

STEWKLEY CHURCH,

PAST AND PRESENT.

PAPER READ BEFORE THE SOCIETY BY REV. C. H.
TRAVERS, VICAR OF STEWKLEY.

The village of Stewkley is situated upon the high ground which divides the drainage of the Ousel and the Thames; devoid of objects of general interest to the antiquarian or the geologist, there is one peculiar characteristic which renders the name of Stewkley familiar to all lovers of Ecclesiastical Architecture, possessing as this village does, a Church, the first entitled to notice as Lysons remarks, on account of its antiquity and curiosity, and

“The Rival of Iffley among the most ancient and most perfect Norman structures in England.”

Though sometimes quoted as a *Saxon* building, there is nothing to justify the supposition that the Church is other than a very early Norman building, dating, as far as can be ascertained, towards the close of the Eleventh Century, dedicated to St. Michael—it is certain that in the year 1170, the Church was given to the Priory of Kenilworth by Geoffry de Clinton.

The form of the Church is a parallelogram of four squares—two belonging to the nave, one to the tower, and one to the chancel, each about twenty-one feet long, the nave twenty-one feet six inches in width, the tower and the chancel eighteen feet wide. The tower, which rises from the centre or nearly so of the building, is supported on massive semicircular arches, springing from piers nearly four feet in thickness, having at the angles circular columns with wrought capitals and bases, each capital of different design, channelled, foliated, or fluted. The *west* fronts of these arches are richly carved in beak heads and grotesque figures, with a double chevron bor-

der, the heads or tongues overlapping a bold bead moulding; at the *east* front the arches present only a simple zig-zag moulding.

The *Chancel* has a groined roof, originally all of stone, but the weight of the roof having been supposed to endanger the walls, the stone of the vaultings between the ribs was removed some years since and replaced with brick.

The groins are set diagonally, composed of stones of white and slate colour, in alternate courses, enriched with a deeply cut zig-zag moulding.

At the north side of the Chancel is an oblong recess cut into the wall, four feet five inches in length, sixteen inches high, by eighteen inches in depth, about three feet from the floor level. This is supposed to have been used as an Aumbry.

At the south side is a piscina with a pointed arch, surmounted by a plain arched moulding. In front of this piscina, of which a portion of the drain stone has been cut away, runs a plain bench of rough masonry of equal height throughout its whole length, measuring six feet four inches by one foot four inches, which has formed a *Sedile*. The bench terminates towards the west with a massive stone elbow.

The windows throughout the Church are uniform, about six feet high and two feet three inches in width, splaying inwards to the width of four feet and a half, enriched internally and externally by double rows of chevron moulding. The east window is remarkable for its *external* appearance. Three arches ornamented with a double zig-zag moulding, and supported by circular columns in pairs, form an arcade, the centre compartment alone being pierced and forming the window, which internally corresponds with those in the rest of the building.

A frieze of zig-zag moulding, in blocks of chunk stone, irregularly cut, is carried along the walls both inside and outside the Church, at a height of about eight and a half feet from the ground, turning in semi-circular arches over all the door-ways.

The Tower, which is about fifty-seven feet in height, is characteristic, though presenting in the gothic pinnacles which disfigure the corners symptoms of the love of change, which, irrespective of architectural feature, marked a certain era in history.

Attached to a string course or moulding, are projecting gurgoyles, one at each angle of the tower, and one in the centre of each front, four of them being the symbols of the Four Evangelists. About eighteen inches below this plinth, is a series of semi-circular arches, interlaced and decorated with a zig-zag moulding, resting on short round columns with wrought capitals.

The north door of the nave hitherto blocked up, is ornamented with a double chevron moulding resting on single pillars with sculptured capitals.

The south door of the nave has also a double chevron moulding, surmounted by a thick bead moulding ornamented with a series of "ball flowers," the pillars supporting the arch are in pairs—the capitals richly sculptured. One on the west side representing a cat's head, that on the east side deeply channelled.

The west front entrance is a curious and interesting specimen of Norman work. There are three arches (forming an arcade somewhat similar to that noticed at the east window). The centre arch forms the doorway, and is loftier and wider than the side arches; it is deeply recessed, each arch surmounted by the chevron moulding. The inner recess enriched with a triple row, and resting upon double columns, the inner column at either side being specially wreathed and the capitals sculptured with a dragon, lion, and foliage.

The centre arch is curiously subdivided by a stone, acting as a kind of key-stone and hanging several inches below the arch, the upper portion of this stone is sculptured with figures of dragons beneath vine foliage; between the doorway and the side arches are pilasters about nine inches wide, flanked by single columns with sculptured capitals. Within this entrance is the *Font* formed out of a single block of stone, columnar, splaying out considerably towards the top, and without any enrichment whatever, twenty-six inches in height and thirty in diameter at the top, and about five inches thick.

The Communion Plate consists of a plain chalice of silver, with the name of the Rector John Pilkington, and the Churchwardens Thomas Prentice, Willam Grace, and the date 1671. A silver Patten with this inscription "May it be accepted as the humble Gift of Elizabeth Gurney, for the use of the Sacred Temple of God at Stuckley, 1744."

There are neither monuments, brasses, nor painted glass in the Church.

The earliest register dates 1547, and among the Vicars of Stewkley we find the names,—

Hubert de Constance, presented in 1226, by the Convent of Kenilworth.

Hugh de Cantelupe, instituted 1256, Archdeacon of Gloster and Prebend of York.

Sir William Yardley, instituted 1506, who by will 1545, directed his interment in the Chancel, and gave to the High Alter a Pound of Wax to burn at all convenient times before the Sacrament.

John Fox, 1545, supposed to be the Martyrologist.

Lawrence Roley, 1554, instituted by the first Bishop of Oxford.

Richard Corbett, 1620, made Bishop of Oxford 1628, and Bishop of Norwich in 1632.

Thomas Potter, 1722, brother of John Bishop of Oxford, 1715—1737.

It may be well here to notice such alterations in the building and its arrangements as can be traced, though in the absence of any authentic accounts, to fix the exact periods of such changes is impossible. Upon the tower are now at each angle pinnacles with a double pointed arch traced on each face of the base, the outer edges being ornamented with crockets with poppy-head finials.

The roofs of both Nave and Chancel were lowered from the original pitch marked by the water-table on the face of the tower. A piece of the old wall plate recently taken down, bore the date 1684, marked in pitch. A Porch of very rude structure has been at some recent date added to the south entrance.

These comprise the external alterations. Internally it appears that until the year 1833, the Church was arranged with open oak benches, in the backs and ends of which were holes and rings through which, tradition says, were passed the halters of the horses belonging to Cromwell's troops, who are said to have converted this Church into a temporary stable. In 1833, these seats were removed and replaced by deal pews. The Font was at this time built up in a square pew, the base completely buried in the floor, and a most unsightly gallery erected at the west end. Until 1833 it appears there was in the tower a

gallery, partly fitted up with seats and partly acting as a scaffold platform upon which the bell-ringers stood. It was elevated about ten feet from the floor of the Church, extended along the whole north side of the tower, and returning across the eastern archway, completely shut out the Chancel. It had (as I am informed) the date 1621 upon it, and was probably a substitute for the rood loft which evidently existed, from the pointed doorway discovered leading from the tower belfry stairs.

In 1844 the Chancel seems to have been repaired, the stones of the groined roof having been considered too heavy for the walls, and having partly given way at the north east side were removed, leaving the ribs alone remaining, and the vaultings between rebuilt in the same character but with brick. The walls were pinned together with iron rods, and two most unsightly brick buttresses erected at each exterior angle of the Chancel.

Subsequently an altar-rail was placed, a new floor laid, and other manifest improvements took place. Some few alterations were made in 1860, such as the removal of the immense "reading desk" and clerk's desk, the lowering of the pulpit, and removing it out of the tower, the placing of the seats in tower, east and west, &c.

In 1862, a complete restoration of the Church was carried out, under the superintendence of G. E. Street, Esq. The roofs of nave and tower were raised to the original pitch (as marked by the water table on the tower), the stucco removed from east and west walls (it was found impracticable to take it off north and south walls, they being built of rubble). The curious western entrance cleaned of the plaster which concealed its beauty. New buttresses have taken the place of the useless brick structures already mentioned at the angles of the Chancel wall.

During the progress of the works, the figures in alabaster shewn in annexed plate, were discovered buried in the step of a *door-way*, in the west face of the Tower (now opening into the Church above the west Tower arch, but formerly leading out upon the flat roof).

The tiles of which a sketch is given, five in number, were found buried under the Chancel floor, near a small portion of a stone plinth running along the north side for about the length of eight feet.

A stone eight feet six by two feet three and a half, with floriated cross as seen in sketch, was found under the floor by south wall of nave, turned with the cross downwards.

The Church internally has been reseated with suitable open benches, walnut wood pillars being introduced into the oak choir stalls, with good effect.

The chevron and curious beak-head mouldings of the arches, windows, and string courses, have been cleaned and come out in great preservation, relieved of the plaster and successive coats of lime-wash with which they were encased. A massive stone pulpit, new lectern and altar, and reredos in alabaster and marbles, a pavement of encaustic tiles and Portland stone, and an east window (by Clayton and Bell) representing the closing scenes in the life of our Saviour, render this interesting old Church more in accordance with the sacred uses to which it is dedicated, and gratifying to the lover of our ancient historical monuments.

ENGRAVINGS OF STEWKLEY CHURCH.

This fine Norman Church from its wide celebrity and unaltered style of Architecture has been frequently engraved,—

- I. In 1784, S. Hooper published a View of the edifice taken from the North West, and described STVCLE CHURCH. BUCKS.
- II. In 1806, the Messrs. Lysons engraved three plates from their own drawings for *The Magna Britannia*,
 1. GROUND PLAN OF THE CHURCH; WITH THE ARCHES AND CAPITALS OF PILLARS AT THE WEST END.
 2. CHANCEL OF STEWKLEY CHURCH.
 3. SOUTH EAST VIEW OF STEWKLEY CHURCH.
- III. In 1807, Two fresh Views appeared in Britton's *Architectural Antiquities*.
 1. A North West View engraved by B. Howlett, from a Drawing by W. Alexander.
 2. A South East View etched by J. Raffe from a Sketch by J. Britton with a Ground Plan, scale 10 feet to the inch.
- IV. In 1847, Dr. Lipscombe published a lithographed View of the Chancel, taken from the Nave, and showing the Chancel Arch, Groins of the roof and East window. *History of Buckinghamshire*, vol. iii. page 474.

And besides the foregoing, the Font is engraved in the *Archæologia* vol. x. plate 17; and a general view of the Church in Petit's *Remarks on Architectural Character*. With these engravings in Works easily accessible, it has not been necessary to add further Illustrations to those inserted in the Paper of the Rev. C. H. Travers, Vicar of Stewkley, now printed at the request of the Members of the Society.

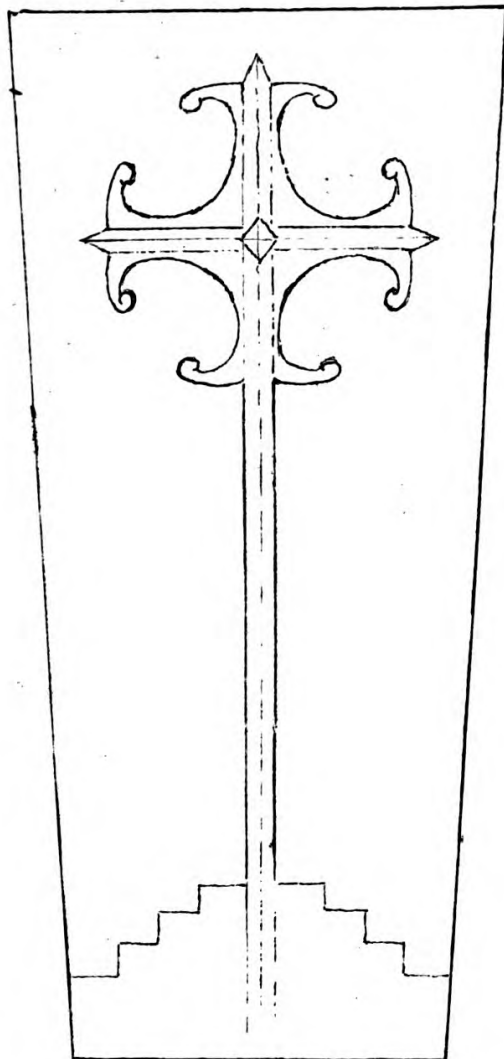
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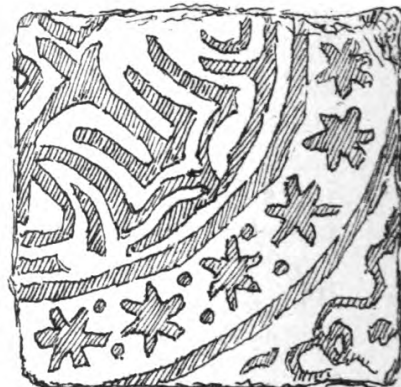
Sculpture in Alabaster found in Stewkley Church.



Sculpture in Alabaster found in Stewkley Church.



Found buried under the floor of the nave of Stewkley Church.



Tiles found in the Chancel of Stewkley Church.