

## Notes on Fenny Bentley Church.\*

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**I**N consequence of the thorough restoration which Bentley Church has undergone, it will be at once understood that there is very little to say about ancient architecture inside the building. It consists, at the present day, of a nave of three bays, with an arcade opening into a north aisle, and a chancel of two more bays, opening into a chapel, now screened off and used as an organ chamber and vestry, and a short sacarium. There is no chancel arch, and the whole length of the church is roofed straight through from end to end. In the darkness it might be taken at first glance to be an old roof, but from the style it is apparently all modern. The arcades and north aisle and tower are new entirely, and there appears to be no evidence remaining to show whether they follow ancient lines, though it may perhaps be taken for granted that at least the chancel arcade occupies ancient foundations.

The chief object inside the church is undoubtedly the rood screen, which has fortunately retained its loft with the carved wooden groinings supporting it. The original front, which would have been a panelled railing about three feet high, is now represented by a cresting. The date of this piece of carpentry is about 1460. Whether the screen has originally been painted and decorated, after the fashion of the examples in East Anglia, is an open question; at any rate, it has been unfortunately varnished in

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\* Read at Fenny Bentley Church, July 21, 1888.

modern and evil times, a fatal treatment of woodwork, old or modern.

The next object in importance is the alabaster altar tomb of Thomas Beresford and his wife, who died respectively in 1473 and 1467. This is a remarkable memorial in more ways than one. It commemorates a distinguished warrior, who fought at Agincourt, and rendered much service to Henry VI. during his wars in France, and for whom he is said to have raised a troop of horse from his own and his sons' retainers, which he mustered at Chesterfield. He was the first of the Beresfords who settled at Bentley, and either he or his immediate successor built the ancient hall, part of which is still standing, in the form of a low castellated tower, now incorporated with later buildings, and occupied as a farm house. This is seen on the right hand, below the church, on the road from Ashbourne to Bentley.

It was not an unusual thing for a monument to be set up during the lifetime of the person commemorated, but it is very unusual that such a record should be made so many years after his death. It was impossible for the sculptor to give, from personal knowledge, a likeness of the deceased soldier and his wife, his armour, or her costume, and from the state of the arts at the time there would have been no portrait to follow, save such as might have been introduced into a specially illuminated book, not perhaps available. So the "marbler" very wisely chose to represent his subjects in habits which he well knew they must have worn, their last earthly garb—their shrouds. In the Middle Ages the common people were buried without coffins, and only in their shrouds drawn together and tied above the head and below the feet. The higher classes were buried in coffins of stone or wood, the bodies in earlier times being salted and wrapped in leather; later, the dead carcass was embalmed and covered with cere cloth—"cered, and chested." The simple fashion of burying in a shroud only, tied like the Bentley examples, was continued for the lower orders until the time of Charles II., when the enactments concerning burial in woollen cloth somewhat altered the mode of laying out. These unchested bodies necessitated

the use of a bier for carrying the body to the grave's actual side, and the early interment after death of uncoffined corpses. The gradual growth of a tomb, from the stone coffin level with the pavement and the effigy carved on the lid, to the high altar tomb with, or without an effigy, is very interesting. Up to the end of the fifteenth century, the bodies of important persons were laid above ground, within the altar tomb, but it was a practice that was attended with much inconvenience, and was entirely abandoned before the middle of the sixteenth century.

The altar-tomb now became a cenotaph, and it is a cenotaph and not a tomb which forms the monument of Thomas Beresford and his wife. If the tomb stands in its original place, it is most likely immediately over the grave, and no doubt Thomas Beresford and his wife were tied up just as the effigies represent them, and placed in the earth in stone coffins, or, as was sometimes the case, in tombs built up with sides of stone, with a bed of sand beneath, for the more rapid consumption of the remains.

As to the effigies themselves, they are carved in alabaster, and the human form is well expressed beneath the shroud, and showing the—

“ Hands in resignation pressed,  
Palm to palm on the tranquil breast.”

They are probably the work of an Italian.

Along the verge of the upper slab is a very interesting series of military trophies, which sufficiently give the date of the erection of the monument, and which, from these evidences, must be about 1550. Taking them in their order from the north-west corner, we have in succession:—Cross trumpets, a standard, a combed morion, a drum, cross partizans, a targe, an armet, cross gauntlets, cross batons, a cabasset, a back piece, a breast piece, a shield, a sword crossed with a falchion, and a casque. These are strung or carried on a flat cord or band, with ties or bows at intervals, and are all forms of military equipment well known to antiquaries who are acquainted with Burgmaier's "Triumph of Maximilian," or who have paid attention to the armour of the time of Henry VIII. The series of twenty-one children, all clad

in shrouds, and incised in the panels of the tomb, are very unusual, both in number and for treatment. There are other Beresford monuments fixed on the north and south walls of the chancel. They have some merit.

The screen dividing the vestry from the north aisle has probably formed part of a *parclose*; some of its component portions are old. The ends of the modern *sedilia* are those of choir-stalls of about 1450; the tops, or "poppy-heads," have been cut off. The seat at the end of the church under the tower is partly made out of a nave seat frontlet of the same period. The font is rude work, and may be of almost any date before the Reformation, though it probably is not earlier than 1450; and the same remark applies to the chest close by it. The modern paving speaks loudly enough for itself, and it is the less bearable because we know it replaces a most valuable and interesting ancient tile floor, replete with the reliable history that heraldry gives.\*

The stone-roofed porch should be noticed, and immediately facing it, in the churchyard, is a good example of an out-door panelled altar-tomb. It is much sunk and hidden in the grass. It is of about the date of 1480. Precisely similar examples may be seen in the churchyards of Thrapstone and Newland. The only other features outside that call for the attention of antiquaries are the windows at the east end and the south side of the church. The east window is old, with strange, straggling tracery; perhaps some of the original upper work is missing. Of the three windows on the south side, the first to the east and the second are good Late Decorated work, and the third, though different in style, is apparently not much so in date; perhaps, like the

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\* Mr. F. J. Robinson has been kind enough to bring under my notice, since the above paper was read, some drawings of this pavement made by himself many years ago. These show a border of tiles in sets of four, laid square, with geometric patterns, and enclosing a space of plain tiles set in lozenge, and each alternate row containing tiles with shields, in the following order:—(1) Three crosses *botonée fichée*, in chief two mullets of six points pierced; (2) a lion passant to the sinister; (3) the See of Lichfield (counter-changed *per bend sinister*); (4) a rose; (5) a cross *fimbriated*. Evidently Nos. 2 and 3 are reversed by the tile maker.

chancel window, it is a few years earlier than the others. All of them are very coarse work, even for Derbyshire, and one cannot apply with strictness the same rules as to dates of architecture in this county which are such certain guides in the valley of the Nene, for instance. Perhaps 1360 would not be far off the date of these windows. The extreme coarseness of their details, a quality so usual in Derbyshire, and the absence of the distinctive mouldings which are so usual in Northamptonshire, somewhat hamper the inquirers who are accustomed to the works of a more polished school.