period, when the north and south walls were cut down, new two-light windows inserted in the north, east, and south sides, and a saddle-back roof with gables, copings, and crosses put on. The original timber of this roof remains, and it is interesting from the fact of its having a double wall plate on the inside. The belfry contains three bells, one of which is mediæval; there is also a sanctus-bell in the east window. The west window is now walled up almost to the top of the lights.

With regard to furniture, the chancel still retains a good seventeenth century wooden altar, but this has now got a new top, and is set on wooden blocks to give it unnecessary height. The altar rail, like the other furniture in the chancel, is modern and contemptible.

The nave and aisles are filled for the most part with a good series of seventeenth century oak pews, arranged in blocks east and west of the cross alley, between the north and south doorways. They are in excellent condition and well adapted for their purpose. Towards the east end they have been partly replaced by higher enclosures made up of the old materials.

The pulpit is a fine one with a sounding board, also of the seventeenth century, and has below it a reading pew, which may be later in date. The pews and pulpit are of the same period as the large window in the south wall. The font is a plain circular block with cast-lead lining, set upon a brick base. It is now surmounted by an oaken cover, apparently modern, of singular but appropriate design, and in keeping with the other woodwork.

At the west end of the nave, two much worn stone steps lead to a low gallery in form of a raised platform stepping up under the tower and filled with seats, all apparently of the eighteenth century. This probably formed the gallery for the musicians and singers. The

floor of the nave and aisles, where undisturbed, is of large square red tiles, but in the aisles much of this has given place to bricks. The central and cross alleys are laid down the centre with grave slabs, the oldest of which appears to be one dated 1641.

It is obvious that in a church containing so many interesting features, no efforts should be spared to preserve everything of historical value, and nothing whatever should be done to the fabric, beyond what is absolutely necessary for its repair and preservation.

In places such repair is not only necessary, but urgent, and it will perhaps be better for the guidance of the architect who may hereafter be entrusted with the direction of the work, to state in the form of a Specification, such recommendations as appear to be called for in the present condition of the building.

1. *Roofs.* Both the north and south aisle roofs, which are covered with lead, must be repaired, but of course only one aisle should be taken in hand at a time, and no larger section of it should be uncovered than can be properly protected by tarpaulins.

The condition of the timbers of the nave and aisle roofs is unknown, but they will probably require some renewal and strengthening with iron bolts and struts.

The lead should be taken off, recast on the spot, and relaid in as short lengths as convenient (no sheet exceeding 8 feet), and in narrow widths of not more than 2 feet 6 inches between the rolls. The boarding on which it is laid, should be laid upon the old boarding, and should be of deal and not oak, as the tannic acid of the oak decomposes lead.

2. *Walls.* The east and south walls of the south aisle will require careful and skilful repair, but on no account should they be rebuilt, or any attempt be made to straighten the jambs of the east window, which have been curiously distorted by settlement.

A very serious mischief which has been done to the south-east corner of this south aisle, is chiefly due to the defects in its roof, and it has been greatly aggravated by the wet having got in and decayed a large beam which runs over the seventeenth century four-light window. This beam must of course be renewed. An oak beam

over the three-light Decorated window in the north aisle is also in a decaying state, and had better be replaced in the same way.

It will probably be wise in the case of the south aisle to build a substantial buttress in line with the east wall southwards. This buttress should be designed with a view of giving the *maximum* of strength, and at the same time making it clear that it is the work of this century.

There is no doubt whatever, that both the east and south walls can be considerably strengthened from the inside by cutting out defective work and building in layers of hard well-bonded material.

3. *Tower*. The most important and serious work to the whole church centres in the tower. This has been very seriously, but not irreparably, damaged by the ringing of improperly hung bells, and is not only cracked from top to bottom on its three free sides, but a bulge has begun to show itself at the south-west corner.

Until the work is taken in hand the bells ought not on any account to be rung, but only chimed.

In repairing the tower, the first thing to do will be to lower the bells and to take the bell cage to pieces, with a view of properly reframing it after the walls have been repaired.

The south-west angle of the tower should be carefully shored up to avoid any risk of movement in this direction, and possibly other shoring may be found to be necessary.

Where the cracks occur the core of the wall will require carefully cutting out in order that long-bonding stones may be built in. Possibly it will be found more convenient to build in courses of tiles, properly lapped and set in cement; but the details of this method of treatment must depend upon what is found necessary during the progress of the work. The object aimed at is to introduce horizontal ties going far enough across the cracks as well as through nearly the whole thickness of the wall to the outer facing, at 4 or 5 feet intervals in height. The work of putting in these bonders would begin at the bottom, and after the hole is cut, and before the bonders are put in, the rubble work below would be

thoroughly grouted and brought up to an even surface to receive the bonding course.

If this work is efficiently carried out, under proper supervision, the tower will be rendered perfectly secure, without any interference with its outward aspect.

It does not appear that failure of foundations is in any way the cause of the mischief which is found to exist in the tower. It might, however, be wise to uncover them so as to see whether any additional strengthening can with advantage be given.

After the masonry of the tower is made secure, the different floors should be repaired in oak, and the bell-cage properly reframed and re-erected in such a way that the upper sill of the cage is at least two inches clear of the walls all round. If this is properly done, the bells may be rehung and rung with safety, but it would be most undesirable to increase the number of the bells, for no risk should be run where such an unusually interesting tower is concerned. The window openings that are at present roughly blocked with rubble may be opened out and glazed, and the belfry windows filled with proper louvres.

4. *Paving.* There is no excuse for abandoning the present pavement. It is even doubtful whether it need be touched at all; but if anything be done, 2 or 3 yards should be taken up at a time, the ground beneath excavated for a depth of 8 inches, and the pavement carefully relaid as it was before on a 6-inch bed of cement concrete bedded on 2 inches of dry rubbish or broken stone. The gravestones should not on any account be displaced.

5. *Plastering of Walls.* Since it was the invariable practice of the old builders to plaster (and whitewash) their walls, great care should be taken to preserve all old wall plaster. The chancel walls have unfortunately been stripped and replastered, and now exhibit an example of the badness of modern plastering. This being so, it is still more important to preserve as far as possible all the plastering that now exists elsewhere in the church.

6. *Glazing.* The value of old clear glass in churches and secular buildings is often overlooked, and nothing can be worse than the modern tinted and so-called "cathedral" glass.

In this church there is good old clear glass in most of the windows, every pane of which should be carefully preserved. Where the lead work is defective it should be repaired by a competent glazier, *in the church*, so as to avoid taking the old glass away.

7. *Seats.* So many of the old seats as remain in place should be left exactly as they are, and nothing but necessary repairs done to them. The later enclosures that have been put up near the pulpit, on each side of the nave, should be carefully taken to pieces, and the old portions of the old pews out of which they are made should be put together again as far as possible, new oak being added where necessary, and the old series of pews again completed.

The low gallery under the tower should certainly be retained unaltered.

8. *Warming.* With regard to warming and ventilating the church, there can be no doubt that an underground heating chamber is most undesirable and unjustifiable, inasmuch as risk of damage to the foundations ought not to be run. A long experience has shown that ancient churches cannot be warmed and aired better and in a less unsightly way than by the use of a Gurney stove. It avoids the unsightliness of iron gratings in the floor, and it is cheaper and more effective than any underground system.

9. *Cleaning.* The walls and ceilings of the church inside should be thoroughly washed down, and considering the want of light in the building there can be no doubt whatever that it would be well to again whiten both walls and ceilings.

10. *Vestry.* To build a vestry on to *any part* of this valuable little church would be an unpardonable offence. The population of the parish is so small that space for vestry purposes within the existing building can easily be afforded. Small vestries added outside are objectionable for the practical reason that they are almost certain to be damp, whereas when formed by screening off part of the church, they are warmed and aired with the church. Moreover, the curtains used for screening off such a vestry afford a useful opportunity for introducing pleasant colour.

11. *Gutters and Spoutings.* All the down spouts

and gutters require careful attention and a considerable amount of renewal. The interesting old leaden shoots to the aisle roofs ought to be carefully repaired and retained.

W. H. ST. JOHN HOPE.

March 16th, 1897.

THE continuation of the papers by Mr. John L. Myres, M.A., F.S.A., on "The Church Plate of Buckinghamshire," has been unavoidably postponed. An important contribution to this subject from Mr. Myres, however, is in manuscript, and will be printed in the next year's number of THE RECORDS, being No. 1, Vol. VIII., of the Society's publication.

THE CHURCH BELLS OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

By ALFRED HENEAGE COCKS, M.A. (*Jarrold & Sons*).

THIS work, by Mr. Cocks, one of our Honorary Secretaries, has been published during the present year. It is in every way the most important archæological book relating to the county which has issued from the press since Lipscomb's History. A full review of the volume, by Mr. E. J. Payne, is to appear in next year's number of THE RECORDS.—ED.