

ST. MARY'S CHURCH, CHESHAM, BUCKS.

BY MR. JOHN CHAPPLE.

The Church of Chesham Leicester, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which has recently undergone extensive repair and entire refitting under the direction of George Gilbert Scott, Esq., R.A., was re-opened, December 9th, 1869, by the Lord Bishop of Oxford, being his last act in the diocese previous to his translation to the see of Winchester. It is a cruciform structure, and consists of a nave with north and south aisles, central tower, north and south transepts, and choir or chancel. There are also a south porch with parvise and turret adjoining the same.

The present church is erected on a site, on part of which formerly stood a structure differing materially in plan and, of course, in architectural detail.

The ancient church consisted of tower, transepts, nave, and choir; the whole of which have disappeared, with the exception of a part of the north transept, in the west wall of which is half of a Norman window, dating from the early part of the twelfth century.

The external length of the whole building from east to west is 132 feet 6 inches; width between the outer faces of transept walls, 66 feet; width across the nave and aisles internally, 51 feet 11 inches; height of tower, 64 feet; and of tower and spire, 103 feet 9 inches. The axis of the chancel points 10° to the south of east.

In the early part of the thirteenth century a reconstruction of the whole structure was made; the north and south walls of the nave were demolished, and in their place were erected five bays and also north and south aisles: these latter were subsequently altered, as will be hereafter noticed. Evidence of the simultaneous erection of these parts is shown particularly by the continuation of the same line of ashlar from the nave, including a lancet window at the west end of the north aisle. Traces have also been found of a triple lancet in the west wall of the nave.

At this time also the western wall of the north transept was pierced for a pointed arch in order to gain access to the north aisle, the insertion of which neces-



Chesham Church 1870.

sitated the removal of a portion of the jamb of the Norman window before-mentioned.

Later in the same century the old Norman tower was demolished and another erected in the Early English style, but with more elaborate mouldings in the arches and pier-caps than are shown in the arcades. This was built as high as the present string-course under the bell-chamber, and is a portion of that now standing.

At that period towers of this form and height served as lanterns, and were open from the floor to the belfry, and in some instances to the roof; their position formed a line of demarcation between the church of the clergy, who officiated in the choir (or chancel), tower, and transepts, and that of the laity who occupied all the western portion.

On the nave side of the tower an oak screen was placed, with a rood-loft over; a fragment of which is still in existence. Access was obtained to this rood-loft from the south transept by turret stairs, which were blocked up for the safety of the superstructure about a century and half back.

We now pass to the period when the late or florid Decorated style prevailed, viz., the fourteenth century, more particularly during the reigns of Edward II., Edward III., and Richard II.

At this date the porch and chancel were erected on their present sites, the south aisle rebuilt in a modified form by widening the western portion, and a decorated window inserted in the east wall of each transept. Two angle buttresses were added to the north transept, and one to the south. On the south aisle buttresses are several sun-dials cut in the stone. The knapped flint facing of the south transept is very good.

This was a period when Gothic architecture flourished, and according to the opinion of eminent archæologists, had attained its greatest enrichment. The tracery of the windows in the chancel, and those above-mentioned in the transepts, is very good; and the inner doorway of the porch is a fine specimen of moulding, with ball-flower decoration.

The ceiling of the porch is groined, and has a priests' room or parvise over, which is approached from the interior by a turret stair. Local tradition states that it

was in this room that "Harding the Martyr" was confined previous to his immolation at the stake.

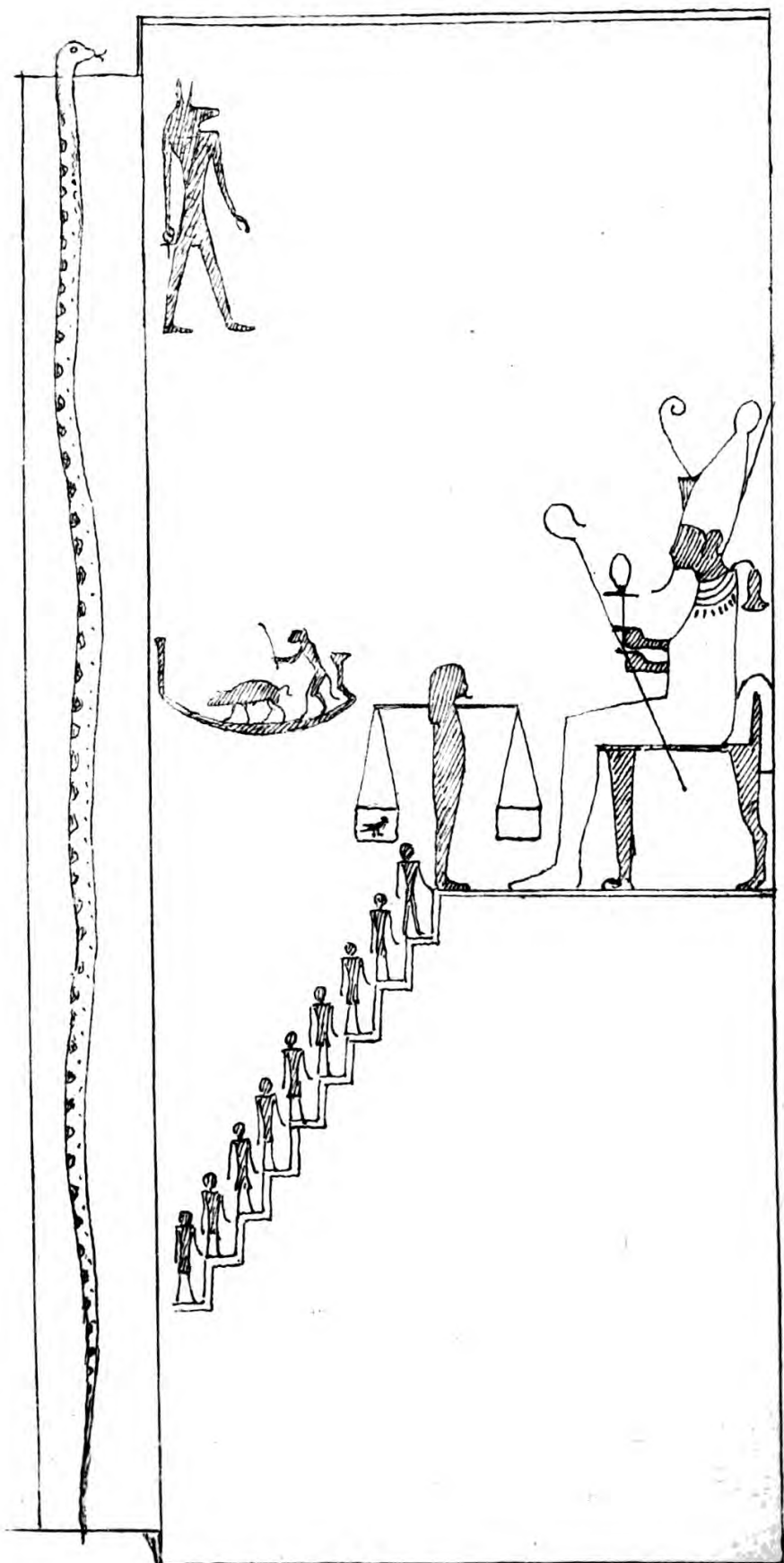
The stoup in the east wall of the porch remains. It is of great beauty, and has a carved crucifix in basso-relievo, now much mutilated, as a finial.

The piscina in the chancel is also a good specimen of Decorated architecture.

Beneath the west lights of each of the western windows in the north and south walls of the chancel, is a small square window with saddle-bars and double stanchions. These are considered to have been either offertory or lepers' windows. They were closed with a shutter, and when closed, had a bar inserted inside, dropping into iron catches as a fastening. The iron catches in one window remain, and when the north window was discovered, the decayed wooden shutter also was there, but it crumbled at the touch. There is, however, some evidence of glazing, for the glass groove remains in the stonework, and the rebate for the shutter is on the inside of this.

There are specimens of such windows in a somewhat different form at Itchingfield, Sussex; at Frinsted, Kent; and a more remarkable one at Doddington in the latter county. In some instances, when in this position, they were termed lychnoscopes, and were used for the purpose of observing the high altar from the outside of the church.

Having traced the various alterations and additions to the structure to the close of the Decorated period, we enter on that of the Perpendicular, when the building underwent material alteration. Up to this time, the fifteenth century, the various divisions of the church had pointed roofs, the stone housing courses of which remain on the four sides of the tower; these roofs were removed except that on the chancel; a clerestory was added to the nave with five perpendicular windows on each side, the tower was heightened twenty feet, an embattled parapet added, and the whole surmounted by an octagonal wooden, lead-covered spire, terminating with a vane and cross. The transept walls were also heightened two feet, low-pitched roofs placed on the nave and transepts, and single lean-to roofs on the aisles. It is also presumed that from some cause, probably from decay, the whole of the north wall of the north aisle had to be demolished,



Judgement scene on Sarcophagus in Sir John Soane's museum.



Fresco found over North door in Chesham Church.

and it was rebuilt nearer the arcade, thereby narrowing the aisle to a dimension of eight feet. The original outer foundations of the Early English period have been discovered. Three two-light square-headed Perpendicular windows and a door were there inserted. The roofs of this period, on the transepts and a portion of the south aisle, remain, and are good specimens of ancient work. The nave was also roofed and moulded as the south transept, but it (the roof) was removed in the eighteenth century. The large five-light west window of the nave was now inserted in the place of the Early English triplet; also windows with elliptic heads in the north and south walls of transepts respectively. A curious feature also was the destruction of the mullions and tracery of the Decorated windows in the south aisle, and the insertion within the old jambs of perpendicular work: a cornice and parapet were added to the south and west fronts, with pointed gablets to the buttresses.

A fresco of this date was on the north wall, over the door, representing an angel with a beam or balance in his hand appearing to the Virgin. The balance was tilted, and on the upper or lighter end an imp was seated. The whole is supposed to have been a representation of the weighing of souls in the balance, and of the Virgin interceding for them.* This fresco is now destroyed by the removal of the wall, but a full-size copy was taken before its destruction. It may not be amiss to mention here

* The subject of this fresco, conveying Christian notions to the peasants at Chesham about A.D. 1400, is but a reproduction of the same idea of the Judgment scene which was inscribed 3000 years before, or B.C. 1600, on the sarcophagus of the Pharaoh, the father of the Pharaoh of the Exodus according to all the Egyptologists of France, Germany, and Italy. Champillion interpreted this picture as representing Osiris, as judge of the dead, having the souls of the people of all the nine grades of society weighed before him. One soul, as signified by the bird in the balance, is being weighed. Another soul has been put into the body of a pig, which is in a boat returning to this world by crossing the river which separates it from Hades the abode of spirits, to pass another life in its body by way of punishment. During his passage he is being chastised by a monkey, one of the punishers in the land of Amenti or Hades. There is no angel in this picture, but there is, standing near the gate of this Hall of Judgment, Anubis, the fox-headed god, who is the protector of the dead, to see that justice is done. The same subject occurs on one of the Syrian Marbles brought over by Mr. Fellowes, and on the walls of some of the churches on the Continent, as St. Laurent, Rome, XIII. siecle. These complete the chain of this curious and peculiar symbolism.—C. L. ED.

that the wall was removed in order to give increased accommodation in the church, and that it has been re-erected with the old windows and doorway near to the first site mentioned as having been in the Early English period. This also makes the church more uniform in plan, besides restoring it to its ancient area.

Another fresco is on the north-west pier of the tower on a facet of a south-west aspect, diagonally towards the nave, and represents a robed ecclesiastic with a pastoral staff in hand in the act of benediction. Near this, on the respond of the north arcade, are also paintings of a hammer, pincers, and horse-shoe.



On the south wall is a colossal figure of S. Christopher; also on that wall, near to the turret entrance, is a circle twelve and a-half inches in diameter, inscribed with segments of circles, differentially coloured, forming a cross. Underneath this circle is a smaller cross, each arm of which is two and three-quarter inches in length.

The western doorway of the nave, which has much enrichment, was also inserted at this period, and the original traceried oak doors remain.

Some fragments of arms of the Earls of Bedford in stained glass are also in the clerestory windows.

The Reformation, with the exception of the mutilation of the piscina and stoup, seems to have left everything about the structure in its usual state. We may here, however, incidentally notice that about this time the whitewashing mania commenced; any figure painting on the walls, whether savouring or not of Roman Catholicism, was ruthlessly destroyed, or the walls were covered with limewash; and sentences inscribed thereon, generally in black letter, some being texts of Scripture, others the composition of the dominant parochial authority.

The next record which we have of any extensive repair or alteration is detailed in a quaint MS. left by "Richard Bowle, of Chesham Magna, Gent.," *temp.*

1606. At that time a "faire newe gallery" was erected in the south aisle, which, it needs scarcely be said, blocked up the tracery of the windows.

It is characteristic of the Stuart age that everything Gothic was regarded with something akin to abomination, and the introduction of Roman architecture in English churches, one of the best specimens of which is the cathedral church of St. Paul's, London, was considered to be evidence, if not of a reformed religion, at all events of a revolution in taste.

Richard Bowle minutely records the works done at this time (the Stuart age) which included reseating the church, and the decoration of the walls by the writing of texts of Scripture. Troublous times were coming, and the church restoration committee of that day experienced great difficulty in raising rateably the necessary funds. Many contributions were made in kind, such as timber, labour, etc.

In this interesting manuscript every transaction connected with the repairs is mentioned; the parties who contributed, and those who dissented; the legal proceedings resorted to in order to obtain compliance with the existing law. There is also the name and residence of every householder in the town and hamlets, with his or her status rateably, and distinguishing the natives from "forriners."

During the time of the Commonwealth and the Restoration nothing particular appears to have been done except the carving of rude initials and dates of the seventeenth century on many places in the building, which is easily accounted for by the laxity pervading and the fierce antagonism existing in all matters appertaining to the Episcopal Church.

In the year 1693, as recorded by a carved date on the wooden key of the barge board, the pointed chancel roof was removed, and a new one, much depressed and of a debased kind, put in its place, corresponding in form, but not in mouldings, with those on the nave and transepts; to this was appended the then usual lath and plaster ceiling, and, from the low pitch it necessitated the removal of the gable, and also the mullions and tracery of the three-light Decorated east window; to compensate for which a debased five-light window was

inserted, corresponding with the roof. Portions of the tracery of the original window have been found, and were of a high order of Decorated work. It had also contained stained glass, there being a fragment in the tracery. The lower stones of the old jambs now remain.

From the additional weight added to the tower in the Perpendicular period, it was observed at the beginning of the eighteenth century that the piers on which it stood were being crushed, more particularly that on the south-west angle, which was the weakest point by reason of a turret stair to the ancient rood loft passing through it. This necessitated immediate attention, for the south arcade near the tower was being tilted over, and there was great danger of the whole structure falling southward. Therefore in 1721, the turret stairs were blocked up, and the western arch of the south transept filled with Portland stone (leaving only a small circular-headed doorway), to act as a buttress to resist the pressure and avert the impending danger. This was done not a day too soon, for, as it was, by the twist given to the structure, the tower became rent throughout its entire height in many places, and the whole of it materially disintegrated. The insertion of this masonry, ugly as it is, had the desired effect to a certain extent. This is now anything but a pleasing feature in the building, and it is hoped at some future day funds may be raised sufficient to rebuild the tower pier, thereby opening the eastern arch of the south aisle into the transept.

The clock bears this inscription—

“Tho. Vernon, Fecit
Londini, Anno
Domini 1728.”

and is of the birdcage form, with two dials. Some framework near^{er} indicates that chimes were also once fitted there, but these have been removed. It is said that they remained but a short time in the tower in consequence of some financial difficulty.

In the years 1796-7 the parishioners seem to have again become awakened to the necessity of having some further repairs done to the structure, but at that time their energies appear to have been chiefly directed towards “*keeping the walls dry.*” Accordingly, the roof which was placed on the nave in the Perpendicular period was,

instead of being repaired, unfortunately removed, and another in deal substituted, strong enough, but without the slightest pretension to ornament or moulding. Ceiling joists were morticed to the beams, the chamfered oak rafters of the former roof being used for that purpose, and a plastered ceiling put underneath. Part of the débris of the old roof was used to heighten the wall of the north aisle, where five semicircular windows were erected on a line above the existing ones, and galleries erected in the space gained by heightening the wall; bare utility being studied on the one hand, and exclusiveness on the other, for one of the galleries bore the inscription in painted letters, "This gallery was erected for maids and maid-servants." A large gallery also disfigured the western part of the nave, in which the organ was placed, and this had the effect of blocking up to a great extent the large and beautiful Perpendicular window.

The tower at this time unquestionably gave further evidence of decay, for iron bands were put round it which afterwards snapped, and the south-east angle was so much crushed, the dressings of clunch stone being so inferior for that purpose as to necessitate its being partially rebuilt above the line of the roofs under the string-course, and which was done with bricks and timber bound and tied with iron, and put together without any regard to lateral pressure or to the decaying nature of the material used for such a purpose.

After these questionable repairs and quasi-embellishments had been executed, the church, with its high pews, huge plain circular pulpit with sounding-board over, ponderous galleries, plastered ceilings, circular-headed windows, brick chimneys, an excrescence in brick called a hearse-house, and the external surface of the walls plastered and rough cast (the stone dressings being mutilated for the purpose of making the rough cast adhere) presented an appearance anything but architectural; but even these abominations had their negative use in more than one sense, for the parsimony of the day in reference to church repairs, the total abeyance of the true principles of Gothic art and the utilizing of the existing materials, no matter how, in the cheapest possible form, without taking trouble enough to effectually destroy their character, tended to the preservation of many

mediæval relics which might otherwise have been totally destroyed.

There is a peal of six fine bells, recast in 1812 by Mears of Whitechapel, the tenor being keyed in F, and weighing about seventeen hundredweight. A smaller bell, or ting-tang, is also in the tower, and was hung in 1790. The curfew bell, a relic of the Norman Conquest, is rung from the first Sunday after New Michaelmas day until the Saturday evening immediately preceding March 10th.

The organ was erected in 1852, and is a fine instrument, built by Hill. Since it was first set up it has more than once been increased in power and volume, particularly in 1869, on the occasion of the reopening of the church after restoration. It is now placed in the north transept, the choristers occupying the tower.

Nearly the whole of the external dressings were of Tattenhoe stone, a very soft material, not calculated to bear with impunity exposure to the weather. Hence, although the internal stonework generally presented a fair appearance, except where mutilations had been made designedly, all the exterior was more or less decayed, and in some instances to the extent of rendering the fabric dangerous. To remedy this, Boxground stone, wherever required, has been inserted. Some of the old stone used externally is of the oolite formation, which weathers better, but none will stand the wear and tear of ages unless it is in every instance laid in its natural bed.

Many interesting fragments of old worked stone have been found and are preserved, which incontestibly prove the Norman character of the earlier building. These fragments are placed in the parvise, and among them are two gravestones of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

In the work of restoration great care has been taken to preserve every ancient feature, and nothing has been removed which could possibly have been left, due regard being had to the stability and beauty of the building.

By the enlarged area of the north aisle, and by the seating of the south transept, much more accommodation is provided. The late nave roof is retained, ceiling excepted, and the whole cased in Perpendicular work; the beams and plates being moulded and embattled, and the spaces over the beams under the principal rafters filled with tracery; traceried spandrils resting on the stone

corbels also support the beams. The south aisle and transept roofs have been restored, and a new roof placed on the chancel, raising it to its original pitch as in the fourteenth century. The north aisle has been rebuilt on an enlarged area as before mentioned, the whole church reseated and paved, the chancel also seated in wainscot and paved with Godwin's encaustic tiles.

The new font near the western doors is Early English work, beautifully executed, and the gift of William Lowndes, Esq., of the Bury. The main shaft is of Park Spring stone, the small shafts of Derbyshire fossil marble polished, the bowl of Mansfield Wodehouse stone, and bears the following inscription:—"ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM, ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL.—X.P.C."

The base of the pulpit is of similar stone and polished marble, the upper part being of wainscot, paneled, with the monogram X.P.C. in a quartrefoil deeply moulded.

The lectern is an exquisite piece of workmanship by Farmer and Brindley, and is the gift of the Misses Sutthery.

The commandments are painted on the eastern wall of the nave over the tower arch, and the remaining surface of that wall is decorated in distemper; an original fragment furnishing a great portion of the design.

In the south transept are two tombs; one, to the memory of Mary, wife of Sir Francis Whichcote, who died in 1726, being a dark marble sarcophagus, surmounted by a large Sicilian marble block, pyramidal in outline, and capped with a funereal urn.

The other, erected to the memory of a son of the first Earl of Devonshire, is of Sienna and statuary marble, with dove columns, and capitals of the Composite order, and has the following inscription:—

"Memoriæ Sacrum,

Johannes Cavendishe nobillissimi Devonix comitis filius, balneorun eques, claritatem generis, nobilitate ingenii, præstantibus que animi dotibus superavit, longaue virtutum serie famam implevit quantam cunque capere tam teneri anni possunt puer optime domi educatus ad exemplum pius, Gallice et Latine supra ætatem, et ad miraculum doctus, erecto spiritu, ingenio absolutissimo

mortales hic reliquias dum Christo jubente resurgant
 immortales, deposuit OBIT XVIII JANVARII, ANNO SALVTIS
 MDCXVII ÆTATIS VIX. XI.

"Victa a quo prisci est, et sæcli fama novelli
 Spesque, dolorque orbis conditur hoc tumulo,
 Nil species, nil lingua illi, nil profuit ætas,
 Nil genus, aut pietas, docta Minerva nihil;
 Corpus habet tumulus, sed vivit fama, jacere
 Tot dotes uno non potuere loco."

There is also a curious monument erected on the north side of the sacrarium in the chancel, to Richard Woodcock, formerly a vicar of Chesham, who died in 1623. He is represented, in a niche formed in the wall, in the attitude of preaching, with a green cushion before him, and wearing a quilled ruff. On a black marble slab below is an inscription in Latin, given in Lipscomb's history, a translation of which will be found in the "RECORDS," vol. xi., page 65.

Another monument to the memory of Richard Bowle, whose manuscript of 1606 has been quoted, has an inscription which runs thus—

"Here lyeth part of Richard Bowle, who faithfully served divers great Lords as auditor on earth, but above all he prepared himself to give up his account to the Lord of Heaven, and now hath his quietus est, and rests from his torments and labors. He was a lover of God's ministers, a father of God's poore, a help to all God's people, and beleeves that his flesh, which with the sowle was long tormented, shall with the same sowle be æternally glorified. He died the 18th of December, 1626, and of his age 77."

There are also other monuments in the chancel, one of which, to the memory of Nicholas Skottowe, who died in 1798, was sculptured in Parian marble, by Bacon, in 1800, and has a kneeling female figure bending in a mourning attitude over a tomb.

In the chancel pavement are some slabs inscribed to the memory of members of the family of Lowndes, who were resident and possessed considerable property in the parish.

In the north transept is a stone bearing the following inscription—

“In a vault underneath this stone lies interred the body of GEORGE WADE, an Infant Son of Major Will^m. Wade, of Lieutenant-Gen^t. Wade’s Regim^t. of Horse, by Mary his wife, daughter to William West, Esq^r., of this Parish, he was born May y^e 22^d, 1738, and buried the 23^d of July following.

DISTURB NOT Y^r DEAD.”

The brass plate on the coffin states that this child was “born at Chesham.”

The east window of chancel is filled with stained glass by Ward and Hughes, and is the gift of the Duke of Bedford. The north window of the sacarium also has stained glass, given by the Misses Nash to the memory of their parents. That on the south side is presented by Mrs. Lowndes to the memory of her husband, the late William Lowndes, Esq. These two latter are by Clayton and Bell, and represent the four acts of mercy. The lancet in the north aisle, to the memory of Mrs. Morton and Miss Aylward, is by Burlison and Grylls.

In the south clerestory is a window in grisaille glass to the memory of Richard Clare and Mary his wife, erected by John Clare, of Ashley Green.

There were formerly some brasses in a slab in the south aisle, but they have disappeared. A rubbing of one has the following—

**Of go charite pray for the soules of Willm Eggerley
John Eggerley Willm Eggerley & Elizabeth Eggerley
the children of Robt Eggerley and Kateryn his Wyfe.**

A few encaustic tiles of very ancient date are laid in the south transept, adjoining the “Cavendishe” tomb.

Having traced the various orders of English architecture, which are all represented in this church, and given a brief sketch of the decay of the fabric and its restoration, let us earnestly hope that the great and good work may remain to future generations a lasting monument, not only of the piety and zeal of our ancestors, but also of the faith of the present age, as shown by the exertions and sacrifices made to rescue such a noble structure from decay, and from the destruction of which it stood in such imminent danger.