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EDITED BY THE REV. C. H. EVELYN-WHITE, F.S.A.,

Founder of the Society and Honorary Secretary.

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THE PRIORY AND CHURCH OF ST. NEOTS, HUNTINGDONSHIRE.

It may be of interest before speaking of the Church (which is dedicated to St. Mary) to refer briefly to the Priory, the history of the two being closely connected.*

In the reign of King Edgar, one Earl Alric or Leofric, and his wife Ethelfleda, founded a Priory at Eynesbury, which place is supposed to derive its name from Ernulf or Eynulf, a Saxon hermit, or according to Professor Skeat from the Saxon Ægenwulf. A patron Saint however was wanting to give popularity to the new monastery, the choice was directed to Neot, and a plan was devised for carrying off his remains. The interest of Brithnod, Abbot of Ely, and the influence of Ethelwolde, Bishop of Winchester, having been obtained, the king's sanction followed. The arrangement was entrusted to the official Warden of the Shrine, who decamped with the sacred relic from Neot-Stoke in Cornwall, and reached Eynesbury in safety. Here he was received at the Mansion of Earl Alric, under whose roof the treasure remained for a short time. A Chapel was soon built, and the mansion converted into a Monastery which was dedicated to the Saint, in whose honour the name of the place was changed to Neotsbury. At the dedication of the Conventual Chapel about A.D. 974, Ethelwolde, Æscwin, Bishop of Lincoln, Abbot Brithnod, and many others were present. It was agreed that the Monastery should be subject to the Benedictine

* This information is in the main derived from "*The History and Antiquities of Eynesbury and St. Neots*," (1820 and 1824) by Rev. Geo. C. Gorham, a native of St. Neots, and for 18 years Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, and Vicar of St. Just-in-Penwith, Cornwall, 1847. Mr. Gorham was afterwards presented to the Vicarage of Bramford Speke, Devon, but was refused institution by Dr. Phillpots, Bishop of Exeter. Hence arose the famous Gorham controversy. He died 19th June, 1857, aged 69. "*Notes on the Priory of St. Neot*" by Rev. H. Fowler; a paper read at a Meeting of the St. Albans Architectural Society at St. Neots in 1886 has also been consulted.

House of Ely, and that the Priors should always be sent from Ely, unless a person could be found among the Brethren at Neotsbury fit for the office. The site of the Priory was on the north side of the Market Place, and bounded on the west by the river Ouse. The endowment by Earl Alric consisted of two hides of land in Eynesbury, six in Waresley, and nine in Gamlingay. Ailwyn, Alderman of East Anglia was the Patron.

After about thirty years the Monastery was threatened by the Danes; and Lady Lewina of Eynesbury, a lady of property took the precaution to remove the remains of Neot to her house at Whittlesea, and besought her brother Osketul, Abbot of Crowland to receive it into his Abbey. He, with some of the brethren repaired to Whittlesea, and the relics were taken to Crowland with the chanting of psalms.

When the state of the country became more settled, these relics were restored to Neotsbury, although Ingulf, Abbot of Crowland boasted that his Abbey still possessed them. From an Anglo-Saxon MS., in the British Museum, date about 1020, giving a list of the Saints of England and the places favoured with the custody of their mortal remains, *inter alia* it states "*thonne resteth Sanct Neot masse preost on Eanulfesbyrig,*" (one resteth Saint Neot Mass priest at Eynesbury). In 1213 the bones of the Saint are said to have been removed by Abbot Henry de Longchamp and placed by an altar erected to his honour.

The Priory of Neotsbury was probably burnt by the Danes in 1010. It was either only partly destroyed, or was rebuilt, for it still supported some monks at the Norman Conquest; at that time it was seized by Gilbert, Earl of Owe, and three of the Ely brethren who would not surrender were at last ejected and sent to Normandy, the Abbot of Bec being charged to keep them prisoners there.

The House now became an alien Priory, subject to the Abbey of Bec in Normandy.* In 1078, Richard Fitz

* The Abbey of Bec-Hellouin near Bri ne was founded in 1060. The establishment was subverted in the French Revolution; the Abbey is now in ruins.

Gilbert de Clare and his wife Rohais sent a request to Anselm, (who in August of that year had become Abbot of Bec) for monks to replenish the Convent at Neotsbury, which was to be made a cell to the Norman House. Anselm at once acceded by sending over white monks, who may have been Cistercians; but whatever the precise order, their habit was subsequently changed for a black dress, for the Priory (like the Mother Abbey) became a Benedictine House. Anselm came to Neotsbury, and examined the relics, which he pronounced to be the bones of "the precious Confessor Neot." One arm was missing, this is supposed to have been left in Cornwall. The shrine was locked, and the key of the feretory taken by the Abbot to France to be carefully preserved there. Anselm afterwards on being promoted to the See of Canterbury, sent a testimonial of this inspection to Oliver Sutton, Bishop of Lincoln, at the same time exhorting the pious to contribute liberally towards the erection of the conventual building. The tower of this Church fell in 1265, when some of the charters were lost in the ruins. Nothing more appears to be known of this Church.

The earliest benefaction occurs in 1100, when Matilda, daughter of Simon first Earl of Huntingdon, gave to the Convent one-third of her Manor of Cratefield, in Suffolk. Rohais the wife of Richard de Clare who held the Manor of St. Neots in 1113, granted the whole of her Manor to St. Mary of Bec and to St. Neot of Eynesbury, and was considered the second foundress. The annual income of the Monastery in 1291 was £225 19s. 2d., and at a later period the site of the Priory occupied forty-nine acres.

Henry I., granted the privilege of a Market and four Fairs, one on the Festival of (probably) the translation of the Saint, formerly held on 8th December, afterwards changed to 17th, and which in recent years has been held on the Thursday preceding the 17th December.

The town was probably growing up near the Monastery, and this being near the great North Road would be easily reached by travellers, who would enter by the gate which was near the Bridge, and to whom the monks by

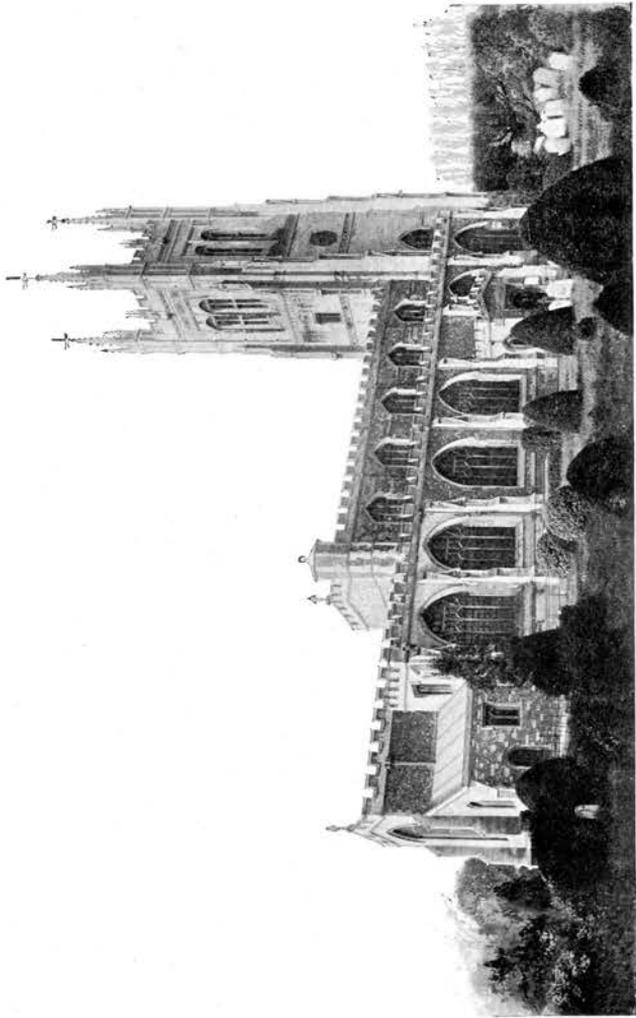
a Bull of Celestine III., were to "give meat and drink, for the love of God, to all who should ask them." The last vestige of the entrance was taken down in 1814, and no portion of the buildings remains. John Rawnds who was the last Prior, was presented to the Vicarage in 1512, and instituted on 28th September of that year; the attestation of the Will of Christiana Crouker of Seynt Neots, probate of which is dated 1527, is as follows:— "thes beyng witnesses John Rawnds Prior off the House off Seynt Neots and Vicar off the seid towne." Rawnds died in 1540, the year following the surrender of the Monastery. Probably about 1589 the materials of the lately dissolved Priory were in part used for building the present stone bridge.

The existing town is an extension of the village of Eynesbury, and it is thought the name St. Neots was given to it when the parish was separated from Eynesbury in the reign of Henry II. (1179).

The first parish Church here was erected about 1183 when the Rectory was appropriated to the Monastery by a Bull of Lucius III. A grant of Hugh de Wells, Bishop of Lincoln, between 1209 and 1234, confirms to the Prior and Convent "The Parochial Church of St. Mary, in the town of St. Neots, with all its appurtenances." We have no record of this early structure, but a window in the wall of the vestry of the present Church in all probability belonged to that mentioned in the grant of Hugh de Wells. It has been suggested that the shaft and lower portion of the bowl of the existing font may have also belonged to it and have been made by some unskilful person in the 12th Century. There are no other indications of a building earlier than the end of the 12th century. A slab of dark blue marble of the 14th Century exists in the floor of Jesus Chapel. On the face is a dog supporting a floriated cross, the stem of which is represented as budding, and the transverse beams as branching into trefoils. (It is engraved in Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments* Vol. II., p. ccxlvii, pl. xviii., fig. 5).

From extracts of Wills for which probate was granted between 1485 and 1535, it is probable that the body of





FROM PHOTO BY A. E. JENNINGS.

EXTERIOR OF ST. NEOTS CHURCH, HUNTINGDONSHIRE.

the existing Church was completed about 1486; that the tower was begun about 1489, and advanced as far as the belfry in 1493, and that the pinnacles were erected between 1526 and 1535. The Church is an elegant and symmetrical example of that light and airy Gothic which attained its greatest excellence in the reign of Henry VII. The plan of the structure is uniform, consisting of a stately nave and chancel, north and south aisles both to nave and chancel, a vestry,* north and south porches to the nave aisles, and a tower of grand proportions at the west end of the nave.†

The tower being faced with light grey stone, which weathers into various tones, has two requisites for grandeur, *viz.* size and fine well wrought material. Its height from the ground to roof is 100 feet, and to the apex of the pinnacles about 128 feet. The design is of a very high class, closely resembling some of the finest towers of Somerset. Two large buttresses stand at each corner of the tower, each a little distance from the angle. They run up to the belfry stage and then stop, being finished at their tops by tablings on which pinnacles, with crockets and finials, are set anglewise. Three single and a double band of quatrefoils are carried along the faces of the tower; those in the base course run round the buttresses as well as the tower; but the two next run between the buttresses and then re-appear at the angles of the tower. The upper bands are also not continuous; they run up to the corner piers and stop there. The pinnacles and battlements were restored in 1880. On each side of the tower the centre battlement exhibits an emblematical representation of an Evangelist. On the south side, about halfway up, is a niche, in which probably was formerly a figure of the Virgin, to whom the Church is dedicated. From a drawing in my possession dated 1817

* The vestry was rebuilt and enlarged at the expense of the late Mr. John Jewel Evans of St. Neots in 1883; when a marble tablet was fixed on the south wall of the vestry as a memorial to the late Rev. Thos. Burroughes, brother of Mrs. Evans, and is surmounted by the family arms of that gentleman.

† A drawing of the Tower appears in "*Illustrations of the Spires and Towers of the Mediæval Churches of England*," by Charles Wickes. Vol. II. Towers. pl. 3. large folio 1854-5.

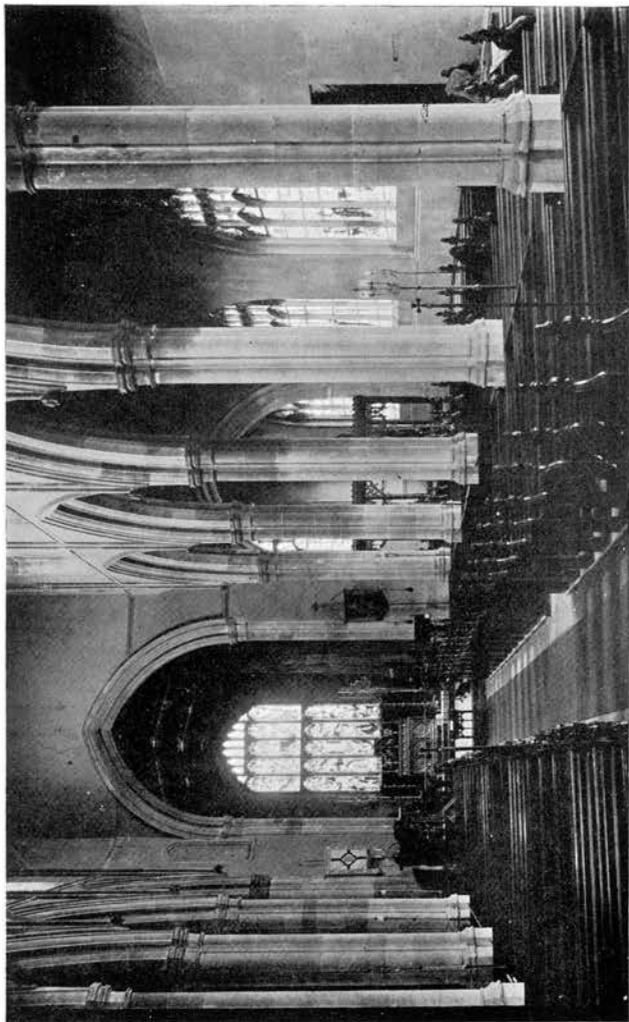
the face of the clock covered the upper part of the niche, which has consequently lost its projecting canopy. The tower contains a fine peal of eight bells, cast by Joseph Eayre,* of St. Neots, the seven smaller in 1753—the eighth in 1764. The latter was recast in 1832.

The nave is about 80 feet long, and has arcades of five bays, opening into north and south aisles, with tall moulded piers and highly pointed arches. A clerestory window of three lights occurs in each bay. The roof is of oak, and has carved cornices and other elaborations. On the roof over the narrow bay next the chancel arch ancient colouring has been reproduced. The aisle roofs are also ancient. At the battle of St. Neots in July, 1648, the Parliamentarians who were the victors, put the Royalist prisoners to the number of about 120 in the Church for security, where they were kept well guarded before being sent to Hitchin. And in some additional notes by the late Dr. Rix to Gorham's *History*, he states "The soldiers seem to have occupied themselves in shooting at the roof of the nave, which on close inspection has a worm-eaten appearance. The timber however is sound; and most of the holes still contain at a little depth a leaden shot, not globular, but a section of a cylinder."

The roof of the chancel was entirely rebuilt in 1901, at the expense of Charles Perceval Rowley, Esq., the work being carried out most satisfactorily by Mr. W. Wade. At the same time battlements were added externally, corresponding with those on the nave.

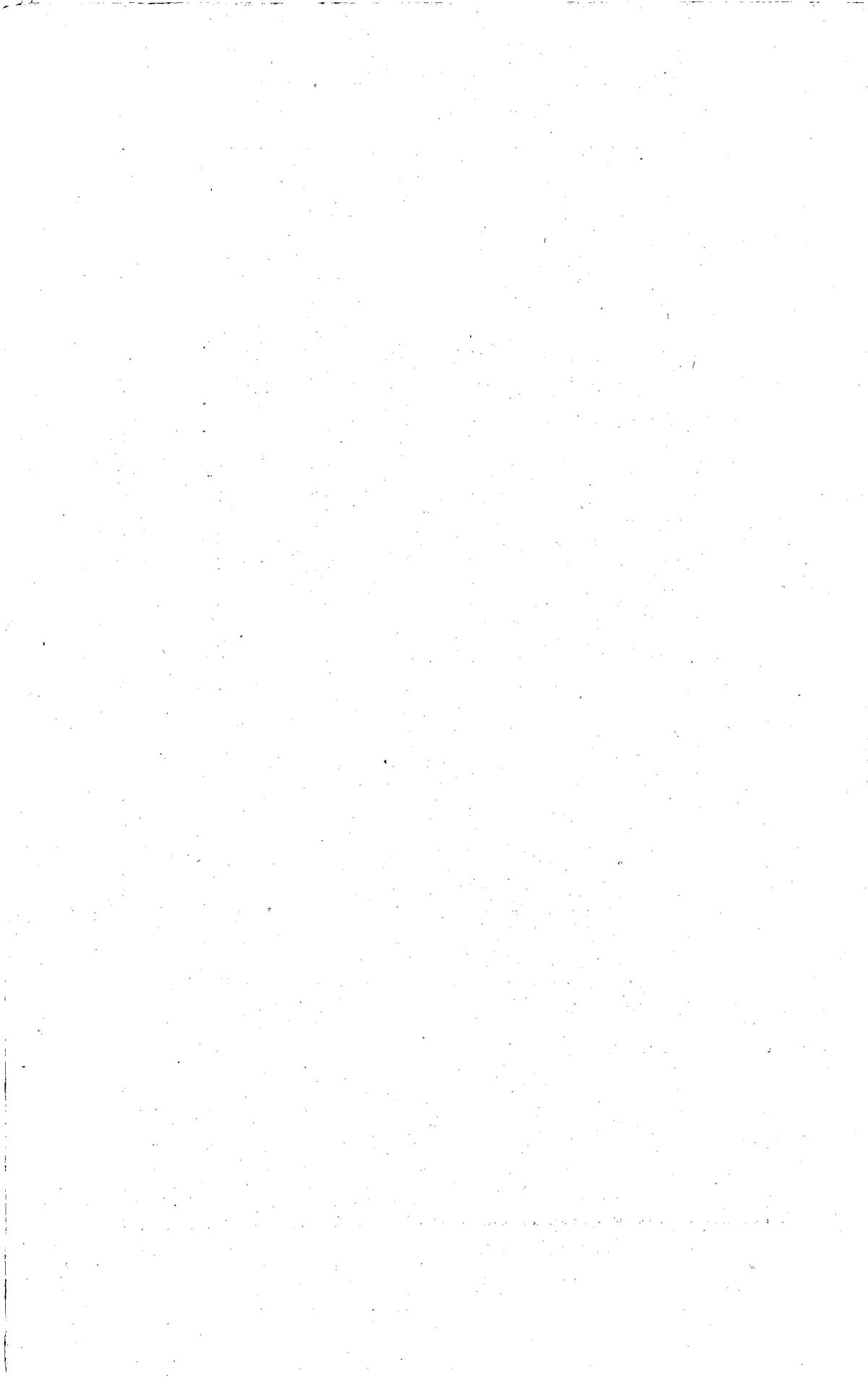
The north aisle of the chancel, in which the organ is placed, is the Jesus Chapel; the monogram **ihc** appears on the cornice of the roof internally, and on the exterior buttresses. This Chapel seems to have been erected by "The Guild or Fraternity of Jesus," consisting of President, Wardens, and Brethren. It is probable that this

* Joseph Eayre was the originator of the only Bell-foundry in this County in comparatively recent times. He was baptized as an adult in 1731 at Kettering, where in 1736, he was also married. He erected a lofty brick building in the "Priory" St. Neots in 1735 in the form of a bell. Here he carried on the business until his death in 1772, and during these thirty-seven years many bells were sent to the churches in this and other counties.



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INTERIOR OF ST. NEOTS CHURCH.



Brotherhood was dissolved with the minor monasteries in 1536, for no later legacies appear to have been left to it. Built into the east wall of this chapel is a fragment of a tomb, having upon it a portion of the usual appeal or prayer for the soul of the departed.

The south aisle of the chancel forms the Lady Chapel, in which is a recess for a reredos.

Sixteenth century oak screens fill the arches at the east ends of nave aisles, and the arches between the chancel and the chapels. From a drawing which I have, the screens seem to have passed through the hands of a careful restorer.

Over the south porch is a parvise known as *Dove's Chamber*,* access to which is obtained through a doorway immediately to the west of the south entrance. It contains the remains of a small theological library, and a little of the original coloured glass, which thanks to George Fydell Rowley, Esq., the Patron of the living, has recently been carefully re-leaded and placed in two frames, forming an inner casement to two lights of the window in the parvise, thus rescuing it from utter destruction.

In 1847 the Church was restored and re-seated, and the carved pulpit by Messrs. Rattee & Kett, of Cambridge, was erected; the figures on the pulpit represent the four Evangelists, St. Peter and St. Paul.

The organ built by the late Mr. G. M. Holdich in 1855, was restored and improved by Messrs. Bishop & Son, in 1900. The Choir seats date from about 1860.

On the south side of the chancel is a monument in memory of the late George William Rowley, Esq., and his wife, erected in 1893 as a tribute of filial devotion by Charles Perceval Rowley, Esq., their only surviving son. The memorial takes the form of a canopied altar tomb of stone, with a recumbent statue of the deceased lady in white alabaster, from designs by Mr. F. A. Walters, F.S.A., and executed by Mr. Thomas Earp, and is a splendid work of art.

* One Robert Dove was Vicar from 1617 to 1622.

The stained glass in the windows is modern, all having been filled during the last forty-four years. The glass generally is of excellent quality; it is in accordance with the style of architecture of the 15th Century, and the colouring is exceedingly rich and effectively blended, reflecting great credit on the artistic skill of the designers. Many of the windows were given by C. P. Rowley, Esq., who has done so much towards beautifying the noble church.*

For architectural details of the present Church, I may refer the interested reader to a paper on "*St. Mary's Church, St. Neots, Huntingdonshire*," by Mr. S. Flint Clarkson, F.R.I.B.A., in the *Transactions* for 1886 of the St. Albans Architectural and Archæological Society.

WM. EMERY.

* A detailed description of the windows is given in my pamphlet on St. Neots Church, published at the *Advertiser Office*, St. Neots, 1902.

