

Abinger Church

An account of Abinger Church read by Mr. John A. Gibbs in the Church on August 18th 1943 to a large company of the Surrey Archaeological Society, who visited Wotton and Abinger that day.

I may mention to begin with that this Church at 551 feet above the sea is the third highest among the ancient churches of Surrey, Tatsfield and St. Martha's alone surpassing it, but of modern churches there are also Coldharbour and Ranmore.

I will now tell you what there is of antiquarian interest. First and foremost are the early Norman north and south walls of the nave; built of rubble, and with small round-headed windows, of which the three on the north side and the westernmost of the three on the south side are original (but repaired). The walls are nearly 4 feet thick up to the windows.

The Domesday Survey of 1086 records that there was a church here at that time. It is impossible, of course, to be quite certain that ours is that church, but good architects claim that it was, among them Gilbert Scott (Sir Gilbert later), who in about 1852 (when he was building Westcott Church) went so far as to express his belief that the nave is Saxon built; and in recent times the late Mr. Philip Johnston (expert on Surrey churches) always held that this is the Domesday church, not Saxon, but Norman, and built in about 1080.

Next in interest is the North Aisle, lying alongside the Chancel, a chapel which was no doubt dedicated to Our Lady, of which its rubble-built walls and its seven lancet windows were, according to some authorities, built as early as 1200, while none put them as later than 1240. It is commonly called the Patron's Chancel, since the Patron claimed it to be his private property, as in the case of similar chapels in many other churches, and at the restoration of our church in 1857 the Patron, Mr. W. J. Evelyn, did undertake that of this Aisle.

The tie-beams, king posts, rafters, and parts of the ceiling boards of the Nave are believed to be many, perhaps 600 or more, years old.

In the years 1935-38 the Horsham slabs of nave, aisle, and chancel were stripped off and decaying timbers thus disclosed were all put in order under the direction of the Diocesan architect and at the expense of nearly £900.

One of the three bells is inscribed: "Wm. Eldridge made me 1674." It marked perhaps final recovery from the spoliation of the Church in Edward the Sixth's time, when its three bells of that day, its plate, vestments, etc., were confiscated. The spire was added to the bell turret in about 1800, taking the place of a mere cap, such as there is on the turret of Wotton Church.

The present oak pulpit was made in 1857, but it has three well-carved panels of Renaissance date representing the Resurrection with the guard in Roman armour, the Annunciation, and the visit of the Shepherds,

The only other antiquities are the two Jacobean chairs in the Sanctuary, one of which was a modern gift, but the other may be an old possession of the Church.

The Church had a very extensive restoration and renovation in 1856-57 under the architect Henry Goodyer (he who later re-built St. Martin's, Dorking, with its splendid spire). There has been a succession of three chancels; the original Norman one was followed in the Thirteenth Century by the second, and the third is the present one, which replaced the second in 1857, the need for the rebuilding being due to the extreme weakness of the walls, in spite of the support of huge buttresses. The sedile and probably the dog-toothed string course in the present chancel were copied from the previous chancel. That chancel had a large "perpendicular" east window, but this had replaced the original lancets only in about 1750. In the present chancel the lancets reappear. The south wall of the thirteenth century chancel had a low side window and a priest's door, neither of which were replaced, but three windows were introduced into it. In 1880 the part of this south wall outside the Sanctuary was replaced by the present arcade, giving access to the organ chamber and south-east vestry, which were added to the church in that year alongside the chancel, Basil Champneys being the architect for these and other alterations in the church to be presently mentioned made in 1880. This south-east vestry is no longer used as such, a new and most spacious vestry opening out of the north aisle, alongside the nave, having been given by Mrs. Edwin Water-

house, of "Feldemore," in 1920, in memory of her husband, together with the remarkable bronze in it of the Crucifixion, the original of which was exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1851.

The arcade of three arches of thirteenth century appearance between the North Aisle and the Chancel is not original, but was a product of 1857 as to its two western arches and as to the eastern one of 1880. The latter forms the north side of the Sanctuary. It takes the place of a wall, behind which the eastern end of the aisle used to be used as a vestry with a door into it opened in 1800 in its north wall, but built up again in 1857, when the present exterior door at the west end of that north wall was made. It will be noticed that the present arcade embraces a bit of the nave besides the chancel, thus affording a passage from the said north door into the nave as well as the aisle. Before 1857 the nave wall reached to the chancel and was followed by an arcade of two arches only, the one round, the other pointed, reaching to the north wall of the Sanctuary.

It will be seen therefore that in 1857 the nave wall was cut back in order to create the passage I have mentioned.

In the south wall of the nave none of the present little round-headed windows was open at the time when the restoration of 1857 was contemplated. This wall had the existing 15th century "perpendicular" window at its east end, which window had probably been introduced to give light to an altar against the rood screen, which there must almost cer-

tainly have been (there is no indication that there ever was a rood-loft). Between that window and the porch-door there was a pair of long single-light "Early English" windows side by side, like a pair in Wotton Church, and over the door there was a window opened some few years before 1857 to give light to a singers' gallery across the west end of the Church. It is to be supposed that when the Early English windows and the gallery window were walled up in 1857 traces had been found of all three of the Norman windows which justified their being reconstructed. When the singers' gallery was removed a barrel organ was installed in the chancel instead of the band that played there with a bass-viol, clarionet, etc. It had two barrels with ten tunes on each.

It was in 1857 that the present oak pews were put in the nave, taking the place of large, square, high pews of deal irregularly distributed. I have already mentioned the new pulpit. Previously there was a Jacobean "three-decker" of pulpit with sounding board, reading desk, and clerk's desk.

I may mention as a curiosity that in the time of the Commonwealth the Rector and Churchwardens gave a lease of seat room adjoining the pulpit for 1000 years for £5 down and a peppercorn rent, and the deed is still extant, but the right is no longer claimed.

The floor of the Church used to slope all the way up from the west to the east end, a rise of two feet. This was corrected in 1857 by introducing the present steps. The whole Church was before that paved with brick and

with old, mostly broken, gravestones. All the gravestones were removed. Two of them, of black marble, were transferred to their present place, under the altar, the one of the Rev. T. Crawley, rector 1683-5, the other of his brother-in-law, the Rev. Robert Offley, rector for 52 years from 1690, a longer incumbency than that of any of our known rectors, the list of which begins in 1286 A.D. Offley was a contemporary of John Evelyn of Wotton, and is referred to in the "Diary" under 1699. One other of the floor stones is preserved, viz., a Sussex marble one to Ann Worsfold, who died in 1704, which is fixed to the outside of the Church near the north porch. In the nave and aisle plain tiles were substituted for the brick, and in the chancel the patterned encaustic ones that were so popular at that date.

The present oak choir stalls, the altar rails, the screen in front of the organ chamber, that between the sanctuary and the aisle, and the pews in the aisle all date from 1880, and the ends of the pews in the eastern part of the aisle are carved with the initials and crest of the Patron.

There used to be a west doorway in the nave, and a south doorway so narrow that it would not admit a bier. The west doorway was only used for funerals, and in 1857 it was built up, but the inner portion remains as a round-headed recess in the west Wall. The present south doorway, much wider than the old one, was then made, with mouldings in 13th century style, and the present porch in the same style was added, taking the place of a previous small brick porch.

The pointed north doorway of the Church, which opens into the aisle, as already mentioned, is ornamented outside with jamb shafts and foliate capitals, which appear to be ancient, and with zigzag ornament round the arch, which may be a "fake." Whence this doorway was introduced is unknown, but it is suggested that the ancient-looking parts, at any rate, may have been on the Priest's doorway, which it is known was at one time pointed though square-headed at the time of its abolition.

The west window of the nave was put in in 1880 to lighten the Church, being twice the size of a previous window in "perpendicular" style but of no antiquity.

You will have remarked the shattered condition of the east window of the chancel. This was due to the blast of exploding ammunition in a fire on the Common in May last year. This glass (put in in 1857) not being to present taste its destruction is not much regretted, as we hope to introduce something better after the war, and already have a fund for the purpose started by compensation that we have received from the War Office. The most pleasing coloured glass in the Church is that of the 3-light window in the south wall of the nave, which is by Morris from a design by Burne-Jones.

The 13th century styled font and its oak cover were introduced in 1857. The bottom of its basin is formed by the previous font's white marble bowl removed from the stone pedestal on which it stood in a pew under the north wall.

Of the mural monuments, I have only time to mention a few. The inscription on a white marble one to Commodore Robinson, who died in 1803, records that he made a survey of the coast between India and the Persian Gulf, the first that was undertaken since that made by Alexander the Great's Admiral, Nearchus. There are brasses to the first Lord Abinger (of the Abinger Hall of that day) and to several members of his family, among them one to General Sir James Yorke Scarlett, of Crimean War fame.

The lychgate was made in 1880.

In the churchyard you will see in the part south of the Church the memorial cross of the 1914-18 war, which was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens.

In conclusion, Mr. Gibbs read a paragraph from his booklet, "Abinger Parish Church," explaining how it is probable that St. James, the Patron of pilgrims, was adopted for the Patron Saint both of this and Shere churches at the time of the very extensive alterations made in both of them in the 13th century, at which time the flow of pilgrims from England to St. James' shrine in Spain was at its height, and the popularity of pilgrimages to St. Thomas a Becket's shrine at Canterbury was growing fast, the pilgrims travelling perhaps, as many hold, by the "Pilgrims' Way" through Abinger and Shere, as shown in our Ordnance maps.