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## WISBECH PARISH CHURCH

Dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul, this church is very interesting, not on account of its beauty or symmetrical disposition, for Cole has declared it to be "the oddest built church he has ever met with." Its interest lies in its singular record of architectural changes, changes which have been compared to those seen in Leominster Church.

From whatever point it is viewed, this church is seen to be a singular building, but chiefly so in its western elevation, which is enormous in extent, but irregular and lacking in design. One sees a prodigious gable covering two naves and a turret staircase between, which is finished just above the roof as a bell turret; then a broad aisle occurs on either side, and added to all this we have a large tower soaring upwards at the north-west corner and the South Porch with parvise over and gabled east and west.

Viewed from the east, the varieties in the roofs introduce other incongruities, resulting in a confused jumble. We see the double nave roof of mediæval pitch, the high gables of the choir and chapel, the latter conspicuously so, the leanto roofs of the aisles, the low gable of the Porch and a similar one to the Vestry with elaborately enriched battlement. Each succeeding century seems to have contributed towards the whole and herein lies its interest.

Upon entering the church the perspectives are grand and impressive, although the same irregular multiplicity of parts is everywhere apparent.

This is one of the three double-nave churches in England.

The three nave arcades of three different styles, a strange skew arch and a spacious and lofty chapel to the south of the chancel at once arrest attention. The chancel is of great length but is somewhat low in height. A superficial glance around shows three special periods of activity to have prevailed.

Of the oldest there remain the late Norman arcade next the North Aisle, an engaged pier and capital between the Chancel and Chapel, the lower part of the Transitional Romanesque Tower adjoining and westwards of the North Nave, the floor of the narthex of which lies some 18 inches below the present level.

The Early Decorated is represented by the two Chancel Arches, the South Aisle and adjoining Arcade with Clerestory over, the South Porch, the West Window of the South Nave, the Arcade between chancels and the north wall and windows and east wall of chancel.

Of the Perpendicular period we have the Central Arcade in the nave, the Windows in the north clerestory, the East Window of the south chancel, the unusually elaborate Sacristy eastwards of the latter and the stately tower at the north-west angle of the Church immediately adjacent but wholly apart from the same.

Collecting these threads together, the history of this grand old fabric unravels itself as follows:—

First there was a Norman or Romanesque Church, the first stone of which is said to have been laid in 1111, although an earlier church is recorded to have existed. The Nave of this Norman church consisted of six bays and is easily located as five of the bays of its north arcade still remain. The pillars are unusually lofty and being treated as columns and not piers, are pleasing, and viewed from the original floor level must have looked vastly different from the usually ponderous Norman pillar. Some are plain cylinders, others have four small shafts attached, but these are not arranged in any symmetrical order.

The capitals are mostly of the cushion type, but varied in form, the easternmost is “flowered” and the arch is “chevroned” and you will observe that as usual with the Romanesque builders, the chevron is worked to the width of the individual voussoirs, which differ greatly in size. Indications of a clerestory overhead are said to have been found in the restorations and although examples of Norman clerestories are seldom met with until late in the Twelfth Century, yet the quatrefoils in the

spandrels of the pillar arcade seem to supply the place of a triforium and as with our neighbour at Long Sutton there probably were clerestories. There was a narrow and low north aisle and probably a similar one to the south. During the 1856 restorations, the bases of the South Norman Arcade were found under the floor. Nothing remains of the chancel, but this was probably a short one without aisles. At this period no Tower existed, but one was shortly after commenced, outside the west end of the Nave, and you see the lowest stages today. The North and South Aisles were continued westwards to the outer face of the Tower, and in the turret staircase formed in the south-west angle of the Tower, we see a doorway which opened out on a gallery over this South Aisle extension. You will notice the more finished character of the Tower, its arches pointed and chamfered in the orders, and the abaci octagonal. We have no pillar of this period but two pairs of responds.

Overhead in its south wall may be seen portions of a large pointed window, with internal splay and string, and recessed in orders and chamfered externally—the aisle roof would finish below this.

A South Aisle was now added to the Choir, for we see the late Romanesque pillar and floriated capital forming the western respond to the present chancel arcade, its square abacus clearly contemporary with the western bay and not with the earlier portions of the Romanesque arcade.

The second great period of activity occurred in Decorated times early in the Fourteenth Century and a complete remodelling of the edifice now took place, the phenomenal double nave appearing. The old South Aisle was demolished and in place thereof a new body of about the same height as the old nave was erected, and a South Aisle added.

The arcade between the South Nave and Aisle consists of the usual clustered pillars, quatrefoil in section, the eastern respond to which is a richly worked and crocketed canopy to what was doubtless a niche containing the effigy of the patron saint of that particular

guild, for there were some 7 or 9 guilds attached to this church, each having its own chantry chapel. The Porch with its parvise over is contemporary and very interesting in detail, the upper chamber was used as a muniment room and repository for the townsmen's weapons and later on as a Town Library.

The large West Window in the South Nave with its fine flowing tracery is perhaps one of the best parts of the church.

Although different opinions were at one time entertained it is now certain that each nave had a separate roof—perhaps the pre-existing north nave roof was raised somewhat—but the Norman clerestories still remained—the southern one becoming internal (as seen in Long Sutton). The North Aisle was widened and I would call your attention to the very fine North Doorway of this style, with its grotesque and floriated ornament in the arch and not in the jambs, this discontinuation of ornament being common to the district. Two of the square headed windows in this Aisle appear to be cœval.

One of the chief chantry chapels—that of St. Martin—was in the north-west angle of the church, which afterwards became the baptistery.

All idea of completing the Tower was abandoned and its south-west turret was carried upwards to receive a bell, a new western doorway was inserted, probably leaving the Romanesque window over.

The Choir and its South Aisle were now entirely rebuilt, the only vestige of the earlier portion being the Transitional Norman respond mentioned earlier.

The fenestration in the north wall of the Chancel shows some signs of symmetry being now observed, and one of these windows is decidedly Flamboyant in character. The east window of this period was five-light with simple arch tracery, but was replaced by another in the last century's restorations. As the Chancel was increased in width northwards the north chancel arch had to disappear, and a unique expedient had to be resorted to, to bring the Norman Arcade into line—the easternmost arch of this Arcade being taken down and a

new pointed arch constructed in an oblique direction. Later on a further addition was made here. The South Chapel was also rebuilt and its roof is steep-pitched and overtops the chancel roof. Its eastern window has been replaced by a Perpendicular window, which was covered up until the restoration of 1856.

*Perpendicular Additions.* There was yet no complete Tower and the deficiency is now supplied. It is very marked in character, containing three stages, but the continuous labels at window lines subdivide the elevations into six stages. The total height of the tower and spire is 130 ft. The doorway forms a stately portal, and a similar one is formed in its opposite wall immediately outside the previously mentioned north door of the church. In detail the shafts of these doorways are unusually large, apparently a localism; and the flowing traceried windows in the east and west walls of the lowest storey, if cœval, are unusual, but they may have been built in from some other position. Very probably this lowest stage was built somewhat earlier, the work progressing slowly, until Bishop Morton's time 1520-1538, when he saw the whole completed.

You will observe the buttresses occur a little way from the angles, and occur in pairs terminated under the battlements with pediments.

The strings in the basement and under the belfry stages expand into richly foliated bands. The two upper stages each contain a single narrow window of two-transomed lights and are low.

The highest sub-stage is relieved by a profusion of initial, heraldic and other devices, set above and beside the head of the belfry windows.

The very elaborate open battlement rises in steps as usual in East Anglia, but more often found in brick than in stone. Two real and two pierced embrasures occur on each side with a central pinnacle between, with larger pinnacles at the corners. A short spire with fine finial crowns the whole, and altogether it is a bold and striking composition and certainly a fine piece of masonry.

Probably from a desire for more light and more sound

in the interior, or perhaps from the fall of the original tower demolishing the South Norman Arcade, but internal evidences do not support the latter idea, it was now replaced by a four-bay, wide and lofty Perpendicular arcade, but the tower arch and abutments were left untouched. These piers contrast very much with western country shapes, being more mullion-shaped, with discontinuous imposts, the semi-octagonal forms of shafts and capitals all typifying the eastern forms of the period.

Many windows were now inserted including a Perpendicular clerestory over north Norman arcade, which forced upon the builders that peculiar arrangement by which it is connected up to the chancel, a skew arch being thrown across from the fifth pier to a point some distance up in the chancel arch—truly a curious and ingenious expedient.

Probably the single roof over the double nave was erected before the north clerestory was formed.

The elaborate Sacristy to the east of the Chapel, gabled towards the east with a highly, though roughly enriched panelled battlement continued round its low gable and along its south wall, was also built at this time, and the characteristic rude and obscure sculptured shields, some bearing the arms of the Sees of Ely and Canterbury, the two keys of St. Peter and the two swords of St. Paul. There is also one on which appear a T, the letters Bur and the representation of a well, from which it appears that Thomas Burwell was the builder, and as he was head of the Holy Trinity Guild about 1500 this building would appear to be their Chapel.

The East Window of the Chapel was also inserted at this time, also a two-storey five-light window inserted over the west door which remained until the Restoration in 1856.

A doubt exists as to the origin and uses of the pointed low recessed space under the east window of the South Aisle, and I am inclined to think it was used as an aumbry by one of the Guilds for the storage of their muniments and chattels.

A small bracket on the jamb of the South Window

near here was also, I think, used for placing the taper or light upon during recital of masses in this same chapel.

Time will not permit me to do more than briefly mention that in later times galleries were erected along the several arcades, the South Arcade having a two-storey gallery, but these excrescences have very properly been removed. A chancel screen with perhaps a rood loft existed at one time, but has disappeared.

I can only call your attention to the several original altar slabs now forming part of the floor in various parts of the church, each bearing the incised five crosses; a fine piscina beside the organ, the original altar slab in the present communion table which is believed to date from William III, the Caroline table being in the Sacristy; the fine mural monument by Nollekens, and two other good Renaissance mural monuments in the Chancel; the slab and excellent large brass of Richard de Braunstone, a Constable of Wisbech Castle with the canopy and portion of the inscription missing; pieces of old stained glass worked-in in the south mullioned window in the chancel, and the fine processional cross.

The curfew bell is still tolled here every evening from 8.45 to 9.

I am indebted to Mr. A. W. Cope, the Curator of the Wisbech Museum, for kindly giving me access to various papers and old views of the Church.

F. BURDETT WARD, M.S.A.

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