Benson, or Bensington.

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PART II.—THE CHURCH.

NOTE.—The substance of this Paper was read on the occasion of a visit of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, 26th May, 1894. Much of it is derived from notes which were taken by the writer at the time of the rebuilding of the Chancel in 1861-2.

THE second mention of Bensington in the Saxon Chronicle is two centuries after the date of its conquest by the Saxons. In 777 Cynewulf of Wessex and Offa of Mercia "fought about Bensington, and Offa took the town." By this defeat of the King of Wessex all the neighbouring district, as far south as the line of the Berkshire Downs, was added to the Mercian kingdom.

In the meantime the Christian faith had been preached hereabouts by the missionary bishop, St. Birinus, or, as the old tradition of the neighbourhood more correctly names him, St. Berin. His see-town was at Dorchester, on the Thames; and, as Bede tells us, he built and dedicated Churches. We can hardly doubt that Bensington, three miles from Dorchester, had become a place of sufficient importance to have one of these churches; and it is reasonable to suppose that the present church occupies its site, though it shows no remains of the Saxon period. In the neighbouring villages of Crowmarsh Gifford and Swyncombe, which originally belonged to this manor, and perhaps at Nuffield also, the churches are of pre-Norman date; and we may certainly assume that the chief village of the manor also had a stone church before the present one was built in the late Norman days. Moreover, its dedication is to St. Helen; and, as we are reminded by Mr. Pearman in his recently published *History of the Manor of Bensington*,

this is the Saint whom Offa favoured in the dedication of churches which he built; whence we may infer that very probably the primitive wooden church of Bensington was at once superseded by one of stone after the Mercian conquest.

We have also a legend which is not without its value in connection with the foundation of the church, since it seems to imply that one was erected here in the earliest days of Saxon Christianity. Half-a-mile up the village is a barn in a grass close which was formerly church property; and the story, often met with elsewhere, is told here, that the barn occupies the spot where the church was to have been built, but as the builders attempted to begin their work the stones were always removed in the night by evil spirits to the other site near the river. We infer, according to the accepted interpretation of the legend, that the Saxon missionaries wished to build the church upon a new site in order to detach their converts more completely from their Pagan usages, while the superstition of those converts, which their teachers attributed to the evil spirits of heathenism, insisted upon the other site, doubtless because it had been connected with their former worship. We have already seen that the church is almost certainly built upon the primitive embankment of the British village.

At the time of the Domesday Survey, and probably from the time of the Saxon conquest, the manor of Bensington belonged to the King; and the importance of the Parish Church of the manor is shown by the fact that as late as the first year of Edward I. not only the neighbouring churches of Warborough and Nettlebed, but also that of Henley, nearly twelve miles distant, are described as chapelries of the mother-church of Bensington.

The Empress Matilda, who died in 1167, appears to have been lady of the manor; for she bestowed the church of Bensington with all its possessions upon Dorchester Abbey, the grant being afterwards confirmed by her son, King Henry II., and her grandsons, Richard I. and John. We may presume that the empress was not in a position to make such a gift until the accession of her son in 1154. It is evident that the Canons of Dorchester built Benson church anew shortly after it came into their possession.

This church of the twelfth century no doubt consisted of a simple nave and chancel of plain design. Nothing now remains of it but the round-headed windows and doorway of the chancel, having no other ornament than plain external dripstones. In 1861 it was found necessary to rebuild the chancel; and this was done,

under the direction of the late Mr. Charles Buckeridge, of Oxford, exactly upon the old lines, most of the old stonework being inserted again; though the walls, which had previously been of the soft local stone, were now encased with flint. The three side windows were replaced as they had been before, except that in the two beside the altar, which had been destroyed externally and blocked up internally, the sills were now lowered to form sedilia and credence-shelf. The doorway also was replaced, but was moved further eastward. Its original position is shown in the woodcut in Mr. Parker's *Guide to the Architectural Antiquities in the Neighbourhood of Oxford* (1846). A second window on the north side was not replaced, in consequence of the erection of a new vestry and organ-chamber. The east end must be described presently.

Within half a century after its erection the church was enlarged, and the new work was carried out with more elaboration than the old. The chancel-arch is an insertion of this period. A bold hood-moulding is carried over it both outside and inside, but the outer one had been cut away and is a restoration. The arch and jambs are further ornamented with wide chamfers, and with a series of mouldings on each impost, the one varied from the other. Traces of colour also remain upon the imposts. Parker's mention of "a head for a corbel" is an inexplicable mistake. At the foot of the arch on each side there are indications of a raised stone base for a screen having been extended across the front of the chancel, ten inches above the level of the original step; and the outer chamfer on the south side of the arch is carried down to this base, while the three other chamfers are stopped twenty-one inches above it, suggesting the idea that stairs to a pulpit or rood loft may have formed part of the design. As the moulded imposts of the arch have been somewhat roughly patched, it may be inferred that a rood loft has been removed. The levels of the chancel-floor were altered in 1862 when it was found desirable to add a second step at the arch, and a footpace was also added for the altar; but two broad steps before the altar are a reproduction of the ancient levels.

The character of the circular piers of the nave, with arches similar to the chancel arch, shows that the aisles were added not later that the early years of the thirteenth century. There is another relic of the Norman church in the easternmost pier on the north side, in front of the pulpit. It differs from the others in size and in shape and in the character of its masonry. Being thicker than the others, and flattened at the sides, and encased in smaller

stones instead of built with solid stones, it is evidently part of the wall of a Norman nave, left standing while the aisle arches were cut through. A familiar example of this mode of treatment is at Cuddesden, where the piers are octagonal, and the upper parts of the Norman buttresses are to be seen above them in the aisles. We may suppose that at Benson the builders were dissatisfied with their clumsy piece of work and proceeded to erect the remaining piers from the ground. The pier that has been described and two of the others have good deep mouldings upon the caps; but the remaining three have remarkably fine conventional foliage, the design being apparently suggested by the leaf of a river-plant; and as these piers first catch the eye from the south door, their position may possibly give the reason for their greater enrichment. The plain circular font is coeval with the arcades; and its original place was in front of the westernmost pier on the south side, the pier being set back and the arch widened that it might not block the entrance. The font has been removed a few paces to the south-west, and now stands at the end of the aisle. The east window of this south aisle, with angle-shafts and square foliated caps outside, is a beautiful specimen of the same period. It belonged originally to the north aisle, where it had been built up at the erection of a former vestry behind it, but was discovered when the present arch was cut through in 1862, and was afterwards inserted in its present position. The south-east buttress of this aisle was found to be original when some of its coating of cement was recently removed. On the whole, therefore, the south aisle fairly represents the Early English extension of the church.

But the side-windows and doorway of the south aisle are insertions of the Decorated style of the fourteenth century; and we may presume that the north aisle was widened to its present dimensions at the same time. Its side-windows are of that date; for though their tracery is cut out, two of them are in all other respects original, and have good hood-mouldings. Of the same date also was the old east-window of the chancel, of three lights and ogeed net-work tracery, similar to that which still exists at Warborough; but when the chancel was re-built in 1862, three lancets were substituted. Its roof is a reproduction of the original one, and the same date must be assigned to it. It appears from Parker's *Guide*, already referred to, that the chancel had also buttresses of the fourteenth century at the eastern angles; and a mistaken inference is drawn that it was lengthened at that date, which was disproved by

the discovery of the Norman side-windows at the east end. A gable-cross shown in the illustration in the same book is an invention of the artist; for there remained the lower portion of a St. Andrew's cross on a circle, similar to one which may still be seen on the Decorated chancel at Brightwell Baldwin. Thus we find that the Canons of Dorchester were making large improvements at Benson, at the same period that they were completing their own Abbey-Church in its present form.

Towards the close of the fifteenth century, or perhaps early in the sixteenth, a low-pitched roof was placed upon the nave. The Tudor Roses in the spandrils over the cross-beams suggest that it is not earlier than the time of Henry VII., and they may be connected with the fact that the King still continued to be lord of the manor down to the time of Charles I. The cross-beams rest upon wooden corbels, some with simple mouldings and some with grotesque masks; but the corbels of the beam fronting the chancel-arch are larger and of more elaborate character, each having an angel, the one with a musical instrument and the other with a shield, evidently to give additional dignity to the easternmost bay of the roof in front of the rood. The lead of the roof is dated outside, 1628, the year in which (as stated in Mr. Pearman's *History*) King Charles I. made a grant of the Manor to Ditchfield, Highlord, and others, of the City of London.

The roof of the north-aisle is of the same date as that of the nave. It is ornamented with a large boss at each intersection of the beams, the designs being similar to those of the corbels in the nave. The central boss is a mask, and three others have floral ornaments; but in the easternmost bay there is an angel holding a book, and the timbers of this bay are moulded while the others are plain; from which we infer that the aisle had a chantry chapel. The easternmost pier also has been grooved and plugged on its eastern and northern sides, and the eastern respond of the arch is similarly marked, showing that this chapel was enclosed by a wooden screen. Similar indications of a screen may be seen in the south aisle. The woodwork of these screens was evidently used in constructing the dormer windows of the eighteenth century in the north-aisle. It is probably, like the roof, of late Perpendicular date.

Nothing is known of the former tower except that it contained four bells, as stated in an Inventory of 7th Edward VI., and that it stood at the west end, where some portion of it must have been incorporated in the present tower, since the contract for the re-build-

ing shows that it was not to be entirely taken down. The present tower, nearly 22 feet square at the base, is the full width of the nave, and is built about ten feet into the western bay, so that the chief part of the first arch on each side is now embedded in the tower walls. The inference is that the old tower was of small dimensions, and that the rebuilders encased its west front, wholly or in part, in their new work, while they extended its area considerably on the other sides.

The tower was re-built in 1780, "up to the lower sill of the belfry windows"; and an aged person lately deceased stated that his mother had remembered its being roofed for a time with thatch; but it was completed before the close of 1781. It is a very substantial specimen of Georgian Gothic; and its four massive pinnacles give it a dignified appearance from a distance. There are eight bells; seven of them dated 1781, the other re-cast in 1852.

The nave being now shortened by the building of the tower, the aisles were at the same time shorn of their western bays. There was until 1864 a Georgian window at the end of the north aisle, and no doubt a duplicate of it was formerly in the south aisle. We may presume also that a doorway in the north aisle, opposite the south doorway, was destroyed at this time; for a side window like the others (doubtless taken out from the western bay) has been clumsily inserted in the next bay.

Galleries had been erected in the central portion of each aisle and across the west end of the nave. This last was dated 1727, and remained until 1862. It is said that the pulpit once stood against the first pier on the south. These facts probably give the date of the three irregular clerestory windows on the south, and explain their position; the one being intended to light the pulpit, and the others the west gallery. We may also conclude that the screens were destroyed and the dormer-windows formed in the north-aisle at the same time. The side galleries were removed and the church was re-seated in 1852. At the same time the aisle-arches were unfortunately coated with cement.

In the chancel there was panelling up to the sills of the windows, bearing date 1713. A high pew on each side, with doors between, closed the entrance. A large boarding with Royal Arms was fixed to the west wall of the nave until 1862; and as its shape and measurements corresponded with those of the chancel arch above the imposts, it was doubtless designed for this position. In the spandrils above the chancel arch were large figures of Moses

and Aaron painted upon the wall, and dated 1717. These adornments must be supposed to have been the work of "Mr. Richard Wise, Gent.," who died in 1740, and appears to have been the lessee of the rectorial rights after the death of his brother, John Wise, "linen draper and cittizen of London," in 1711; both of them being buried in the chancel.

An unsatisfactory renovation of the south-aisle took place in 1841. The Decorated doorway remains, and Parker's *Guide* in 1846 speaks of the side-windows as "lately well restored," but makes no mention of the east and west windows. The Churchwardens' accounts show that new ones were inserted as an afterthought when the aisle was renovated. The west end must have had a Georgian window coeval with the tower; and perhaps at the east end a similar window had superseded the early English lancet in order to give more light to the gallery. The new windows of 1841 were single lights with ogeed heads, modelled on the pattern of the two-light side-windows. That at the west still remains; but in 1864, when the early east window of the north aisle was brought to the south aisle (as stated above), the modern east window from this place was taken to supersede the Georgian west window of the north aisle. A record of this transposition of the windows may save future antiquarian students some perplexity. The repairs of 1841 also included a poor and flimsy roof to the south aisle and a porch of the same character. An engraving by W. Willis, 1830, shows a tasteless Georgian porch with flat roof and embattled parapet.

Before the vestry and organ-chamber were added on the north side of the chancel in 1862, there was a small vestry in the angle of the chancel and the north aisle. It had a square-headed window of two lights and a stone chimney-head, both of good modern work, corresponding with the work of 1841 in the south aisle; and the contractor shortly afterwards used them in building a house in the village, where they may easily be mistaken for old work. But the interest of the vestry consisted in the fragments found in its walls. There were the broken portions of a fine head-stone, of about the thirteenth century, with an ornamental cross on each side, the two designs being different but of similar character; and also a round-headed gravestone, probably of earlier date, having on one side a plain cross and a margin in low relief, simply formed by chisselling out four spaces; but these stones were unfortunately built into the new walls and lost. There were also several early English caps and bases, apparently of window-shafts; and hence it seems evident that

the vestry was built at the same time as the tower, and that these were portions of the windows from the ends of the shortened aisles, similar to the window already noticed which was blocked up here.

The church now contains no monuments of special interest. In the re-building of the tower in 1780 a stone coffin was found; and as Offa was the great historic personage of the village, it was supposed to be his coffin. But Offa was buried near Bedford. A slab now forming the upper step under the tower-arch, and marked with the imprint of a brass fillet of the fourteenth century, may very possibly have been the cover of this coffin.

Another slab near the porch has the outlines of effigies of a man and wife, of the close of the fifteenth century, with two groups of children. "Six daughters in veil head-dresses" are described as alone remaining in 1793 by a writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of that year. We might conjecture that possibly the brass represented the persons who gave the roof to the nave and were therefore accorded a burial place of honour within the church.

There was formerly in the middle of the nave a brass with effigy in furred gown, two Latin elegiac couplets at the feet and a marginal inscription. The chief part of these is copied in the Rawlinson Collections in the Bodleian library, and less perfectly in Wood's MSS. from which it is printed in Parker's *Guide*. It was for Thomas, son and heir of William Freeman, of Preston-Cromarsh. It remained in a mutilated state until the church was re-seated in 1852, when the last portions of it were lost. Thomas must have died shortly before the commencement of the registers in 1566, and another son was christened by the same name in 1568. William Freeman, the father, died in 1573. Relating to this family, the fly-leaf of the register has the following curious entry: "1599. John Freemā of Cromarche beynge visited wt sicknes was licensed to eate flesh in lent and other fastinge dayes duringe the tyme of his Sickness. the 25 day of February by me Wylliā Cox minister."

Another brass inscription, which has long disappeared, is preserved in Wood's MSS. (and also, imperfectly, in the Rawlinson collections), but has never been published: "On another brass ō the ground. Here lyeth buried the body of Elizabeth Stampe late wife of William Stāpe of Cromarsh-Battell in the countie of Oxoñ gentleman who deceased the 6 day of May an. dom. 1590. Shee had by her said husband 8 sons 9 daughters, by her form' husband one son 3 daughters."

The only old monuments now remaining are a brass inscription

in the chancel to "Stephen Smythe of Turners Corte," 1606; and a curious tablet in the south aisle to Ralph and Jane Quelch, 1629, who "left the new Inn twice built at their owne charge," and whose only son was "liberally bred in the University of Oxon"; this new Inn being probably the Red Lion, which continued to be the principal hostelry of the village through the eighteenth century, and is the only one mentioned in the registers; though it was the first to disappear after the coaches ceased to run, and is now divided into shops and private tenements. "Ann, daughter of Charles Woods of Amsterdam and Avis his wife, . . . born at ye red Lion," was baptised in 1686; and Margery, daughter of Christopher Jeff, "a private belonging to Ld Fauconberg's regt. quarter'd at the Red-Lion," was baptised in 1782. "Mr. James Kemp, many years Master of the Red-Lyon-Inn," was buried in 1777. And in 1794 the Easter Vestry was "adjourned from the churchyard to the Red Lion Inn," and decided to purchase a clock for the recently erected tower; the vestry-room being presumably insufficient for the parishioners who attended. Perhaps we may suppose that the host of the Red Lion provided entertainment for King Charles I., when, after the battle of Edgehill and the capture of Banbury and on his way to attack the Parliamentary stronghold at Reading, he sent an order, "given at our court at Benson this 3rd of November, 1642," for Caversham Bridge "to be rebuilt and made stronge and fitt for the passage of our army and artillerie by tomorrow eight of the clocke in the morneing" (*MSS. of Reading Corporation* in 11th Report of the *Historical MSS. Commission*, appendix, pt. VII., p. 220).

It is strange that there is no memorial of a vicar until the last in 1881. Indeed none had been buried here since the seventeenth century. One of these was William Cox, in 1618, who made the interesting entry relating to John Freeman in the register, quoted above. The following is equally curious: "Abigail Cox ye dawter of Mr. William Cox was x̄ped ye 24 of August 1600. was borne the 22 day of August beynge Fryday at tow of clocke after midnight. Sol in Virgo 10 degrees the moone in Gemini. sole p'dominante."