

DESECRATED CHURCHES IN BUCKS.

(Continued from Vol. ii., p. 205.)

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DEANERY OF WYCOMBE.*

Fourteen ancient churches or chapels, at least, within the old Deanery of Wycombe have been destroyed or converted to secular purposes. Of these, six were in the parish of Wycombe, and will doubtless be described by Mr. Payne in his paper on that town. Leaving these, then, to him, the first parish in alphabetical order here to be noticed is Hughenden. On or near a manor in this parish, called Overhall, there has, doubtless, been a chapel, though the existing notices of it are very slight. There is a meadow still bearing the name of "Chapel Platt," and a hill that of "Chapel Hill," and the name "Chapellhill" appears in the Hughenden Court Roll of A.D. 1654. A chapel standing on the hill here, indicated by the name, would have been very convenient for a large hamlet, called "North Dean," which is two miles from the parish church.

Marlow had three chapels within the parish.

Besides a chantry chapel attached to the parish church, there was one connected with a hermitage, which is still indicated by the names "Chapel Street" and "Chapel End," but I have not been able to learn more about it.

The old manor-house of Harleyford had a chapel belonging to it, which is thus noticed by Langley in his history of Desborough Hundred:—"Tucker Bold had a grant from John, Bishop of Lincoln, July 16th, A.D. 1542, to allow him to have a priest to officiate within his chapel at Harleythorpe, within his manor there, on account of

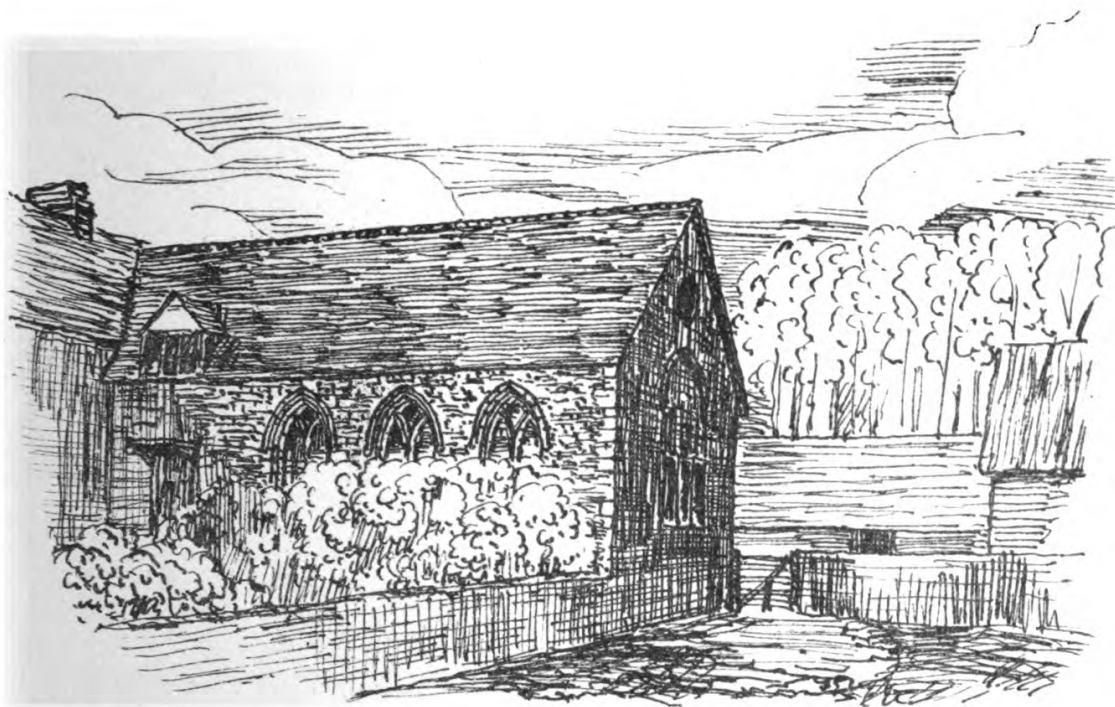
* Since the notes were taken for this series of papers, a new arrangement of the deaneries has been made. The Deanery of Wycombe has been abolished, and is now included in that of Amersham.

the distance of the parish church." Langley, afterwards speaking of the old manor-house, says, "this chapel was used till the whole was pulled down in 1755, when a handsome regular mansion was erected on the same spot." This was, doubtless, merely a private chapel for the use of the mansion, and the cottages connected with it.

We now come to a more interesting notice.

Widmer, another manor in the same parish, once contained a hamlet of some extent, but has now only one farm-house, part of which is formed out of an ancient chapel. This chapel, which stands east and west, and forms a right angle with the rest of the building, still retains much of its former ecclesiastical character. A considerable portion, if not the whole of the original roof and walls remain, and shows that it consisted of a nave and chancel of remarkably good proportions. The walls are well built of rubble, strengthened with stone quoins at the angles. The east window has been blocked up, but from the hood moulding and the internal stumps of tracery which still exist, it has evidently been a decorated window of three lights. Above it, in the gable, is a small vesica window of early date, but the mouldings having perished, it is not easy to determine its exact period. On the south side are the remains of three decorated windows, two of which retain the hoods, jambs, mullions, and tracery, and the third has portions of them. A modern door has been inserted in the wall, and a bed-room window in the roof. On the north side are two narrow circular-headed windows of the Norman or transition period. They are now blocked up. The chapel has been converted into two stories of domestic rooms, and so far as could be ascertained, all ecclesiastical relics within have long since perished or been removed.

Beneath the chapel there is a fine old crypt in a fair state of preservation. It is of equal dimensions with the floor of the building, being thirty-eight feet long by seventeen feet two inches wide, and consists of two aisles divided by four arches, resting on massive round pillars. The pillars, which are plain, and five feet in circumference, stand on plinths, equally devoid of ornament, and have a simple necking with octagonal capitals. The vaulting across the aisles is so slightly curved that the middle of the arch is only one foot seven inches higher than the



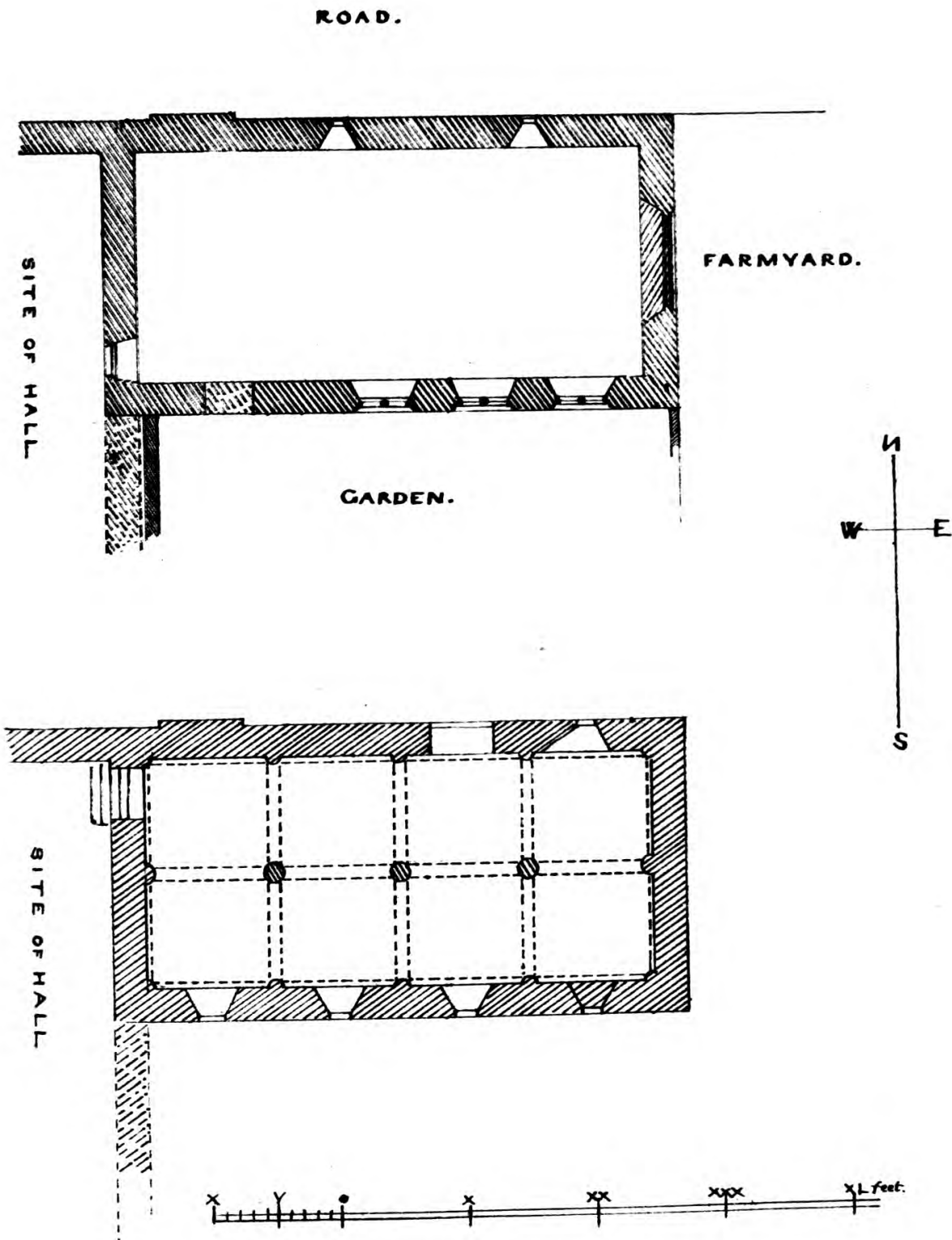
View of Chapel



View of Undercroft

Bemrose & Sons, Derby

Records of Bucks, Vol. 3.



+ Plan of the Chapel and Undercroft
at Widmore Manor, Great Marlow,
Bucks. October 1863.

Edward J. Payne, architect

Records of Bucks, Vol

level of the capitals, though the span of the arch is eight feet. The roof, which is not groined, is formed of rough, unshaped pieces of chalk, and strengthened with plain ribs running parallel to each other from the pillars to small responds in the wall with circular caps rudely moulded. There have been four splayed windows on the south side, and one on the north. There is also on the north a recess which appears to have been an entrance, but the only present entrance is at the west end by a flight of stone steps, which, however, appear coeval with the crypt.

The architecture of this interesting edifice evidently belongs to two periods. The two north windows and the crypt may safely be assigned to the close of the twelfth century, or the beginning of the thirteenth; while the east and south windows, which are clearly of the decorated style, must have been inserted at least a century later.

A few words may now be said respecting the erection of this chapel. It is two miles and a half from the parish church, but the farm-house adjoining it is the only dwelling in the neighbourhood. On referring, however, to the manorial history, we find that when the Domesday survey was taken Widmer was a hamlet containing fourteen villeins and six borderers; thus making twenty families, amounting probably to about one hundred souls, besides those in the mansion, which doubtless occupied the site of the present farm-house. Such a population would, in those days, be considered amply sufficient for the erection of a chapel-of-ease; but no such chapel is mentioned in the Domesday notice, nor does any part of the present chapel appear to have been built till about a century later, at which time the manor of Widmer was in the possession of the Knights Templars, and continued in their possession till about A.D. 1320. To the Templars, therefore, we may safely assign the earliest portions of this chapel, and conclude that the crypt was designed as their chapter-house, for they are well known to have held their chapters with the strictest secrecy. From the Templars Widmer passed, about the year 1320, to the Hospitallers, who doubtless inserted the decorated windows, and repaired other portions of the chapel in the same style.

There are some peculiar features in the architecture of this chapel which deserve notice. The flatness of the vaulting of the crypt, and the octagonal capitals of the

pillars seem not to accord with the apparent date of the rest of the building, and the early English windows on the north side of the chapel are splayed in a peculiar manner.

In Langley's time the chapel was used as a brewhouse ; it is now converted into habitable rooms, and the crypt into a dairy and wine-cellar.

Medmenham had, beside the parish church, a church attached to the abbey and a chapel-of-ease. The Abbey Church, which was standing in A.D. 1718, when Brown Willis visited it, has been since entirely demolished, having now only the fragment of a pillar standing. A chapel formerly existed at Hollowick, near Wood End, a small hamlet about two miles from the parish church. The chapel has long since been swept away, but its site is still indicated by a field called "Chapel-field."

Saunderton, though a small village, with a population of only two hundred and thirty-two souls, and probably never containing many more, had formerly two churches, St. Nicholas's and St. Mary's, each a distinct rectory with a separate endowment. Langley and Lipscombe give a list of the successive rectors of each church from the year 1276 to 1452. These churches, though standing near each other, were on separate manors belonging to different lords, each of whom had the patronage of the rectory on his own manor. In or about the year 1455 the two manors and advowsons passed into the hands of the same proprietor, the two rectories were then united and presented to William Tybard as sole incumbent. The church of St. Mary was alone used for divine worship, and that of St. Nicholas was suffered to fall into ruin. Not a vestige of the sacred edifice now exists, and its exact site is uncertain. In the year 1807, when an enclosure took place, some old foundations were discovered in a garden belonging to a small public-house, and many human bones and skeletons, says Lipscombe, were dug up here, and in some osier beds which are now covered with water. Many years afterwards, and during the incumbency of the present rector, a stone coffin containing two skeletons was found in the same garden, "which," observes my informant, "is unusually fertile." This garden, then, thus fertilised by human remains, is doubtless the site of the demolished church.

The two churches at Saunderton present an uncommon, but by no means a solitary case. Barton, a village in the North Riding of Yorkshire, has two churches standing contiguous to each other; Wigston, in Leicestershire, from the same circumstance, has acquired the name of Wigston two steeples; Swaffham, in Cambridgeshire, has two churches standing in the same churchyard; and Reepham, in Norfolk, had formerly three fine churches all standing in one churchyard. Such cases appear to us anomalous, and they would be so, were our ancient churches founded, as some persons suppose, by a national grant, or in any way at the public expense. But a little knowledge of history enables us to account for these cases. The fact is that our old churches, except some few in cities and large towns, were in reality founded for manors, and not for parishes. The lord of a manor, by his own voluntary act, built and endowed a church, generally near to his own residence, for the use of his household and of those living on his adjacent estates. Thus we often find churches standing at a distance from the village, but near the site of an ancient manor-house, as at Wendover, Weston Turville, Stoke Mandeville, Drayton Beauchamp, etc. Where there were two or more manors in a parish or district belonging to different lords, it was usual for them to join in founding a church for their respective household and dependents; but occasionally, where from some private feud or other cause, they could not amicably unite in the work, yet, being zealous Churchmen, and desirous to provide their respective dependents with the means of religious worship, each of these lords founded a separate church for the residents on his own manor; as at Saunderton, where each church stood on a separate manor, and at Reepham, where all three churches stood in one churchyard, we are yet expressly informed that they severally belonged to the three lordships of Reepham, Hackford, and Whitwell, in the same parish. But the natural evils of such a practice soon became apparent. Originating, as it generally did, in strife and jealousy between the founders, it soon engendered similar feelings between the incumbents and between their respective flocks, so that neither party could carry out effectually any plans for the general good of the parish. Such advowsons were therefore usually soon consolidated and

placed under the charge of one incumbent, who, using only the best church, or that most convenient for his parishioners, the other fell into decay, as was the case with Saunderton. We cannot regret the union of two such rivals, nor wonder that a disused church could not weather the storms of church-destroying periods, but our feelings are shocked at Christian cemeteries being converted into gardens.

Wooburn, the next and last parish to be noticed, has been deprived of two consecrated chapels. One of them adjoined the mansion belonging to Deyncourt Manor, and was a cruciform structure, thirty-six feet long and twenty-four feet wide. I have not been able to ascertain any particulars respecting its foundation, but portions of it are still traceable in the windows and roof of a building adjoining the Deyncourt almshouse. But there are no indications of interments ever having taken place here.

The other chapel was connected with the episcopal palace, which, for several centuries, was one of the favourite residences of the Bishops of Lincoln.

In the seventeenth century this palace and manor became the property of Philip, Lord Wharton, and during the Commonwealth, and till nearly the close of the century, this episcopal chapel was used by a Nonconformist congregation. It continued in existence till A.D. 1750, when the whole mansion was pulled down; but "the chapel," says Langley, who wrote in 1797, was "still spoken of by aged people in terms of admiration."

The parish of Wooburn, according to the "Diocesan Calendar" for the present year (1863), contains 2300 inhabitants, and church room for only 360, so that these demolished chapels, which would probably have accommodated at least 100 more, might have been made very serviceable to the parish, especially as that adjoining the palace, stood near Wooburn Green, which of itself is a moderately-sized village, and now a railroad station. Indeed, the present Vicar of Wooburn has found it so desirable to hold services in various parts of his parish, that he has constructed a moveable chapel, which is wheeled about from hamlet to hamlet, as he finds it convenient and desirable.

When I began this series of papers on the Desecrated Churches of this County, I knew but of about forty that

would come within its scope. Further investigation, as is generally the case, has discovered to me several more. Already I have noticed thirty-seven, and have still by me notes on about twenty more, so that the whole number may safely be estimated at sixty. Now, suppose each of these lost chapels would hold on an average fifty persons, the county has thus lost church room for 3000 worshippers, while the population, during their gradual destruction, has been steadily and largely increasing. From its migratory nature it must be admitted that some of these chapels were no longer needed in their respective localities; but while they have heedlessly been allowed to pass away, no others, or scarcely any, have been built to provide for the immense increase of population in other parts. Nor is this all. Hitherto I have noticed only such churches and chapels as have been destroyed, or converted to secular purposes. But there are other ways of desecrating churches. They may become so dilapidated, so disfigured, so secularized as to have no appearance of sacred edifices. Windows and doors may be blocked up; arches and pillars be cut away to fix up unsightly galleries; mouldings and sculpture may be plastered over to save the expense of repairs; fonts may be "beautified," as I have known them, with blue and red paint, and, worse still, used as cupboards for candle-ends and tinder-boxes, or filled with fragments of sculpture and memorial brasses. And even worse, I have known the communion-table used as a writing-desk for Sunday-school children, and at vestry-meetings. But enough of this. It is a painful subject. How refreshing to turn our thoughts to a brighter prospect. A spirit of reverence for churches has been awakened throughout the country, and it is gratifying to see our own county among the foremost to manifest this spirit. Something has already been done towards repairing the evils of past desecrations. Within the last ten years no less than twelve new churches have been founded, five have been rebuilt, and forty-five have been restored, making a total of sixty-two churches, which may almost be regarded as so many houses of prayer regained. For consider how much is implied in the word "restored." It implies not only that a church has been thoroughly and substantially repaired, but that it has been recovered from a state more or less resem-

bling what I have described as a partially desecrated condition. Any instance of reformation would suffice to exemplify this. Let us take that of our county town, St. Mary's Church, Aylesbury. When I first knew that church, it was not only in a dangerous state of dilapidation, but it was deformed in almost every possible way within the sacred walls. The pillars of the nave had fallen from the perpendicular, their capitals had been broken and cut away to fix up clumsy galleries. The pulpit, reading-desk, and pews were all as ugly as can well be conceived; beautiful arches and mouldings were concealed by plaster; a huge, dirty-looking, singing loft hid the beautiful lantern tower; and heaps of rotten boards and rubbish, lying here and there, with the effluvia arising from ill-covered graves below, rendered the church not only unsightly, but actually pestiferous. Now it is the gem of our county churches. All its original beauties have been disclosed and renovated; where requisite new ones have been judiciously added. I remember a lovely arcade in the north wall of the chancel being discovered, but the corresponding one on the south side had been completely destroyed. The original one has now been skilfully restored, and a new one, in perfect harmony, has been added on the opposite wall. Stained glass windows, well designed and executed, have superseded the former ones throughout the chancel, and most other parts of the church. All the beautiful arches and pillars, with their rich mouldings, have been renewed. The old pulpit, galleries, and pews are gone, and the whole church from east to west has a truly ecclesiastical, and hallowed, and reverential aspect. The symmetry of the entire edifice, and the harmony of its arrangements and decoration, are striking. But there is nothing gaudy, no fantastic embellishments. It charms and elevates the mind by its beauty, its chasteness, its purity, by the air of stillness and solemnity which pervades it, and by its sacred memorials and associations. All its details combine to invest it with the unmistakable character of a hallowed edifice, consecrated to the service of Him who hath said, "Reverence my sanctuary."

"We cannot, of course, expect to find in village churches the same amount of ornament and amplitude of arrangement; but if properly restored they inspire the

same feelings of reverence and devotion. It has also been found that every case of church restoration has led to a marked increase of interest and veneration on the part of the parishioners, and a large addition to the number of the worshippers within its walls.

Let these facts stimulate us to redoubled exertions. Let us not rest till every church in our county has been reverentially restored, and every hamlet or district where a new church is required be duly provided for. Then, and not till then, shall we have done what in us lies towards remedying the evils of past apathy and desecration. And then may we, with a clear conscience, say or sing—

“These temples of his grace,
How beautiful they stand!
The honours of our native place,
The bulwarks of our land.”
