

# Architectural and Historical Notes on the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Silchester.

By P. H. DITCHFIELD, M.A., F.S.A.

ONE of the last works of the late President, Charles Edward Keyser, was to order his photographer, Mr. Marcus Adams, to prepare the illustrations which adorn these pages. When I paid my last visit to him I saw some manuscripts to which he called my attention and I understood that he had been devoting some of the time during his illness in writing an account of this Church of Silchester. This manuscript has disappeared. I submitted the illustrations to the Rector, the Rev. H. T. Adams, who located and described the plates, and I hoped that he would have written this article. He is already the author of a short history of his Church, which contains much valuable information, but he has left me to record these notes.

The Church looks down upon historic ground. On its West side lies the famous Roman city with its walls still standing above the surface, and beneath the sod are the houses, streets, temples and basilica where Roman citizens lived nigh 2,000 years ago. Under a portion of the Churchyard it is believed there are some foundations of the Roman city, but when the Society of Antiquaries thoroughly explored and excavated the site the hands of the excavators were stayed when they reached this consecrated ground. Moreover, within the bounds of the city they discovered the foundations of the earliest Church in Britain of the Basilica type, a building of extraordinary interest, the plan of which has been reproduced in every recent book on Roman life in this country.

There was probably an early Norman church with an aisleless nave which regulated the size and plan of the present building. The chancel was built about 1230 in the Early English period, and was probably an enlargement of an earlier one. The North

aisle was added at the end of the Twelfth Century, and the South aisle a little later than the chancel. The usual desire for more light in the building of churches is manifested by the insertion of larger openings of the windows in the Fourteenth Century : a new West window was inserted, and in the Fifteenth Century a new East window of the chancel of three lights. We have usually to deplore the ravages of modern restoration work. At Silchester it is a pleasure to note that it has been very conservative, and little damage has been done.

The gable window over the East window is modern. There are Thirteenth Century lancets in the North wall of the chancel, a priest's doorway, a Fifteenth Century window, an aumbrey, and the South wall has similar openings, except that the third window is Fourteenth Century. The arcades of the nave are of two bays with circular columns and semi-circular responds. The East window of the North aisle is partly of modern stonework outside. The North doorway was built in the Thirteenth Century and the dog-tooth ornament is in the label over the door. The porch is wooden and modern.

Examining the South aisle we find that the East window is decorated and also the South window ; there is a small piscina, and a fine decorated tomb recess in which lies the effigy of a lady who wears a wimple and veil, mantle and cote hardi. Two angels guard her head and a dog her feet.<sup>1</sup> The South doorway is Early English, and the porch modern. Within it is a Norman font bowl with a modern shaft and panelled sides and scalloped capital. Mr. Adams records that "over the South door is a portion of a small panelled frieze and two of the shields have in them a bend fusilly with an escallop in the sinister quarter. Another panel has an elephant's head (inverted). These are the arms and crest of the Cuzany family who owned one of the two manors in 1348-1380."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is probable that this is the monument of Eleanor Bluet, who married as her third husband Sir John de Peyton.

<sup>2</sup> William de Cuzany, or Cusaunce, was the King's clerk, whose nephew married Margaret, co-heiress of John Bluet, lord of the manor.

The roofs of the Church are modern, the timber having been cut from trees on the Duke of Wellington's estate. The tie-beams are old. The corbels sustaining the roof are Fourteenth Century work and are carved as human heads and grotesque beasts. There is a wooden bell-turret and a boarded pyramidal roof. The turret contains five bells, all except one having been placed there in 1744 and the other in 1848.

An important feature of the Church is the handsome chancel screen which dates from the early years of the Sixteenth Century. It is divided on either side of the middle doorway into two bays by heavy moulded posts. There is some modern work in the tracery in the three southern openings, but the rest is old and of very pretty design, the rose and pomegranate occurring on it. A line of cresting set upside down appears over the middle opening. Above the head beam is a beautiful band of open carving with kneeling angels holding scrolls between two bands of cresting; between each pair of angels is a large leaf.

The pulpit is a patchwork made up of Seventeenth Century woodwork and above is a canopy inscribed "The gift of James Hore, gent, 1659." It has a domed top surmounted by a dove, and a cornice with semi-circular arches and pendant fleurs-de-lis, all enriched with carving. The lectern is modern, the gift of Lord Saye and Sele. The font is Fifteenth Century work. Some traces of mural painting appear on the splays of the windows in the chancel. In the East window of the North aisle are some remains of old glass. Tradition states that the old stained glass was buried when Cromwell desecrated the churches, and has never been found. Some glass was brought from Rheims Cathedral ruined in the Great War. There is a figure of St. Helen, and in the setting is an amethyst and three cornelians. Amongst the church plate is a fine cup and cover paten of 1512, a paten (1757), a flagon (1635) and a piece of pewter.

An old oak chest demands attention with its three locks all in working order. The key of the Church is notable. It is of

very large size, ten inches long, and has been charged with powder and fired on Guy Fawkes' day.

The Rector has recorded the monuments in his Church, and the reader is referred to his book. Two very interesting Fourteenth Century monuments are exposed to the weather on the East of the Church and are supposed to be in memory of members of the Bluet family. Ralph Bluet held one of the manors in the time of the Domesday Survey, and the family acquired the second manor formerly held by Ralph de Mortimer. The monuments are said to be memorials of John Bluet and his two daughters, co-heiresses, Margaret and Eleanor.

In the chancel there is a memorial of the Earl and Countess of Blessington. Viscount Blessington purchased the manor of Silchester from the Draper family of Sunninghill Park, Berks, in 1704. He was the son of Dr. Michael Boyle, Archbishop of Armagh. The youngest daughter of Viscount Blessington married Viscount Mountjoy, whose son was created Earl of Blessington in 1745. He died without issue. The manor was ultimately divided into moieties, and then were united and purchased by the first Duke of Wellington, and is now the property of his grandson, the fourth Duke, who owns the advowson. A tragic story is told of a young scion of the house of Blessington, Viscount Skerrin,<sup>3</sup> aged fourteen years, who was taken to London by the Rector, Robert Betham. The Rector had to visit his brother-in-law, Dr. Dawson, confined in the Fleet Prison. The boy was left outside and was robbed and thrown into the Fleet Ditch. Seven years later the Rector again visited the Fleet and shared the same fate. He was robbed and murdered and cast into the unsavoury Ditch. Both bodies were conveyed to Silchester and buried there. Hearne, in 1721, records the hanging of a man at Tyburn who committed this crime.

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<sup>3</sup> Mr. Adams calls him grandson of the Earl; but the latter died childless, and the dates do not fit. Apparently the boy was the grandson of Viscount Blessington. A hatchment of the Earl is preserved in the Church.



The Parish Registers begin in 1625, and record the case of the burial of Viscount Mountjoy in linen and not in woollen according to law. The relatives paid the fine of £5, which was given to the poor. The Churchwardens' Accounts record many items of peculiar interest: redemption of captives taken by the Turks, the building of St. Paul's in London, the repair of the stocks and whipping post, the celebration of Gunpowder Plot when much beer was brewed and drunk. Polecats seem to have been numerous and many were slain, and travellers were so many and Silchester churchwardens so kind-hearted that their charity had to be restrained by a decree of the parishioners.

Such is the record of this interesting North Hampshire Church. The numerous illustrations that accompany this record, the gift of our late President, will display its story better than any description in words, and the reader will conclude that it would be difficult to find a country church with such remarkable architectural distinction and so replete with varied interest.

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It is interesting to record that Queen Elizabeth in her royal progress through England was received on Silchester Common by Francis Palmer, the Sheriff of Hampshire, and other gentlemen of the County on September 3rd, 1601. "Her Majesty said she was never so honourably received into any shire, for as Hampshire is a county pleasant of soil and full of delights for princes of this land who often make their progresses thither, so it is well inhabited by ancient gentlemen civilly educated and who live in great amity together."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Woodward's "History of Hants," iii, pp. 192-3.