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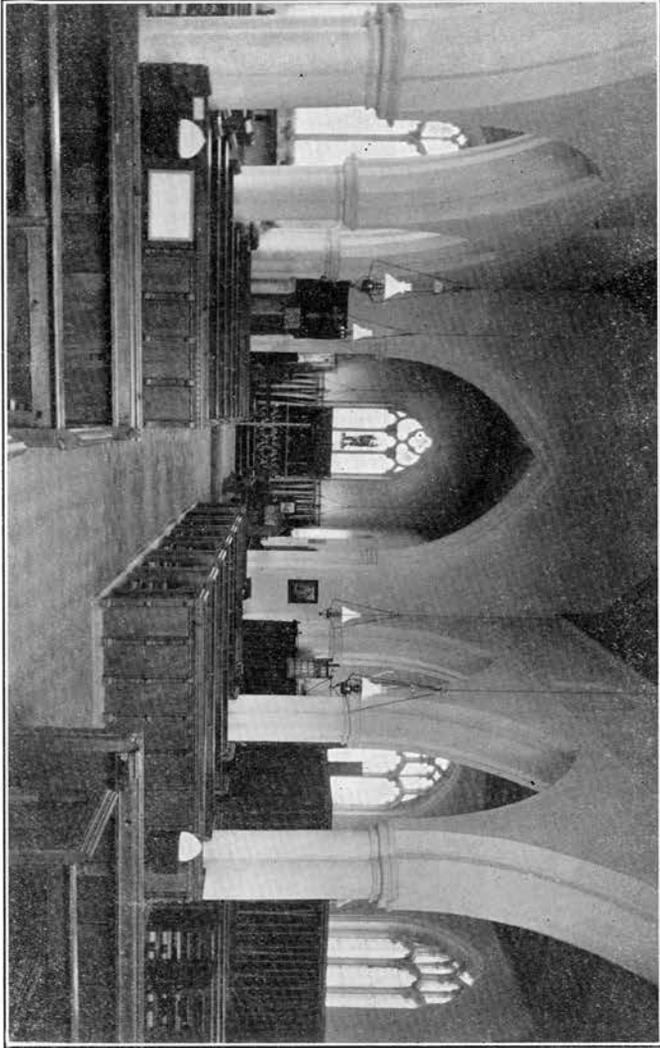
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*Photo by*

STEEPLE MORDEN CHURCH, CAMBS.

*W. Evans*

## STEEPLE MORDEN CHURCH, CAMBS.

The Church was formerly a large and handsome building with a lofty steeple in the centre between the chancel and the nave. Old records mention two chapels, one on the north side, the other on the south. Foundations remain which seem to show that the south aisle was continued further east than the nave. A great part of the old walls was found, on removing the plaster, to be covered with paintings. Several figures could be made out:—a medallion painting on the west wall appeared to represent the crowning of the Virgin; above the pillars on the north side of the nave was a large figure (St. Christopher) carrying the Holy Child; in the north aisle leaves and fruit covered much of the walls.

About the year 1630 the steeple fell, and destroyed part of the nave and chancel. The nave was repaired, the south aisle being shortened. A low wooden tower was erected over the porch to carry three bells. There were difficulties between the Parish and the Patrons (New College, Oxford,) as to the responsibility for the repair of the damage caused to the chancel, the Patrons held the parish responsible, while another difficulty is indicated by a Memorandum by Robert Pinck, Warden of New College, dated August 27th, 1632, which states—"If the chancel should be repaired  
"and built where it before stood, there would be between  
"it and the Church a void space of well near 20 feet,  
"viz., where the steeple before stood, and the building  
"and closing of it to the Church would be more than  
"double the charge of repairing it there, where a good  
"part of the walls is now standing."

In 1633 Articles of Agreement were prepared by which the chancel was to be repaired at the cost of the parish. An estimate of the work to be done states the length of the chancel to have been 42 feet, the breadth 28 feet.

In 1638 there was still an intention to repair it, and probably it was owing to the troubles of the time that nothing was done. The following extracts from the Record of Archbishop Laud's Visitation at Cambridge, in the year 1638, is interesting:—"The Church fell  
 "downe 8 or 10 years agoe and is built againe, but the  
 "steeple which formerlie stood between the Church and  
 "the chancel is not there again; and the chancel being  
 "still downe, Mr. Martin who is farmour of the Parson-  
 "age is willing to re-edify it, if it were resolved whether  
 "it should be joyned to the Church, or built upon the old  
 "foundacon, which is deferred to my Lord Archbishop's  
 "Visitation."

The following description is given in Cole's manuscripts in the British Museum, under the head Steeple Morden, dated 1748.

"The Church here is in a deplorable condition, one  
 "hardly knowing what to make of it within side or  
 "without. The steeple which formerly was so remark-  
 "able as to give its name of distinction to the village,  
 "fell down some years ago, and standing in the middle  
 "of the Church, Cathedral fashion, it crushed the  
 "chancel which has never been rebuilt. The place  
 "where the three bells now hang, two of which are  
 "broken, is a sort of wooden tower, with a small spire  
 "of lead, and a large leaden cross. Part of the chancel  
 "was standing till within these thirty years, when it  
 "was entirely taken down. When the whole Fabric  
 "was complete it was a handsome Church.....Query  
 "whether the steeple did give name to the village or  
 "whether it took not that denomination from the family  
 "name of Staple who have arms in the windows."

Cole mentions a good house standing just out of the Churchyard to the north-west, belonging to Mr. Leheup; this was pulled down in 1765. He gives the population as follows:—in 1676, 199 inhabitants; in 1685, about 60 families.

The Parish Registers go back to 1675.

Extract from "the Ecclesiastical and Architectural Topography of England, Cambridgeshire," Parker, 1851: "Steeple Morden St. Peter and St. Paul. The original plan of this Church was a nave with aisles, south porch and a lofty tower with a spire on the south-west of the nave, but in the reign of James II. the tower fell, destroying the clerestory and chancel, neither of which have been rebuilt. A low tower, for a single bell, has been built above the porch. The nave has three arches on the south side, and four on the north, of the usual Early English or Decorated character of this district, with moulded caps and clustered columns; the north aisle is Perpendicular, with a Jacobean parclose at the east end, and the lower part of a good Perpendicular screen worked into a pew. There is much Jacobean wood-carving in this church, and one of the pews bears the date 1686, which is probably the date of the repairs made after the tower fell. The south aisle is Decorated, with the string-course running round the interior. The font also Decorated, octagonal, panelled. There is the matrix of a very fine fourteenth century brass, and some good open seats. The porch is Decorated, with a double niche over the entrance; two Early English caps and traces of the chancel arch are to be seen in the east wall of the nave."

The chief work in the restoration of the church was done during the incumbency of the Rev. William Martin, who, after having built the Church of England School, about 1860, set to work in 1866 to restore the Church, rebuilding the chancel and making a general restoration. To Mr. Martin the Parish is immensely indebted for his devoted work, at the same time no doubt the period was an unfortunate one for the Church's restoration, the allusion in the foregoing extract as to the old oak carving particularly making one sigh.

When I came to the village in 1902, the above mentioned matrix was used as a paving stone, being just outside the north door; I have since had it moved and

embedded in its present position in the floor. I should like to draw attention also to the Church plate, which is of a very pleasing character; in the centre of the paten can be seen the head of our Lord, which I suppose would point to a Pre-Reformation date for its origin, even if made up at a later date.

Since 1902, with the assistance of the expert advice of Mr. T. D. Atkinson of Cambridge, I have been enabled to carry out some needed repairs and improvements to the Church:—the whole of the interior has been whitened, the damp-course has been inserted all round the chancel, and on the east end of the north aisle, the roof has been repaired, the windows made water-tight, the Churchyard added to and fenced, the Vestry accommodation improved, the east end of the chancel refurnished, and a new set of lamps provided.

At my request in 1903, Mr. Atkinson drew up a report on the Church with recommendations for work, most of which has been carried out, so that in 1911, again at my request, Mr. Atkinson drew up a second report on proposed improvements. A main feature considered unsatisfactory is the shortness of the chancel, and it is felt that the impressiveness of the Church would be increased if the chancel were either lengthened by about 12 feet, or if a simple and massive screen were built projecting into the nave, being returned at each end against the piers of the chancel arch.

The Church was originally a Rectory, of which the Bishop of Winchester was Patron. In the year 1381, William of Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, obtained leave to appropriate it to the "New College" which he was then founding at Oxford; and the Warden and Fellows of New College have from that time been the Rectors, and Patrons of the Vicarage.

A word or two about the village itself may be of interest. From Lyson's Cambridgeshire it appears that the Manor of Steeple Morden was anciently in the family of Fitzwalter; at a later period in that of the Fortescues;

and after passing through various hands, was purchased in 1746 by Lord Chancellor Hardwicke. Morden House, the old mansion formerly standing to the north-west of the Church was formerly the seat of the Dachets and afterwards of the Leheups. Other manors in the parish are the Manor of Bruces, the Manor of Cheyne, and the Manor of Oldfields. The names of these Manors have somehow got corrupted among the people, and in this connection I should like to ask the opinion of the learned upon the name now given to a certain locality where the parishes of Ashwell, Guilden Morden and Steeple Morden meet, now popularly call "Ruddery." In ancient days there was a little chapel in existence on the spot, the old roof beams of which are now the uprights of a barn at Guilden Morden, and the little image belonging to the ancient shrine of the Chapel is now in the possession of the Bishop of Bristol. The dedication of the chapel is uncertain, and it is supposed to have been dedicated to some saint of the name of Roderic or Roderida; but is it not more likely that the name Ruddery is a corruption of Etheldreda, and the chapel was dedicated to St. Etheldreda? I believe that for many years, if not now, a fair was held at Ashwell on St. Etheldreda's day (Oct. 17).

In conclusion may I say that it was with great pleasure that we welcomed the Archæological Society of Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire to our little Church, which in spite of its sufferings in the past, (witness the fact that it was chancel-less for some 230 years,) yet bears traces of its original pleasing character, and has some, if but a little, claim to the sympathetic interest of archæologists; and which as a House and Home of Devotion holds (and please God, will for many generations yet hold) a warm place in the hearts of many of those who live here, as their ancestors have done for so many centuries before them, under the special tutelage of St. Peter and St. Paul.

E. Y. ORLEBAR.