

# THE CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, PYRFORD

BY

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THE ancient chapel of St. Nicholas is one of the two parish churches of Wisley-cum-Pyrford. Wisley and Pyrford churches were both built about 1140 but were not combined until 1631; before that Pyrford had been a chapel-of-ease of Woking.

The site of St. Nicholas is on a bluff overlooking the Wey valley at the side of a track which led up from a ford to the Pyrford Stone, 600 yards to the north. The church (Plate XVI) is one of the oldest in Surrey that stands as a complete building of one period; some changes have been made but the original Norman proportions remain unaltered by the additions of aisles, chapel or tower. A timber bell-turret has been built over the west end, a Tudor porch has been added outside the north door and a Victorian vestry outside the south. The oak shingles with which the turret was covered were replaced with cedar in 1967. The interior underwent some restoration in 1869; this was sympathetically carried out by the architect who later became the distinguished Sir Thomas Jackson. A talk to the Surrey Archæological Society on his restoration work was printed in Volume VII of the *Collections*, in which he described St. Nicholas as

the very model of a small English church. Nothing could be happier than the site that has been chosen for it, on the brow of a steep bank overlooking the broad meadows through which the river Wey winds, with Newark Priory in the middle distance and the chalk hills beyond. Nothing can be more perfectly artistic than the way in which the building is adapted to its site from every point of view. It is to these elements of design that the church owes its charm. Of positive architectural ornament it is almost bare, and none could be added without spoiling it.

The churchyard is enclosed by attractive horizontal rails and contains a fine yew which must be centuries old but there are no tombstones of note.

The massive Norman walls are built of a dark, flinty conglomerate or 'pudding-stone' with dressings of chalk-stone or 'clunch.' The walling was covered with a rough daubing of mortar now partly worn away to expose the conglomerate. Internally the diagonal axe marks of the Norman masons are clearly visible on many of the clunch dressings. Also visible are three consecration crosses—on the north and south walls of the chancel and on the west wall of the nave. The clunch bears as well several small 'dot and line' crosses such as are found in a number of other churches but whose origin is uncertain. Later Henry Slifield carved his name on the chancel arch with the date 1619; he was probably the son of 'George Slyfield of Pirford.'

The chancel has a fourteenth-century east window of two lights with a quatrefoil tracery light containing the only medieval stained glass in the church; it depicts the Trinity with the Holy Spirit shown as a dove over the cross (Plate XV). To the north is a little twelfth-century window; the corresponding window to the south was slightly enlarged in the thirteenth century with a pointed head with a label. Further west is a nineteenth-century recess, suggestive of a blocked doorway, but probably cut out to make space for a priest's stall. The chancel arch is of two plain orders with chamfered imposts. A drawing by Hassell, dated 1828, shows the semicircle of the arch filled with a pierced timber tympanum probably of seventeenth-century date.

The nave was refitted in the fifteenth century with new windows and new pews. The eastern window in the north wall is of this date with cinquefoiled square-headed lights but the other north and south windows are now entirely modern. The arch of the north doorway is enriched with chevron ornament and springs from chamfered imposts over nook-shafts with leaf capitals. The west shaft has been removed and let into the jamb is a stone stoup, now broken, probably contemporary with the porch. The south doorway is narrower and has a plain semicircular arch, much restored. In the west wall are two small twelfth-century windows flanking a fifteenth-century buttress. The placing of the windows suggests that there was an original buttress in the same position. The present buttress and those at the north-west and south-west corners were probably built when the bell turret was added. These buttresses are of Sarsen stone (the word comes from 'Saracen,' i.e. foreign) which occurs in the local subsoil of Bagshot Sand.

Of the oak pews, those at the back by the south door remain almost untouched; the others had been 'sadly mutilated by the addition of high tops' according to Jackson, 'but we were able to repair and keep the greater number.' Hassell's drawing shows box pews in the eastern part of the nave and extending into the west end of the chancel, with the parson's reading desk appearing on the north side of the nave. Clear marks of the hinges for doors remain on a number of the pew ends.

The north porch is framed in timber with plastered panels, now partly repaired in brickwork. The north gable has its original pierced bargeboards.

The roofs of chancel and nave were probably renewed in the fifteenth century. They are of trussed-rafter construction with vertical ashlar pieces under the lower ends of the rafters, carried on cornice-beams tenoned into the tie-beams. The underside of the roof timbers was at one time covered by a ceiling and this also covered a celure, a canopy over the Rood, at the east end of the nave. The celure is formed of feather-edged, grooved boarding framed by an embattled moulding. It was uncovered by Jackson who recorded that it was painted 'with yellow flowers and rosettes on a red ground . . . The pattern is very hard to decipher.' Below the celure, five mortices in the top of the tie-beam over the chancel arch

provide evidence for the figures of the Rood; repairs to the north and south cornices suggest the existence of a second beam in front of the Rood for lights or for the front of a loft.

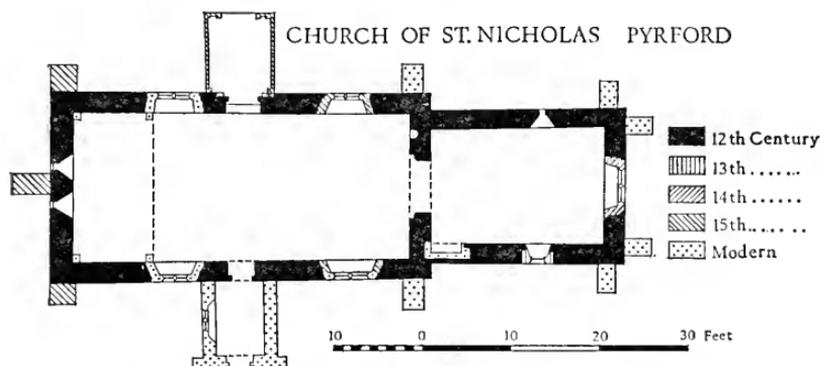


FIG. 1.—PYRFORD CHURCH. PLAN

*The Wall Paintings.* Two series of wall paintings were found in 1869 by Jackson. The later series, presumably post-Reformation, could not be preserved, as they were on 'a very loose and tender coat of whitewash.' The removal of this exposed traces of Norman wall paintings on a harder plaster. Professor Tristram, who dated them at about 1200, described those on the north wall as too slight to be identified: 'the most that can be said is that they are not inconsistent with the traditional rendering of the Funeral of the Virgin.'

On the south wall the remains were of

a Flagellation, in which part of the figure of Christ, bound to a column, is visible, and to the left a tormentor, clad in a tunic patterned with spots, wielding a scourge; and adjacent to this subject, one in which a bearded figure appears, possibly Christ . . . and another possibly seated on a throne. On the right, remains of a masonried building survive.

Early in 1967 this painting—part of a series of scenes of Our Lord's Passion—was repaired by Mrs. Eve Baker's skilled assistants, as it was found to be deteriorating. Underneath it they discovered another painting. This remarkable find was identified by Mr. Clive Rouse and Dr. Audrey Baker as a *Psychomachia*, i.e. a representation of the struggle between good and evil. It may have been a fresco, and its primitive style confirms that the church dates from no later than 1140. Both wall paintings are in red ochre, but the later is in outline and the earlier in 'solid colour.'

The newly-revealed painting (Plate XVII) shows mounted horsemen fighting with spears, and a row of figures wearing conical hats and carrying staves. These figures are apparently unique to Pyrford; so far, at least, no one has been able to identify them.

The stone corbel, which has unfortunately been superimposed on the paintings, is a fourteenth-century image bracket; it was probably removed from over a side altar to the south of the chancel arch,

perhaps when the pulpit was installed. That there was an altar to the north of the arch is indicated by the plain niche to be seen there. This too would have held an image.

*The Pulpit.* The Jacobean pulpit, with its sounding-board and fine brass candlesticks, is a feature of the church (Plate XIV). Jackson removed a thick layer of white paint which had been spread all over it in the eighteenth century (as recorded in the churchwardens' accounts), disclosing its unusual combination of woods—red deal, oak, and walnut or cedar. Some of the panels had decayed and were repaired; he supplied a new base, as the original one had disappeared, and also provided particularly well-made fittings for the door.

The pulpit bears the date 1628 and the initials N. B. There was a Nicholas Burley in the early seventeenth century who lived in The Old House in Pyrford, where his initials are carved on a fireplace. He it was, surely, who presented the pulpit to the church.

*The Communion Table* is of approximately the same date as the pulpit.

*The Bells* have no decipherable inscriptions but one appears to be medieval and the other eighteenth-century. An inventory of the church's possessions, drawn up in the reign of Edward VI, includes the item, '2 belles in the steeple.'

*The Plate.* The chief piece is a beautifully designed silver cup with a cover, both hallmarked 1570. There is also a late seventeenth-century pewter paten, and a much restored pewter flagon of the same date.

*Memorials.* An oval tablet on the north wall of the chancel commemorates Richard Owen Cambridge of Ripley who died in 1804, aged 14. Above it is a shield-of-arms of Onslow, probably from a seventeenth-century memorial. By the south door is a grave-slab of Sussex marble to John Langston, 1633.

*The Font* is Victorian.

*The Organ* was presented in 1964, but the old mellow pipes of the previous one have been retained.

#### SOME HISTORICAL NOTES

The first mention of Pyrford was in 956, when King Eadwig made a grant of land at Pyrianford to his friend Eadrig. Later the manor of Piriforde was among the possessions of King Harold which were seized by William the Conqueror. He granted part of it (together with Battersea) to the Abbey of Westminster in exchange for Windsor. Then in 1087 he gave the remainder of his lands at Pyrford to the Abbey 'for the health of his soul,' in a royal writ which carries one of the five genuine impressions of his Great Seal.

The Abbot was lord of the manor of Pyrford for nearly five centuries, but the Abbey's records do not include any reference to the building or maintenance of the church.

Newark Priory, whose ruins in the water meadows can be seen from the churchyard, was founded more than fifty years after St.

Nicholas was built. In 1258 the Prior bought the advowson of Pyrford from Westminster Abbey for forty marks; he also owned the livings of Horsell and Woking, and combined all three under Woking.

After the Dissolution the manor of Pyrford reverted to the Crown. In 1558 Queen Mary granted Pyrford to the Priory of Sheen, which she refounded, but it became Crown land again when Sheen was suppressed by Queen Elizabeth. Throughout the Abbey's ownership of Pyrford a house had been maintained there for the Abbot's use, and it had been exempt from the many taxes and restrictions suffered by the surrounding countryside which remained in the royal forest of Windsor.

St. Nicholas' early records were destroyed by fire; the register goes back only to 1665. A board in the church lists the incumbents from the annexation of the perpetual curacy of Pyrford to the rectory of Wisley in 1631, and this list can be extended back to 1535 from the Winchester diocesan archives. Pyrford was of course in the diocese of Winchester until the creation of the diocese of Guildford, so it was by a licence from the Bishop of Winchester that, for instance, in the reign of Edward III the Abbot of Westminster was allowed to have mass celebrated by his monks in the chapel of Pyrford for the space of one year.

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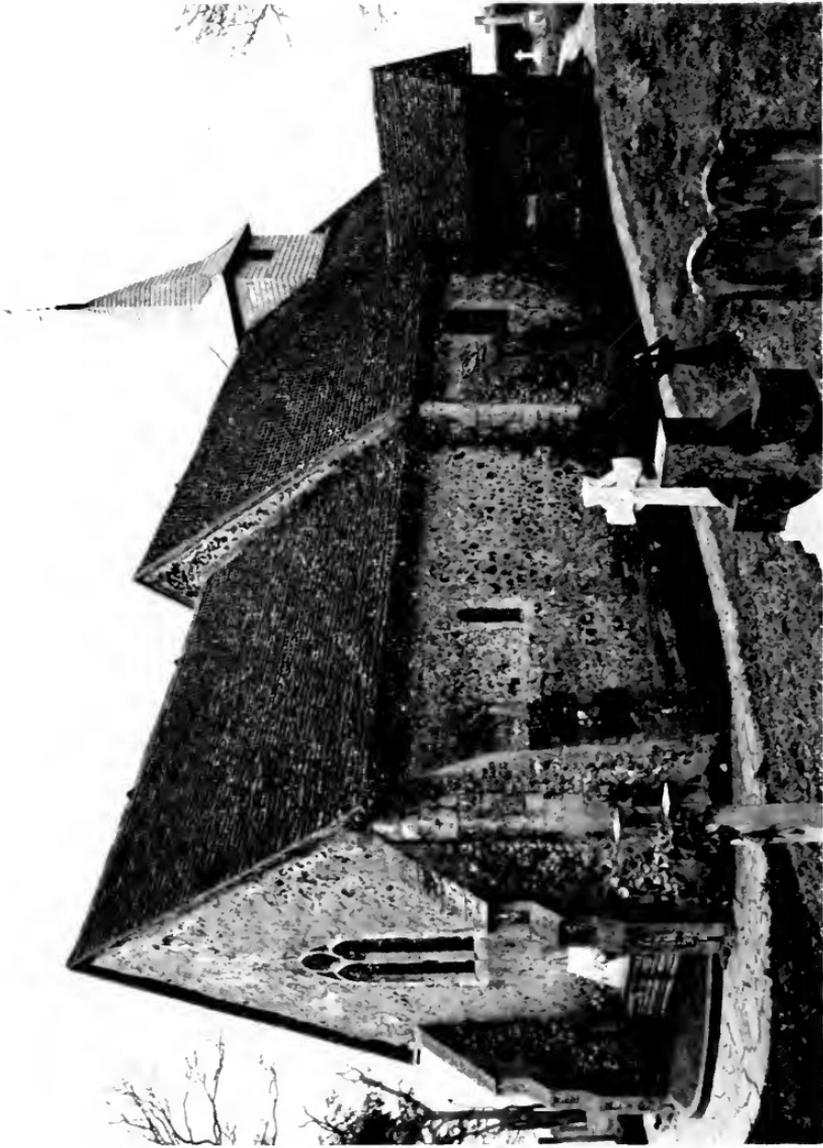
*(Photo: National Monuments Record.)*

PYRFORD CHURCH. PULPIT.



*[Photo: National Monuments Record.]*

PYRFORD CHURCH. TRINITY IN EAST WINDOW.



[Photo: National Monuments Record.]

PYRFORD CHURCH FROM NORTH-EAST.



*Photo: D. E. King.*

PYRFORD CHURCH. PAINTINGS ON SOUTH WALL.