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Contents of Part 1., Vol. 2. (pp. 104).

Papers.

	PAGE
I. BRAMPTON, HUNTS., by <i>S. Inskip Ladds</i> , A.R.I.B.A.	I
II. THE PRIORY AND CHURCH OF ST. NEOTS, HUNTINGDONSHIRE, by <i>Wm. Emery</i> , (illustrated)	16
III. STOW LONGA (St. Botolph), HUNTS., by <i>the Rev. G. E. Sharland</i> , R.D., (illustrated)	25
IV. EYNESBURY AND ITS CHURCH, by <i>Wm. Emery</i> , (illustrated)	29
V. GREAT PAXTON, HUNTINGDONSHIRE, by <i>the Rev. A. G. Cane</i> , M.A.....	33
VI. THE CARVED BENCH-ENDS IN EYNESBURY CHURCH, HUNTINGDONSHIRE, by <i>the Rev. C. H. Evelyn White</i> , F.S.A., <i>Hon. Sec.</i> , (illustrated)	46
VII. THE STORY OF COTTENHAM, CO. CAMBRIDGE, by <i>the Rev. C. H. Evelyn-White</i> , F.S.A., <i>Hon. Sec.</i>	55
VIII. SOME NORMAN DOORWAYS IN CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND HUNTINGDONSHIRE, DISPLAYING <i>TYMPANA</i> , by <i>the Rev. C. H. Evelyn-White</i> , F.S.A., <i>Hon. Sec.</i> , (illustrated).....	98

Illustrations.

	PAGE
ST. NEOT'S CHURCH (St. Mary), Hunts., Exterior ..to face	21
ST. NEOT'S CHURCH (St. Mary), Hunts., Interior ..to face	22
STOW LONGA CHURCH (St. Botolph) Hunts., (1) Exterior, (2) Interior.....to face	25
Silver Paten (15th Century) and <i>facsimile</i> of Hall Mark ..	27
EYNESBURY CHURCH (St. Mary), Hunts., Ground Plan to face	30
Plan of Nave Arches and Columns	31
GREAT PAXTON CHURCH (Holy Trinity), Hunts., Saxon work (<i>conjectural</i>) in Nave	40
EYNESBURY CHURCH, CARVED BENCHES in, Plan	46
Some details	48
NORMAN <i>TYMPANA</i> :	
Pampisford, Cambs.,	99
Stow Longa, Hunts.,	100
Little Paxton, Hunts.,	101

THE CARVED BENCH-ENDS IN EYNESBURY CHURCH, HUNTINGDONSHIRE.

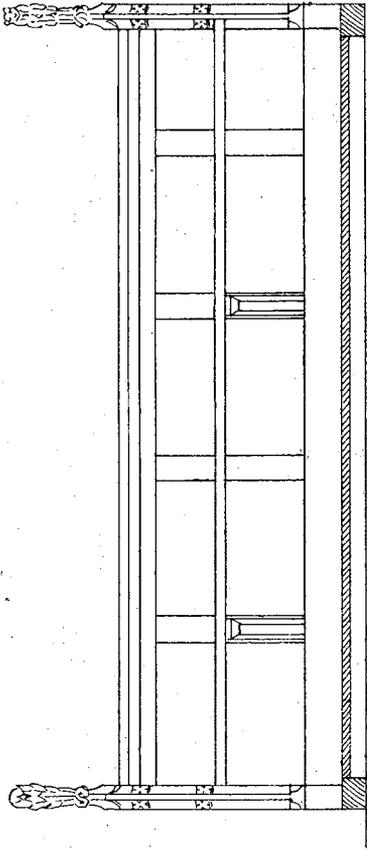
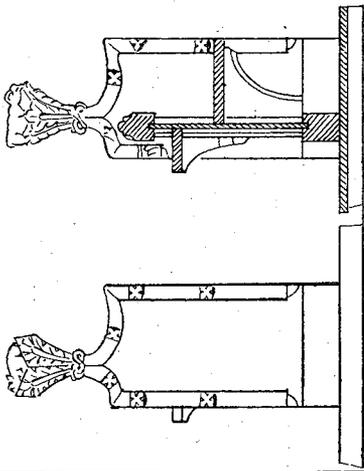
It is somewhat strange that so attractive a feature as the singularly well preserved oak benches in Eynesbury Church, displaying designs of such a varied and interesting character as to invest them with no ordinary importance, should have hitherto escaped the particular attention they certainly merit. The accomplished writer, the Rev. G. C. Gorham, whose work on St. Neots and Eynesbury is deservedly valued, makes no mention of these seats. They were removed in the course of a general restoration in 1857 to their present position in the north aisle from the place they originally occupied in the nave. Whether while there the benches, during then recent times, were in any way hidden from view by modern excrescences, such as were allowed to disfigure parish Churches during the years that followed the stirring events of the sixteenth century, I cannot say. The omission of all mention of these seats is otherwise unaccountable.

There are in all thirty-two bench-ends, all of different design, mostly bearing the 'poppy head' in its complete form. Twenty-six show the twisted cable pattern immediately below the actual *fleur-de-lis* which may be regarded as giving to the 'poppy-head' its true character, tying up or binding together the bundle or head. The familiar term 'poppy-head' has been variously defined; *poupée* (*Fr.*) or *pupa*, *poppæa* (*Latin*) furnishes us with a meaning which appears by no means improbable *viz.*: something which resembles a puppet or doll, or even the puppet-like bundle which the human figure—*e.g.* of a young child—is made to assume under certain conditions.* *Poop*, signifying the high end of a seat,

* "*Statuncula vestibis amicta*" (*v. Fucciol.*, Du Cange)="clouts, bearing a likeness to a tied up bundle."

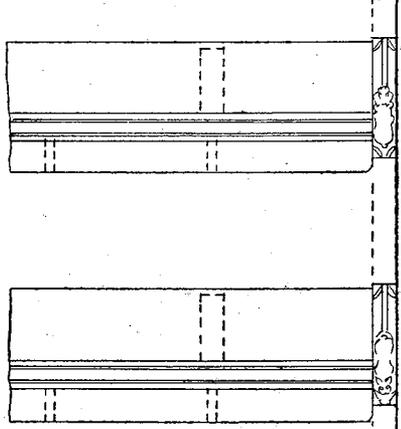
See also an excellent article in *The Ecclesiologist*, Vol. ii., n.s., pp. 209-216, which is full of ingenious suggestions relating to symbolism, etc.

Church of S. Mary Eynesbury, Hunts. Old oak seats now in North Aisle.



End

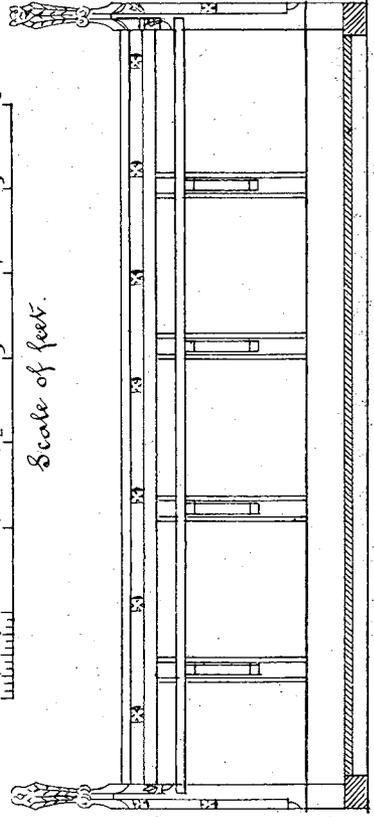
Section



Front.

12 9 6 3 0

Scale of feet.



Plan.

Back

Thos. Garratt, del.
1903.

an elevated ornament, has also been suggested. The plant (poppy) of the genus *papaver*, in its tied up form conveys a perfectly intelligible meaning. But the main idea is to be found in the *fleur-de-lis* which is a recognized ecclesiastical emblem as well as a royal heraldic badge. The *fleur-de-lis* is supposed to have originated in the spear head, and this form of leaf in its simplicity may be seen, appositely enough, in the mouldings of some of the Eynesbury bench-ends. The *fleur-de-lis* shows the upright or stem with its over-lapping sides united by a band. This true form is curiously absent in certain of these bench-ends as will be pointed out, but this very feature invests the consideration of the carvings with an added interest, as where the customary upright foliage takes the form of a recumbent animal or a quaint human representation. If the gracefulness of the exact form is lost, the variety is pleasing, even though it is somewhat uncomely. It has been assumed that where the recurring feature of the twisted band that encircles the neck of the 'poppy-head' is wanting, a later date may be assigned. I think this unlikely; any such divergence from the wood-carver's beaten track is at once picturesque and skilful.

There are sculptured upon these bench-ends fourteen designs depicting animals in one form or another; generally full length either recumbent or crouching. As far as the distorted views of our forefathers with regard to the precise form of objects of natural history will allow us to judge, it may be assumed that the hippopotamus, rhinoceros, wild boar, horse, sheep, stork, serpent, or fish, &c. are here represented. The vegetable world offered no facilities worth mentioning for contortion and caricature, so that the mediæval artist generally followed nature's own pleasant path in representing foliage, &c. But yet an inexactness frequently prevails which is very perplexing when we seek to investigate forms and attach names and designations. An elongated leaf of the spear-head type and a similar specimen resembling an arrow head are of frequent recurrence. The end of the bench which carries the ornamental bunch of foliage with its

half expanded and undeveloped centre, its lateral curling and expanded leaves marked by a graceful curve is characteristic of the 'poppy-head' with which we are best acquainted. The conventional bunch of foliage, however may be best left for the examination of experts in botanical nomenclature.* Such ornamentation I am inclined to regard as entirely decorative, wrought with a view to pictorial effect more than anything else.

It will be observed that scriptural or legendary subjects are eschewed, while others are quaint only, without being humorous or grotesque.

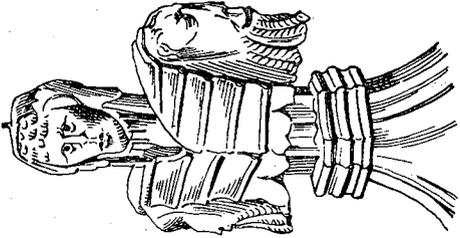
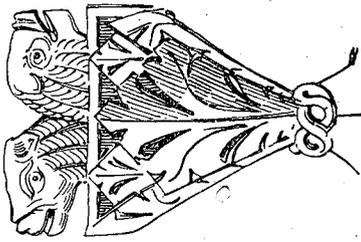
On the back of most of the flattened forms of the animals the remains of a rivet or screw may be seen, which points either to the existence of some ornament required to complete the *fleur-de-lis* shape, or to the utilization of the standard for a scone or other temporary adjunct.

The average height of the standards, measuring from the top of a finial to the ground base is three to four feet. The finials and shoulders project above the back of the seat. The standards, which like the other material used in the construction of these seats are sound and massive, are morticed into an oak sill. Much of the ordinary work, excellent as it is, seems somewhat roughly executed, the surface of certain of the seats seem to be hewn rather than planed. The form of the bench-end exhibits the shoulder greatly diminished on one of its sides to allow of convenient access to the seat. The seats are supported on brackets and the backs carried down. A narrow flat book board, placed a little higher than the seat, is in two or three instances the original work. The continuous cills upon which the benches now rest are of course renewals. Or, the seats may originally have been constructed without a boarded floor; old Church accounts elsewhere seem to establish this mode of erection.†

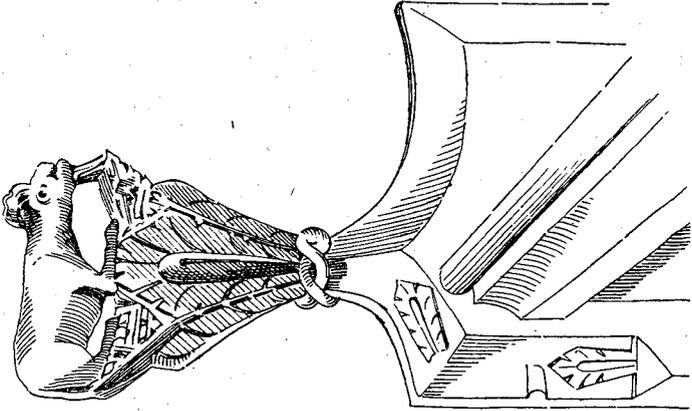
The seats as at present arranged in the north aisle are

* The open pomegranate frequently carved on a finial is sometimes thought to have given rise to the term.

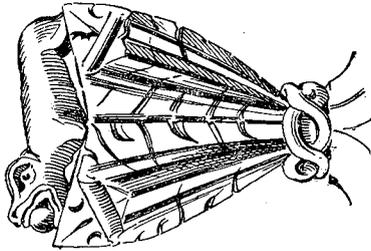
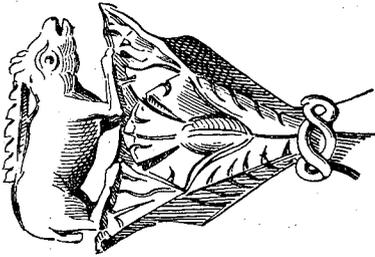
† *Vide* Accounts of St. Mary's (Great), Cambridge.

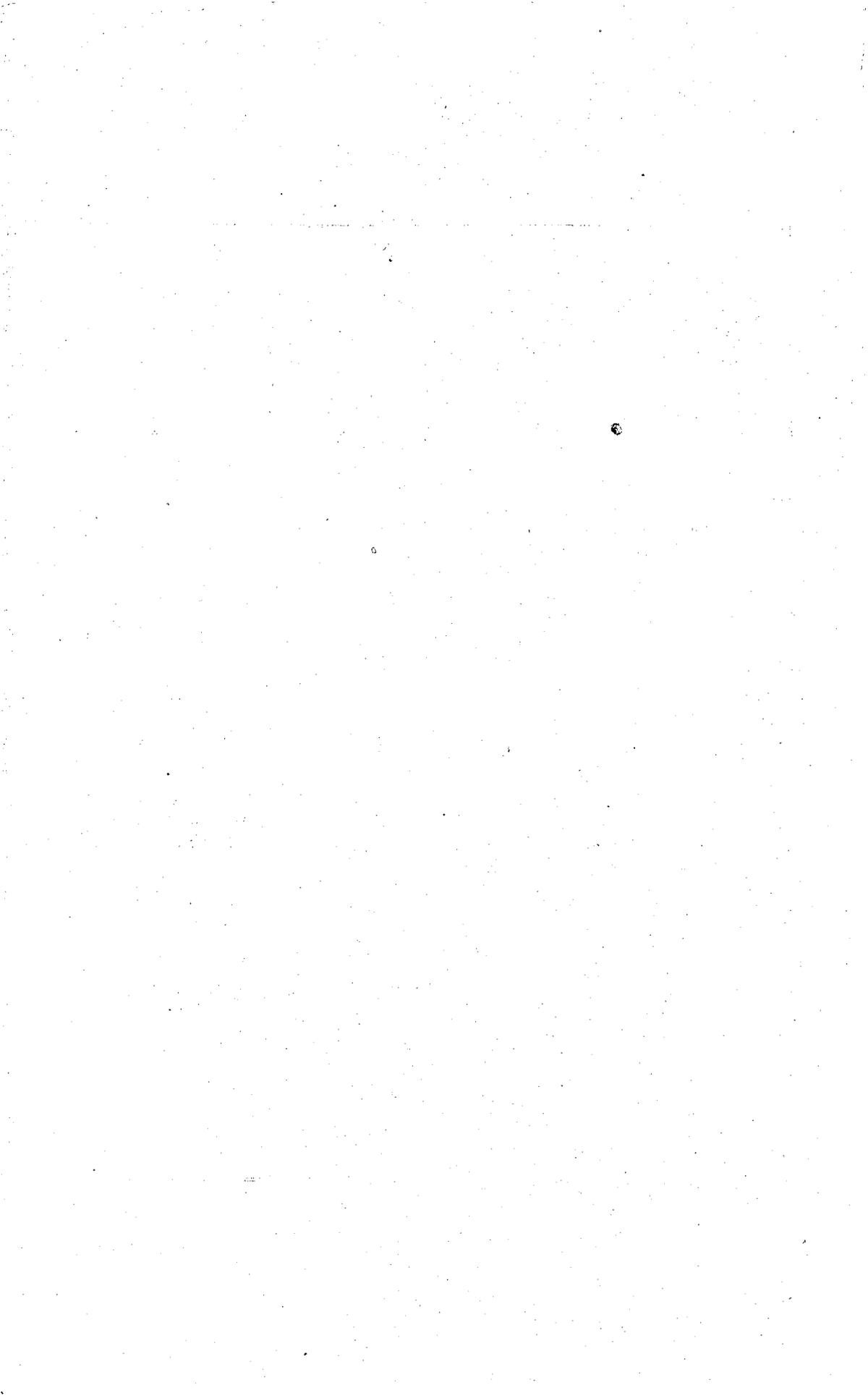


Thos. Gurnett del. 1905.



Bench Ends,
Church of S. MARY,
GYNESBURY HUNGS.





in two divisions, *viz.* to the east and west of the north door. The easternmost block is made up of four lines of seats with five 'poppy heads' on either side. The front has seven panels of late Perpendicular character moulded at the top and decorated with small quatrefoils; at the back a similar number of panelled divisions carry the quatrefoil while the top bears the elongated leaf decoration. The range of seats towards the west has ten compartments, with eleven bench-ends on each side. Six divisions or panels of varying pattern front the series. The design, which has the flower ornament, is hardly so pleasing as the work in the front group, the tracery of the arcading being of a debased form and consequently far less graceful. The chamfered top has the quatrefoil ornament. The wainscoting is relieved by the bowtell or small buttresses.

Three of the bench-ends facing south have their sides carved. In one case a tree appears with fruit thereon, another has leaves only without stem.

Open seats or benches of this character are found of as early a date as the fourteenth century, if not earlier, but they mostly belong to a later period, and were always placed in the nave. There may at one time have been other seats of a like kind in the nave of Eynesbury Church, but the excellent condition of the benches that remain renders it improbable that work of this character could have passed into a state of decay, and it is unlikely that any such were ever removed out of the Church.

These seats were probably introduced into Eynesbury Church early in the sixteenth century, or it may have been quite towards the close of the previous century, forming a range on either side with a broad passage between. Such partial seating was I fancy very general about the time named, and I have an idea, however much we may dislike it, that particular parishioners who defrayed the cost appropriated the benches to their own use. It was left to others to augment the series as desired. Only in this way can we account for such a limited seating accommodation at a time when pulpits had become stationary. It is certain moreover that seats during the period

referred to, were never allowed to be the incumbrance into which they ultimately developed. Men in those far off days were content simply to kneel and worship, or were satisfied when need required it, with a movable stool. It is not unlikely that pride rather than necessity led to the introduction of the fixed seat, and to this and like causes we may attribute in no small degree its long retention.

The entire groups of benches may now be more closely examined.

EAST OF NORTH DOOR.

- I. (a) The first in order, starting from the east end of the north aisle, is a singularly interesting example of the wood carver's art, a kind of *tria juncta in uno*, displaying reduplicated heads, male and female; whether the intention was to represent two, three or four persons, or the whole a mere matter of caprice, I cannot say, but I am inclined to regard the whole as a species of mythological triad. The termination shows the head of a female in wimple and characteristic head-dress which marks the period as that of the early part of the sixteenth century or the close of the fifteenth.* Encompassing the face are broad lappets falling from a frontlet or cap of network design with a kind of crimp bordering. The undergarment displays a narrow frill brought up closely around the throat. This head appears as a double profile. Below, on either side, the heads of two bearded men project. They have plaited hair or rather hair indicated by hatched horizontal lines somewhat resembling the judicial coif. The design is not an infrequent one, and it is moreover of great antiquity. It is to be found *e.g.* carved on Egyptian capitals (as at Denderah); indeed, this Eynesbury example, so far as the two

* The monumental brass of Joan Swann at Stretham, Cambs., (A.D. 1497) displays precisely similar costume, and this continued to be worn until the middle of the sixteenth century.

branching profiles are concerned might well have been wrought in part from this Egyptian model so close is the resemblance in coiffure. These are the only illustrations affecting costume, afforded by the Eynesbury examples. Whatever this singular device or combination may typify it is certainly suggestive of marital relationship. The faces so much resemble one another that likenesses can scarcely be imagined. An allusion however may be made to the connection of a wife with two husbands. The double face or two headed representation afforded ample scope for the caricaturist in days gone by. Even the clerks in the Exchequer, labelling their documents, are found to pourtray by a rude characteristic drawing of three heads in one, the person of a usurer. It is to be hoped for the honour of the neighbourhood that double-faced individuals were not immediately in the eye of the Eynesbury carver! This easternmost 'poppy-head' measures 14 inches from top to bottom and 10 inches across, the finial (female head) is 5 inches by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

- (b) The example placed at the further end of this seat is an ordinary 'poppy-head.'
- II. (a) The 'poppy-head' is formed of foliage. The upper portion is missing. The shoulder and continuation carry a hollow moulding with leaf and quatrefoil ornament.
- (b) The poppy-head is composed of foliage. The hollow moulding of this bench-end displays a cone-like continuous ornament and is relieved by the small mock buttress.
- III. (a) From the foliage issue the heads of two bulls (?) with open mouths, as if bellowing. The hollow moulding has quatrefoils on sides and shoulders. The twisted cable, here as elsewhere, appears round the neck of the 'poppy-head.'
- (b) The lower part of the head displays foliage upon which is seen the hinder part of some recumbent

animal. The hollow moulding of the sides bear the leaf ornament.

- IV. (a) A foliated head; twisted band round neck; the quatrefoil appears in the hollow moulding.
 (b) Foliated head; leaf ornament and quatrefoil within the moulding.
- V. (a) Head foliated; the neck, collar, shoulder and side well moulded.
 (b) The foliated head has an unfinished appearance. The moulded neck, &c., as before noticed.

WEST OF NORTH DOOR.

- I. (a-b) Identical with No. V.
2. (a) Foliated with two beasts' heads issuing. These animals have long hair on necks and distended nostrils. The quatrefoil appears in the moulding.
 (b) The broad profile of a human head (without neck) issuing from the foliage exhibited below, and displayed in an oblong. It is quite of a Dutch type, somewhat resembling an old world representation of the sun in his glory. When I first saw this quaint carving I had a suspicion that it might be intended to represent the ninth century Saxon, little St. Neot, the long distended hair surrounding face and head giving the appearance of a *halo*, but I now see no reason for encouraging such a conjecture. This curious piece measures $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches by 6 inches by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches. It of course misses the *fleur-de-lis* or true 'poppy-head' form. The hollow mould of the sides, &c., show the leaf ornament.
3. (a) On the leafage of the lower portion is a smooth skinned beast with long horn-like ears, feeding; the legs are bent at the knees. The leaf ornament is within the moulding.
 (b) A hound on leafage with large angular teeth and flap ears.
4. (a) A leaf head with leaf ornament in the hollow mould.

- (*b*) Leaf head with quatrefoils in hollow.
5. (*a*) Stag with antlers extended on back, standing on leafage; quatrefoils appear in the mouldings.
 (*b*) Animal with thick hair at the back of neck, feeding. Leaf ornament in moulding.
6. (*a*) An animal with large round ears, on leaves. Within the moulding is the leaf and quatrefoil ornament. Enriched seat end.
 (*b*) Ram (?) feeding on leafage, which appears in the under part. The leaf ornament is within the moulding.
7. (*a*) Animal and bird, bodies conjoined at shoulders. These objects are bereft of their heads.
 (*b*) An animal (? wolf). The trefoil ornament is within the moulded portion.
8. (*a*) Animal upon foliage biting its back. Within the moulding is the quatrefoil. End of seat enriched.
 (*b*) Animal (rabbit or hare) with long ears laid back. The moulding has the trefoil ornament.
9. (*a*) On foliage a bearded stag with antlers: quatrefoil in moulding.
 (*b*) Bird (head gone) on foliage. In the moulding is the quatrefoil and trefoil ornament.
10. (*a*) An animal swallowing a ball. Leaf and quatrefoil ornament in mould. Enriched seat end.
 (*b*) Birds (?) or serpents or swans with scaly necks, head to head.
11. (*a*) Horse (?) with reins on neck, standing on foliage below: quatrefoils within the moulding.
 (*b*) The 'poppy-head' displays leafage: the leaf and quatrefoil ornament enriches the moulding.

It should be mentioned that occasionally small blocks within the mouldings intended for quatrefoils, &c., remain unworked.

As I had occasion to remark some time since in the course of my observations on the Brampton stalls,

Huntingdonshire is particularly rich in carved woodwork which deserves to be systematically and exactly studied; hitherto it has been well-nigh neglected in a County which until the establishment of this Society in 1900 was content to allow its antiquities to remain 'undiscovered.' The Eynesbury seats are undoubtedly fashioned out of native timber by the hands of skilled Huntingdonshire men whose work deserve to be appreciated. There are few examples more interesting than these unique (and in all probability locally designed) benches. An added interest is found in the fact that the men who destroyed the carved work in our Churches with axes and hammers were content to leave these benches alone, and we acknowledge our indebtedness.

By way of additional illustration Fox's *History of Godmanchester* may be consulted (pp. 288, 9). At the end of several chapters are tail-pieces illustrating the curious carvings that ornamented "the Assistants' seats." The work is somewhat similar to that at Eynesbury, and a date (A.D. 1513), forming part of an inscription upon one of the panels, may possibly furnish an approximate date for the Eynesbury benches.

The 'poppy-heads' at Glatton are very interesting; indeed several churches in the county furnish conspicuous examples of this important feature of ecclesiastical woodwork.

In the adjoining county of Cambridge there are many instances of good carved bench ends. An interesting set may be seen at Soham. Three faces are upon a 'poppy-head,' and the animal form is also here a deviation from the strict *fleur-de-lis* pattern.

I have to express my indebtedness to Mr. Thomas Garratt for the skilful drawings which illustrate this paper.

C. H. EVELYN-WHITE, F.S.A.