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# Cambridge Antiquarian Society.

25 JANUARY—15 MARCH 1909.

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MADE TO THE SOCIETY

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Monday, 22 February, 1909.

T. D. ATKINSON, Esq., Vice-President, in the Chair.

Dr F. J. ALLEN read a paper on

## SOME NOTABLE CHURCH TOWERS OF CAMBRIDGESHIRE, AND THEIR RELATION TO THE PRINCIPAL TOWERS OF ENGLAND.

The Church Towers of Cambridgeshire may seem to be an unprofitable subject for study, as the county is not on the whole remarkable for the beauty of its towers: it has no distinctive style of tower or spire, such as some other counties possess. But there are just a few good towers in Cambridgeshire; and it is interesting to trace the origin of their designs, which are derived partly from local, partly from distant sources.

The geographical distribution of towers in England is worthy of note. There are three areas in which the spire or tower is made a commanding feature of the church. (1) The largest and most important area begins at Bridlington, includes S.E. Yorkshire and the whole of Lincolnshire, and stretches from these counties like a band across the Midlands to Gloucestershire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall. (2) The second area is a narrow band following the East Anglian coast from the Wash to Leigh near Southend. (3) The third area has far fewer towers, but extends from Wiltshire through the counties bordering on the Thames as far east as Tenterden and Canterbury.

The first of these areas corresponds nearly, but not exactly, with the occurrence of good freestone (oölite or soft sandstone) for building. In the second area the towers are mostly built of flint or rubble, and are remarkable rather for bigness than for refinement: their existence may be due to the influence of immigrants from Flanders and Holland, where big plain towers are prevalent.

Two portions of the principal area require special mention

namely, Northamptonshire for its spires, and Somerset for its towers without spires. The influence of these counties spread far over England: for instance, towers of the Somerset type occur at Probus in Cornwall, at Preston near Hull, at Derby, at Tichmarsh in Northants, and at St Neots. The Gloucestershire towers, though less numerous, had likewise a very wide influence.

Cambridgeshire is not included in either of these areas of great towers: but it touches the first and second, and shows some influence from each.

In the present paper only spireless towers are considered. But it should be understood that in early times all towers had some kind of raised roof, either pyramidal or saddle-backed, though many early towers have since been deprived of these. The pointed roof by exaggeration gave rise to the spire. The finishing of towers with a flat roof surrounded with a parapet and pinnacles was a late device, introduced at the transition from the Decorated to the Perpendicular period. Some of the earlier Somerset towers were prepared for spires, but finished without them, thus showing that the spireless tower was evolved from a spired form.

(At the meeting lantern photographs were shown of typical towers from the various tower districts, as well as of the following Cambridgeshire towers.)

*Cambridge, St Benet's.*

The neighbouring counties of Norfolk and Northants have several Anglo-Saxon towers, but this is the only instance in Cambridgeshire. Nevertheless it is more skilfully designed than any of its neighbours. Its builders had already at that early date discovered some of the chief canons in tower design. One of these is to make the diameter diminish from below upwards: another is to accumulate the interest towards the top. The interest here is centred in the group of windows in the top stage, this group being more effective than in any other Anglo-Saxon tower. But St Benet's tower is not complete. The pilaster rising from each middle window-head is supposed to have run up to a gable, as at Sompting, Sussex; and if such

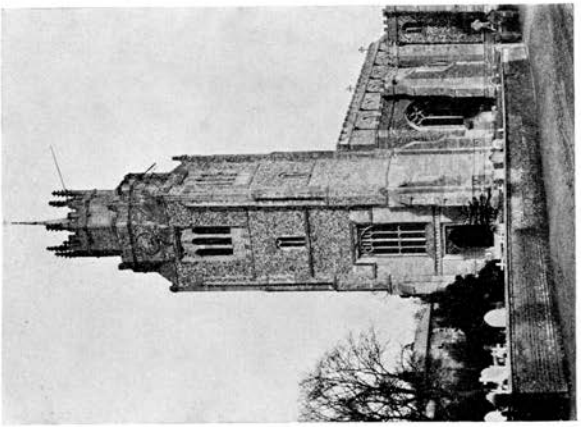

Fig. 2. Sutton, Isle of Ely.

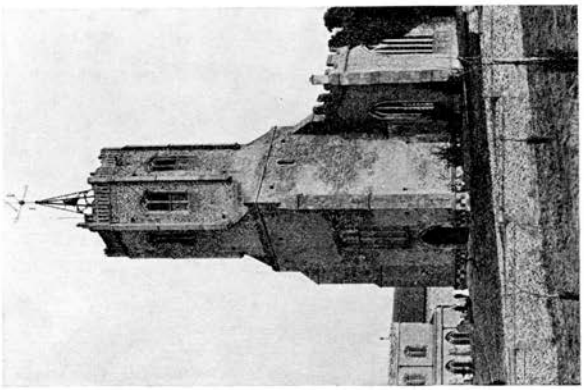

Fig. 1. Swaffham Prior, St Cyriac's.

was the case, the termination of the tower should be similar—a gable on each face, with a diagonal pyramid roof.

*Swaffham Prior, St Mary's.*

This is one of the few towers in the county that have Norman work of importance. The lowest storey (square) and the second (octagonal) are Norman. Then follows a storey of 16 sides, which is of the Transition or Early English period. Above this the walls are ruinous; but there was formerly a storey of Decorated or Perpendicular date, crowned with a spire. The upper part of the tower was destroyed by an act of vandalism in 1802.

The plan of this tower, square below, and octagonal above was repeated in the following Cambridgeshire towers:—Ely Cathedral, Swaffham Prior St Cyriac's, Burwell, Sutton, and Gt. Shelford.

*Ely Cathedral.*

The base is Norman, the middle stages Transition Norman, the upper stage Decorated. A wooden spire in addition was probably intended, if not actually built. The top stage of this tower, octagonal with four detached turrets, each connected with the body by a bridge at the top, was rare or even novel at the time of its construction; but the idea was afterwards repeated in other parts of England; *e.g.* at Lowick, Northants, where the turrets are reduced to large square pinnacles. The crenellated octagonal turrets are imitated in many towers; *e.g.* Haslingfield, Newport in Essex, Great St Mary's, and nearly all the College gate-towers in Cambridge.

*Swaffham Prior, St Cyriac's.* Plate XXII, Fig. 1.

Square below and octagonal above, with stair turret on the N.E. side; the form probaby limitated from the sister church of St Mary. The details seem to be transitional from Decorated to Perpendicular. At the angles of the octagon are pilasters arising from well-carved corbels and ending in (ruined) pinnacles. These projecting pilasters, seen in absolute profile, make the upper part of the tower seem to overhang curiously. The parapet, rather dilapidated, is adorned with good flush-work. (See

under Soham.) A wooden spire seems necessary, to complete the design, and to balance the spire at the companion church of St Mary.

When complete, with parapet, pinnacles and spire, this must have been a very distinguished tower.

*Burwell.*

Square below, quasi-octagonal above, the S.W. face being absent and replaced by an attached stair turret. The N.W., N.E., and S.E. faces each supported by a buttress. The plan of the tower has some resemblance to those of both Ely and Swaffham Prior St Cyriac's. There is an appropriate small wooden spire, partly in skeleton. The style of this tower seems to be on the whole Perpendicular, but the top windows have curvilinear tracery. These windows are too small and far too low down for good effect, and in fact the tower has little claim to beauty: but it is well situated, and groups well with the surrounding trees, especially as seen from the site of the Castle.

*Sutton.* Plate XXII, Fig. 2.

The body of the church is late Decorated, the base of the tower fairly late Perpendicular, the upper three-fourths very late and peculiar. Notice the strange upper windows, of 3 lights, the heads containing not tracery but large blind slabs. The tower is square for nearly three-fourths of its height. Then follows a short octagonal stage which was pretty certainly intended to receive a spire: but instead of a spire a kind of blind lantern has been added, useless for giving entrance to light or exit to the sound of bells. Most of the lower pinnacles are dilapidated. The outline of this tower from some points of view is the most bizarre that I know in the range of Gothic architecture, even more bizarre than most of the renaissance towers of Wren, Gibbs, Hawksmoor, and their imitators.

*Swavesey.* Plate XXIII, Fig. 1.

Lower two-thirds apparently of the end of the 13th century: upper storey early Perpendicular with a pair of excellent windows on each face. Parapet battlemented without pinnacles. This is a simple but very satisfactory tower: its outline is massive

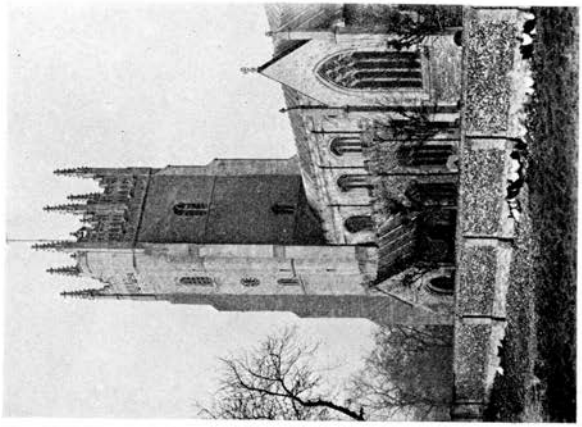

Fig. 2. Soham.

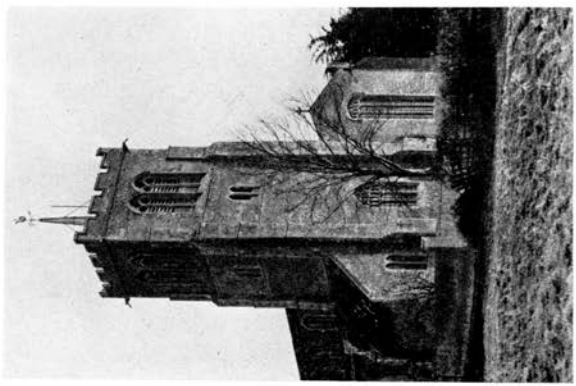

Fig. 1. Swavesey.

Haslingfield.

and reposeful, but its beauty depends mostly on the form, size and position of the top windows: it is in fact an excellent example of the importance of the "fenestration" of a tower. The said windows are similar to those of several towers in Beds, Bucks and Herts; *e.g.* Bletchley, and Crawley near Woburn. The tower may therefore have been built by masons from the Bedford district.

*Soham.* Plate XXIII, Fig. 2.

Entirely of the Perpendicular period. The body of the tower is of East Anglian type, with the usual spreading buttresses and insignificant windows;—the East Anglian builders had but little notion of the importance of fenestration. But the florid parapet and pinnacles are of the West-Country type. There is even a distinct resemblance to the parapet and pinnacles at Westerleigh near Bristol, a Gloucestershire tower with Somerset influence. The chief difference between the two designs is, that the West-Country ornament is produced by perforation, the Soham ornament by "flush-work," *i.e.* the inlaying of black flint in the interstices of pale stone.

*Haslingfield.* Plate XXIV.

The one first-class tower in Cambridgeshire, faultless alike in detail and in composition. The style is Perpendicular of the Northants type. The details are related to those of Aldwinkle All Saints (near Thrapston), St Ives, Thaxted in Essex (an exotic spire from Northants), and St Neots—but the crenellated turrets are like those of Ely. The towers of Newport in Essex and of Saffron Walden (with modern spire) appear to have been designed by the same artist as Haslingfield: the three are closely related.

The dwarf wooden spire at Haslingfield seems to be the remnant of a more lofty spire with which the tower was originally crowned. When such spires became ruinous through decay of the wood, they were usually taken down, the rotten parts of the wood were sawn off, and the spire was reconstructed on a smaller scale from the shortened timbers. In some instances the process may have occurred more than once.

*Melbourn.*

A tower with much resemblance to that of Haslingfield, but plainer. The masonry differs in being mostly of flint. The turrets are dilapidated and roughly patched up. The staircase is made to disturb the symmetry of the S. side very oddly.

*Cambridge, Great St Mary's.*

The lower two-thirds is of very good Perpendicular work, the great west window being perhaps the best in that position in any tower. The west door was built by Sir Gilbert Scott, to replace a renaissance door. The upper storey was built after A.D. 1600, and is of inferior design, the windows being especially poor. The outline of this upper stage is somewhat like that at Newport, Essex. If its windows and other details were as good as those of Newport or Haslingfield, it would make this a really fine, first-class tower. But the tower as it stands is only of the second class.

*Wisbech.*

A bold tower with some peculiar late details (*e.g.* the parapet) which seem to have affinity with those at St Neots and Tichmarsh. The lower stage forms a north porch to the church, and has an imposing outer doorway.

## Classes of Towers.

Church towers may be divided into *Distinguished* and *Undistinguished.*

The *undistinguished* include the great majority of towers, such as are merely a part of the building higher than the rest, intended only for utilitarian purposes.

The *distinguished* may be divided into three classes as follows:—

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1st Class | such as | a cathedral or abbey. |
| 2nd „ | would be | a town church. |
| 3rd „ | *fine* for | a village church. |

Fineness does not depend much on size. A good design will bear enlargement or diminution without much altering its quality.

On this basis the *distinguished* towers of Cambridgeshire may be classed as follows:—

| | |
|---|---|
| 1st Class | Haslingfield.<br>Swaffham Prior St Cyriac's, *when complete.* |
| 2nd Class | Soham.<br>Sutton.<br>Cambridge Gt. St Mary's.<br>Swaffham Prior St Mary's, *when complete.*<br>Wisbech. |
| 3rd Class | Melbourn.<br>Swavesey.<br>Burwell. |

St Benet's cannot fairly be classed with these, since, although excellent for its period, it is a primitive or archaic building.

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Monday, 1 March, 1909.

Dr VENN, President, in the Chair.

A lecture was delivered by Sir ROBERT STAWELL BALL, Lowndean Professor of Astronomy, on

ANCIENT AND MODERN VIEWS OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE MILKY WAY.

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Monday, 8 March, 1909.

Dr A. C. HADDON, Vice-President, in the Chair.

Dr W. H. R. RIVERS made a communication on

THE SECRET SOCIETIES OF THE BANKS ISLANDS.

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