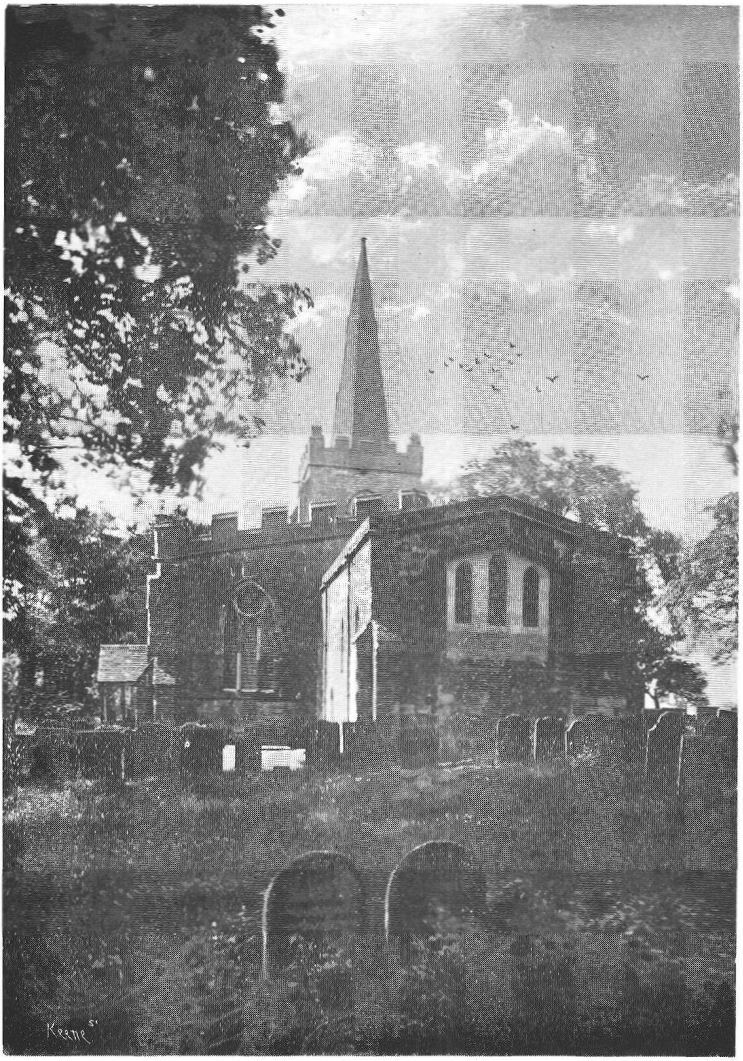

WESTON-ON-TRENT CHURCH.

Weston-on-Trent Church.

A Guide-Lecture given before the Derbyshire Archæological Society,

By Rev. R. Lethbridge Farmer.

THOSE must have been stirring times when the Angle invaders forced their way up the Trent, and, having carried the great rock-stronghold, with its innumerable caves, wherein lurked many of the desperate Celtic inhabitants, made Snodengham a base of operations for pushing still further up the river. Family after family landed from the long, flat boats, and made their settlements on either bank of the river—at Lockington, Hemington, Donington, Weston, Aston, Chellaston, Swarkeston, Alvaston, Elvaston, Thulston, Ambaston, and other coveted spots in this wide and low-lying district.

But it is not likely that these pioneers of the English race were long allowed to remain in paganism, for the middle of the seventh century had but just turned when those devoted missionaries of the Celtic line had made Repton their centre of evangelization; and in A.D. 656 Diuma was appointed Bishop of Mercia, with Cedd (the brother of Chad) and Adda and Betti assisting him in founding the monastery at Repton, and itinerating far and wide throughout the midlands. They could hardly have failed to reach so near a spot as Weston-on-Trent, and to have commenced Christian teaching

here, afterwards continued under the episcopal supervision of Chad and his successors at Lichfield.

When the *Domesday Survey* was completed in 1086, there was already a church here—quite possibly only of wood—and a resident priest. Weston-on-Trent was then a Royal manor, having been forfeited to the King by Edwin, grandson of Leofric, Earl of Mercia. Aston-on-Trent and Shardlow were berewicks of the manor of Weston.

There is no proof that the church mentioned in Domesday Book occupied this actual site, though it may be taken for granted that such was the case, for there are no traces of any former building elsewhere in the parish, neither would it be likely that a once consecrated spot would be abandoned.

The church which was built here early in the thirteenth century seems to have consisted of the chancel pretty much as it now stands, with nave, aisles, and tower practically on the same ground-plan.

Glancing first at the chancel, it will be seen that on the south side are three plain, single lancet windows, with widely splayed jambs, and on the north two, remaining *in situ*. They appear at the first sight identical, but looking more closely it will be observed that they are not slavishly alike; but, save for the easterly one on the north side, they have all drop-arches. At the first, the east window would in all probability be a triple light, corresponding with these lancets, but taller than those which are seen at present, and which are of modern introduction. From the exterior it will be seen that the present window has been inserted in the framework of a five-light Perpendicular window, the hood-mould of which remains. The triple sedilia, and the piscina on the south side, are coeval with the lancet windows. The prototype of the sedilia was a low stone seat, which was sometimes carried round the whole chancel. The sedilia are often at three different levels—the highest, nearest the altar, for the priest, the two others for

deacon and sub-deacon. The piscina was used for the cleansing of the altar vessels, and for the washing of the priest's hands. There was formerly an aumbry in the east wall, on the south side of the altar, but this has been built up.

On the south is a low side window, which is concealed by the choir stalls, but can be seen when a carefully arranged panel in the woodwork is unlocked and opened. It is now simply a small, square, splayed recess, and is built up on the outside. Probably it was never glazed, but would have had a door, and possibly a grating. The use of these low side windows has often been discussed. They are often referred to as "lepers' windows," through which the Blessed Sacrament was administered. Others maintain that they were designed to allow the sanctus bell to be heard without at the elevation of the Host; while, again, it has been suggested that if the sanctus bell on the gable were rung by a rope hanging outside, this aperture would allow a person within the church to reach the bell-rope, and thus make known the moment of consecration. There are several other theories, such as the convenience of being able to keep a watchful eye on the sanctuary lamp; and one, which has just been made known to me, advanced by some French writer, I believe, namely, that the gleam of a light protected within the sacred building might be cast upon the graves without.

But to return to the fabric. Tracing this same Early English period through the rest of the church, a lancet window like those in the chancel is found in the west wall of the south aisle. In the north aisle the small western doorway, with square head, now built up, is of about the same date. From the exterior it will be observed that on that side the doorway has a round head. The low stone bench which runs along the whole western wall is of later date, and cuts across the earlier doorway. This door was, I presume, the entrance to a chantry chapel, probably once screened off from the nave

by a parclose. That this aisle was used as a chapel is clear from the raised altar-piece at the east end, while on the floor is what looks suspiciously like an altar slab, utilized as a tombstone, and inscribed upon it, "HIC JACET . . . PULTON."

There is an aumbry in the north wall, where once the altar vessels will have been kept. The door is gone, but the remains of hinges and staple are still there. There is also a piscina in the east wall. On either side of the window is a bracket. The most prominent one on the north side would probably support the figure of the Blessed Virgin, to whom the church is dedicated; while that on the south would carry the lamp which was perpetually burning above the altar.

Before passing on from this period, attention should be called to the portion of the foundations of the Early English tower to be seen outside, from which the accumulated earth has carefully been removed.

The glory of the church is its lofty arcades. When it was desired at the close of the thirteenth century to rebuild the south aisle, the tall pillars on that side were reared, the walls raised, and a flat roof substituted. But both arcades were not built at once.

For a time, then, there would be a lower series of arches remaining on the north side, and over that aisle a steep-pitched roof, indications of which are traceable at both ends.

Then, after some thirty years or so, when it was determined to make both sides symmetrical, the higher arcade and the flat roof were added on the north side also. The difference in the dates is observable in the capitals. On the south side there is a plain, small dog-tooth on the moulding of the respond. The other capitals on this same side are deeply undercut, and it may be mentioned—for it is scarcely visible to those whose sight is not of the best—the beautiful mouldings are all different.

A glance at the windows, too, shows those on the south side

to be of earlier workmanship. They are of the early Decorated period, with plain tracery. The three-light window in the east wall, with a plain circle in the upper part, is uncommon. The date of these windows would be about 1300.

The windows on the north side are also of the fourteenth century, but somewhat later, as shown by the cusping, than those on the south. The probable date of these is from 1320 to 1330.

The tower is of the Decorated period, with battlements added in the fifteenth century. Upon the tower is a curious bee-hive shaped covering to the spiral stair-case, with a small doorway leading out to the top of the tower. This construction prevents one from walking round the north-west angle. It is hidden from view below by the parapet. Looking down from the tower, one can read on the lead-work of the roof below, in plain, painted capitals:

ROBERT HI
LL RICHARD
BRIAN. C. W. = Churchwardens.
GEORGE SI
LLS DONING
TON. 1703.

which fixes the date of the restored lead-work.

The monument to Richard and Dorothy Sale, introduced in 1615, has had a chequered history. Apparently the work arrived in various portions, and when the figures came someone was struck with the idea that the empty sedilia was just the place where they would well fit in, if only an arm or so were taken off. This, too, would save the cost of further base-work. The explanatory tablet was first set against the south chancel wall, obscuring the two windows, which were bricked up for its accommodation, and also a mural inscription, part of which was visible until quite lately, the major part having

been destroyed by an unappreciative workman, though previously well warned. At the restoration in 1877, the figures were placed where they now are, and the tablet moved to the north side of the chancel. The tiny figures of the two cradled babies are somewhat touching, and perhaps a preacher may not be rebuked for calling attention to the fact that the larger figures show that the art of kneeling in worship had not then been lost, nor the practice of following the service from open books.

The pulpit, of Jacobean workmanship, and dated 1611, formerly stood in a corresponding position on the opposite side. It has been rightly placed where it is, the north being emblematic of darkness, and the preaching of the gospel as a light shining in the gloom. The pulpit in its former position was then somewhat higher, and in being lowered the bottom panels, with lozenge-shaped patterns, were turned sideways instead of being upright, the base being reversed.

The octagonal font, bearing the date 1661, is not unlike one or two others of the same date to be found elsewhere.

A glance may well be taken at the old parish chest in the vestry, dated 1662, with its compartment for alms having two separate locks. The initials "S" and "H," standing for Stevens and Henshaw, at that time churchwardens, are cut on the exterior. The two keys ensured that no single individual should be responsible for the moneys deposited.

The old bier, with the date November 4th, 1653, must have borne many bodies to their last resting-place, and probably few churches have one that has been so long in continuous use.

Passing out from this interesting church, no one can fail to be struck by the picturesque porch, with its lower stone-work and wooden frame above filled in with the old thin red bricks —so much more enduring than the modern ones—and its roof of time-subdued tiles.

The whole church is so pleasing that I know not whether to call it an artist's church or an architect's church—both may find it a delightful study. The rich colouring of the stone—local stone, too—can only be appreciated when the sun is shining through the windows and the open door—the warmest orange, bands of crimson and red, and streaks of purple. Outside, too, what a calm and restful picture this church, nestling amongst the trees, presents. It is worth a long day's journey to stand and contemplate it from any point of view.

If time allowed, I should like to have referred more in detail to the registers, which go back to 1565, and contain many interesting entries, such, for instance, as the burial of "some souldiers of ye garrison" in 1644, for there was an engagement at King's Mills, hard by, at the time of the Civil War. I should like to know the origin of those marks on the tower, which are not mere sand-holes, but seem suspiciously like bullet-dents.

The page in the registers which refers to "Papists" only is of interest, especially as we know that the wives of some notable local recusants were confided to custody at the rectory. Also the pages which mention some forty collections for needy outside objects—even the Corporation of Scarborough receiving 3s. 4d. in 1661.

There is, however, sufficient material in these registers for a separate article.

And again, I should have liked time to refer to the hall and the remains of its moat, said to have apparently been the largest moat around a domestic residence in the country. Fairfax is believed to have slept at this hall the night before the engagement at King's Mills. It is a somewhat interesting although an unfinished building, and I must acknowledge the courtesy with which I was allowed to inspect it, and even to go on its roof.

Finally, I must claim leave to thank Mr. H. Q. Farmer for his assistance in my study of the architectural features of this church, not forgetting to acknowledge reference to Dr. Cox's *Derbyshire Churches;* but above all, I thank the senior incumbent in our diocese—the Rev. John Wadham—for the patience with which he pointed out the various details of this church.