ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, SONNING.

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A CHURCH has no doubt existed at Sonning since the ninth or tenth century, as we know that Saxon Bishops resided at Sonning before A.D. 900; but no part of the present fabric is probably older than about the reign of Henry II., 1180. Portions of an older building are, however, worked into the masonry of the Tower, and one stone close to the buttress of the north-west gable of the Church is well worthy of notice. It is supposed to be part of a Saxon-inscribed cross, which is recorded to have stood at Sonning. The oldest parts of the present building are the south doorway and the small two-light window above it. Those have the only round arches in the Church, and are of Norman date, probably not later than A.D. 1180, for a few years later, about A.D. 1200, we find the pointed Gothic Arch coming into general use. There, is in the inside of the Church, one other relic of Norman times, namely, the beautiful twisted column on which the alms-box is placed against a pillar in the north aisle. This little column was found during the repairs of the Church, built into part of the chancel wall, and it had evidently been thrown away, and used simply as material for filling up the middle of a wall at some bad time of alteration and disfigurement.

It is difficult to decide what was the exact form and appearance of the Church before the Reformation. The *South Chancel Aisle* is of a much more recent date, about A.D. 1620. The *North Chancel Aisle* is earlier, but that and the *North Aisle* of the Church can hardly be earlier than A.D. 1500. There is a record of an ancient chapel at the east end of the Church, dedicated to *St. Sarac* or Saric, which was famous in the middle ages as a place of pilgrimage for persons afflicted with madness. This Chapel was probably an addition at the east end of the Chancel, and traces of its foundation have been discovered in digging graves in that part of the churchyard.

There is some reason also to think that the Church at one time extended further at the west end, because the last of the columns on both sides of the Nave goes into the wall of the Tower in such a way as to make it probable there was another bay beyond, and some confirmation is given to this view from the fact that the present Tower is evidently of a much more recent date than the Nave of the Church. *The Tower*, which is of the late perpendicular style, seems to have been built about the time of the Reformation, and it is thought that it was made up greatly out of old materials from those parts of the Church (for instance, the Chapel of St. Sarac) which

were then pulled down. This would account for our finding large blocks of stone of all kinds, sometimes elaborately carved, interspersed with the flint-work. The *ancient fabric*, therefore, before the Reformation, was probably longer than the present Church, both at the east and west ends, but must have been substantially what we see it now, only without the South Chancel Aisle and the Tower. Any one can see by looking at the position of the outside buttress at the east end of the South Aisle, with the *ancient sun-dial* upon it, that the building originally ended there.

The oldest and the finest portion is the beautiful *South Aisle*, which belongs to the very best time of decorated Gothic Architecture of the reign of Edward III., 1350. Next in age to this comes *the Nave*, with its fine piers of massive chalk, dating probably from A.D. 1400. Of the same date is the *Chancel*, the east window of which is a fair specimen of the decorated style. Then come the *North Aisle* and the *North Chancel Aisle*, both built, as we said before, somewhere about A.D. 1500. This we gather from the lower pitch of the roof, showing that the style was becoming debased, and from the very meagre, low-arched windows, all of which disappeared at the restoration of the Church in 1852. Of the two *Porches*, the *South* one is entirely new; the highest praise that can be given to it is, that it has frequently been taken for an ancient work. The *North Porch* belongs to the time of the North Aisle (about 1500); it was lengthened about two feet in 1852, and new windows and a new doorway were given to it. One word about the general appearance of the Church *before the restoration in 1852*. The building was substantially the same as it is now; all the roofs are the old ones except the roof of the Nave; this was found to be so out of repair, that it was necessary to remove it, and when the roof was off, it was determined to raise the walls above the Arches, and to put in the clerestory windows. The other five roofs are the old ones, but they were ceiled beneath the rafters, their height being thus considerably diminished, and all of them were carefully white-washed.

Imagine then six ceiled roofs, all nearly the same height, and all white-washed. Imagine also all the walls, all the arches, and the pillars, and the stone-work of the windows of one uniform whiteness. Imagine all the windows on the North Aisle and in the South Chancel Aisle, and in the two Western Gables nearly square-headed, and you have the general frame-work of the interior of the Church. There was a huge gallery running along the whole of the west-end, and advancing far into the body of the Church. This must have been erected at the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when at the rise of the Puritan party in the Church, these hideous structures began to come into fashion. This gallery contained the organ, with a seat in front for the singers, and several large pews. It was curious to look down from this eminence on the high square pews, resembling cattle pens, which filled the Church.

Another gallery, erected in 1791, stretched along the North Aisle, containing five large pews, all with doors and lined with green baize.

The pulpit stood where the present pulpit is; it was of oak, of the reign of James I., but when cleared from its yellow paint, it contrasted so unfavourably with the new work that it was replaced with one more suitable to the restored Church. It was interesting as having been once preached in by Archbishop Laud (who was beheaded in 1645). In his diary he mentions that, whilst staying at Hurst, he came over to preach in Sonning.

There were *three screens* dividing the Church from the Chancel and Chancel Aisles; two of these are simply removed further back, and the central one which was very inferior, was removed altogether. The *Vestry* was where it is now, containing the fine old table of the reign of James I., and the chair at the head of it. There was an oak bench of the same date running all round the Vestry, where was formerly held the Court and Visitation of the Dean of Sarum, to whose peculiar jurisdiction the Parish of Sonning originally belonged. Just outside the Vestry stood an ugly and uninteresting Font, which was removed to a church in Glamorganshire, the present *Font*, as well as its handsome *cover*—the work of Mr. Rattee, the celebrated wood-carver, of Cambridge—having been placed in its present position in 1852. The font and pulpit were both executed by Messrs. Wheeler, of Reading. A word about the position of the *Monuments*. The large monument to the Barker family, and that to Lady Litcott, stood on either side of the east window. Westmacott's monument to Lady Reade, filled up the whole of the Arch within the Sacrarium, opposite to the *Sculptured Arch*.

The history of this beautiful Arch, the most remarkable feature in the interior of the Church, is unknown. In Lyson's "Magna Britannia," it is only spoken of as "an elegant pointed arch, very richly ornamented with figures of saints." It may possibly have been raised over what was called an Easter Sepulchre, that is, a place for the performance of certain solemn rites commemorative of our Lord's Resurrection, or it may have stood on the shrine of a saint, or it may have been erected over the tomb of some benefactor of the Church. There are good reasons for supposing that it is not now in its original position, and Canon Pearson thinks it not improbable that it may have been connected with the chapel and shrine of St. Sarac, and have been spared in consideration of the beauty of its workmanship, when the Chapel itself was removed at the Reformation. In 1852 most of the heads of the statues were gone, and the canopies and bosses were choked up with whitewash, so that it was impossible to tell whether the material was stone or chalk. It was repaired by Mr. Philip (who has since become a distinguished sculptor); the arch was taken down stone by stone, and carefully re-worked, as far as could be ascertained according to its original design, in the Vicarage. The front to the Chancel represents "Christ blessing the Twelve Apostles." The figure of our Lord with the hands raised in the act of benediction, occupies the key-stone. There are seven figures on each hand, the first from the top on either side being angels. On the front towards the Vestry, the key-stone contains the Virgin and Child, and in this we

have, perhaps, the nearest clue that can be obtained to anything like the history of the Arch, for the Virgin and Child are represented exactly as they appear in the Arms of the See of Salisbury; and it would seem, therefore, that we may connect the Arch with some of the Bishops of Salisbury, who, as we know, had a palace in Holme Park at Sonning, and constantly resided there until the Reformation. On either side of the Virgin and Child are two upturned faces, partially veiled, in the act of adoration; next to them are two singularly beautiful figures of angels swinging censers, and below them, it is conjectured, Kings and Queens under canopies. Mr. Woodyer placed a slab of stone underneath the Arch, which now serves the purpose of a Credence table. The Arch as it now appears, is certainly a great adornment to the Church, and is an object of much interest to all archæologians.

It may be well to notice here the other relics of ancient carving which the Church possesses. Everyone remarks the *little niche on the chalk pillar in front of the North door* as you enter. The image is gone, but the carved work on the pedestal of the niche remains, sharp and clear, and is well worth noticing. On another pillar on the opposite side of the Church, are the remains of what must have been *a stoup or basin for holy water*; this is also elaborately and richly carved in chalk. The beautiful little Norman twisted pillar has been already referred to. One other relic may be mentioned, the *Piscina*, which is now in the Vestry in the North Chancel Aisle. It was discovered behind the high boarding of a pew, at the east end of the south wall of the Church, and its position indicated on the inside what the buttress does on the outside, that this was originally the end of the Church. The Piscina was always placed near an altar, for the purpose of cleansing the vessels used in the Sacramental Service, and, no doubt, a side altar stood in this South Aisle. It is of stone, of a simple and excellent design, and belongs, like the aisle in which it was found, to the best period of decorated architecture.

In opening the vault under the vestry, belonging to the Blagrave family, who formerly lived at Bulmershe, a curious discovery was made. Against the wall at the east end of the vault was placed the stone monument representing several *figures kneeling*, which is now in the wall of the South Chancel Aisle, close to the organ. There was no name upon it, but there is every reason to believe it was a memorial to some members of the Blagrave family. It represents *six kneeling figures, three male and three female*, of the date of the reign of James I., with a curious and now hardly decipherable inscription underneath.

The best of the ancient monuments is that to Lady Litcott. It is of black and white alabaster. She is represented kneeling at a fald-stool or prayer-desk. It is interesting to trace the gradual change from the old mediæval monuments to those of modern times. Up to the Reformation the figures of the dead on monumental tombs were always represented in a recumbent posture, with the hands clasped as if in prayer. There then followed a period of transition, during which the effigies were placed, like that of Lady Litcott and the

figures taken out of the vault, in a kneeling attitude. Later on, after the great Rebellion, the modern half-heathen designs, of figures weeping over urns, of broken columns, of flickering lamps, of death's-heads and cross-bones, and the like prevailed. Of the latter kind is the *monument to Sir Thomas Rich*, Bart., a great benefactor to Sonning, who died in 1667; it was removed last year from the Rich Chapel, where the Organ now stands, and placed under the Tower. He enlarged the Blue-coat School at Reading, and provided that there should always be three boys from Sonning Parish educated in it. It is of Italian workmanship, of black and white marble, and must have cost an immense sum of money. It consists of four colossal naked cherubs or cupids shedding tears, and supporting on their wings a vast black marble slab, on which stand two large white marble urns. Lysons, in his "Magna Britannia," may well say, "The monument to Sir Thomas Rich is *very heavy*."

We have great reason to be proud of our peal of bells. They are eight in number, and of excellent tone and quality. Six of them have short and appropriate inscriptions, and bear the dates 1640 or 1641. The treble was found to be cracked, and was re-cast by Messrs. Mears in 1852. Number three must be spoken of separately, as it contains an inscription of singular historical interest. "*Ecclesiæ, Reginæ, Sacheverellisque Cano Laudes*," "Of the Church, of the Queen, and of Sacheverell, I sing the praises:" the date is 1711, "R. Phelps, fecit." Who would have thought that our Church should be brought into any kind of connection with the famous Dr. Sacheverell. He is almost forgotten now, but in the reign of Queen Anne, from the year 1709 to 1713, his name was in everyone's mouth from one end of England to the other. A few words must be said to explain this, and to account for the extraordinary circumstance of his name being found on a Church Bell. Dr. Sacheverell was a Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and Preacher at St. Saviour's, Southwark. In 1709 he preached two famous sermons, the first at Derby, and the second before the Lord Mayor at St. Paul's Cathedral, on the 5th November, upon St. Paul's words, "Perils from false brethren." These sermons having been printed, came under the notice of the House of Commons on account of their violent attack on the Government and abuse of the Revolution as an unrighteous change. 40,000 copies had been distributed throughout the kingdom, through the efforts of the Tories and High Church party. The House of Commons ordered him to appear before the Bar, and after he had admitted the authorship of the sermons, it was resolved that he should be impeached. The trial was put off till the next year, and in the mean time the High Church party had agitated so earnestly in his favour, that the popular opinion was all on his side. At his trial before the House of Lords in Westminster Hall, Sacheverell was attended by the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, and above 100 of the most eminent clergymen in London. Queen Anne herself was present, and as she entered Westminster Hall, the people pressed upon her, exclaiming, "We hope your Majesty is for God and Dr. Sacheverell."

He was, however, found guilty, prohibited from preaching for three years, and his two sermons were ordered to be burnt by the common hangman. This comparatively lenient sentence was regarded rather as an acquittal than a condemnation, and the populace who looked upon him as the Champion of the Church, celebrated the event as a grand ecclesiastical triumph. There were bonfires and rejoicings both in London and all over England, and when in the following year, 1711, (the year of the casting of the bell), he set out to take possession of a living in Shropshire, to which he had been appointed, his journey to Oxford and thence to the North, was a continued triumph. He must have passed very near Sonning. It is a most curious evidence of his immense notoriety, and of the importance attached to his trial, that so permanent a record as the inscription on a bell should have been devoted to his fame. It is also a proof that Sonning itself took the liveliest interest in the public affairs of the day, and sided with the Tory and High Church party.

On the door into the Tower, Mr. Woodyer has pointed out the use and object of the bells by engraving on the hinges the following words: "*Deum Laudo, Vivos voco, Mortuos ploro.*" "I praise God, I call the living, I bewail the dead." I have only time to mention our best and most valuable monumental brass. In the centre of the Chancel lies the figure of a man in complete armour, his hands clasped in prayer and his feet resting on a lion. At the four corners of the stone are coats of arms. The inscription is in Latin, the English translation of it being: "*Here lies Laurence Fyton, Esq., formerly Bailiff of Sonning, who died March 29th,* A.D. *1434, upon whose soul God have mercy. Amen.*" Out of the mouth of the brass figure issues a scroll with these words, "*my soul shall live, it shall praise Thee, and Thy judgments shall help me.*" This brass is mentioned by Leland, the antiquarian, in the account he gives of Sonning in his Itinerary, about the year 1540.

In the South Aisle there is a monumental slab with a large brass let into it, to the memory of *Lord Stowell*, father-in-law of Lord Sidmouth, who was Prime Minister from 1801 to 1804, and lived at Earley Court. It bears the following inscription: "*The Right Hon. Lord Stowell, died 28th January, 1836, in his 91st year.*" Compare with this the recumbent figure of Laurence Fyton, his hands clasped in prayer, and the verse in his mouth from the 119th Psalm, expressive of joyful hope, and I think few persons will doubt to which monument the preference must be given.

You will probably be surprised to hear that *Sonning claims the dignity of having once been an Episcopal See.* Florence, of Canterbury, who lived in the reign of Henry I., speaks throughout his History of the See of Ramsbury, but in the catalogue which he gives of its Bishops, he calls them all "Episcopi Sunnungenses," "Bishops of Sunning." Camden, Leland, Bishop Godwin, Dr. Heylin, and others, all speak of the Bishops of Sonning; but on the other hand it is maintained that they are usually styled in the ancient Charters, "Episcopi Corvinensis Ecclesiæ," *i.e.*, Bishops of the See of Ravens-

bury, or *Ramsbury*, Corvus being Latin for Raven. The conclusion to which we must come seems to be this, that the Bishops were generally known as Bishops of Ramsbury, but that as they resided equally at Sonning, they were considered also Bishops of Sonning. The See of Sonning or Ramsbury was merged first into the See of Sherborne, and then into the See of Salisbury at the time of the Conquest. It is pleasant to think that though Sonning is now only a village, it must once have been a place much more widely known, and even of national interest. Beyond all doubt there were for 150 years Bishops residing here, holding their services and ordinations in the ancient Saxon Church which unquestionably stood on the present site, and exercising jurisdiction over the whole of the surrounding country, and no less than three (Odo, Sigiric, and Alfric), out of the eleven Bishops of Sonning whose names have come down to us, were translated to the Archi-episcopal throne of Canterbury. Sonning was, moreover, the residence of the Bishops of Salisbury from the time of the Conquest to the Reformation, and this accounts for what is otherwise very rarely seen, the Chancel is as long as the Nave. Being an Episcopal residence it, of course, brought a large addition to the Clerical Staff of the Parish, and the whole body of Clergy and Choir, together with the Bishop and his attendants, would have conducted the services in the Church.

In conclusion, let me add, that I am entirely indebted for the contents of this paper, which have not, I trust, been without interest, to a history of Sonning Church and Parish written for the *Monthly Magazine*, by Canon Pearson, commencing as long ago as 1869, and continued at intervals up to the present time.