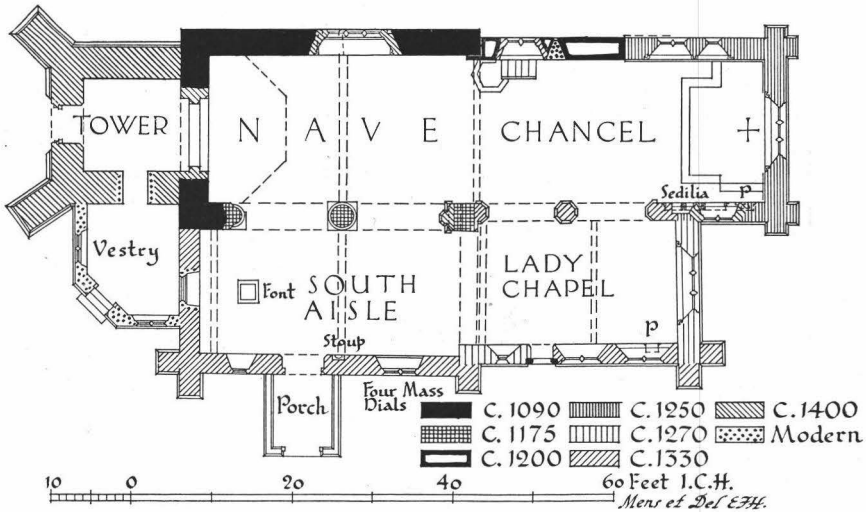


WEST HOATHLY CHURCH

BY IAN C. HANNAH

THIS rather typical wealden church, whose dedication to St. Margaret was recently rediscovered by our member, Miss Mary Holgate, appears at first glance to be very

PARISH CHURCH of ST. MARGARET WEST HOATHLY



like many others of the district; it is only on rather closer study that the complexity of its architectural history becomes manifest. It arises chiefly from the economical instincts which through many generations have prompted the village to re-use whatever could possibly be employed again.

Built of the local stone, seeming from every side to form an integral part of the landscape, it is the only medieval church except Rotherfield to stand on the

very crest of the forest ridge—the watershed between the basins of the Channel rivers and the Thames. The plan on the surface is simple—nave with south aisle, chancel with south chapel and western tower—but the eschewing of right angles and the many different periods make it rather complicated to draw. There are at any rate seven

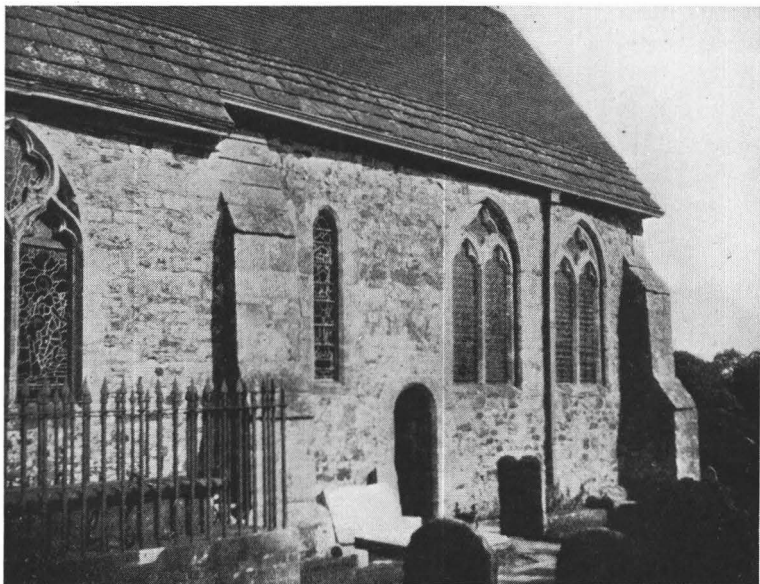


FIG. 1. WEST HOATHLY CHURCH: CHANCEL, FROM THE SOUTH.

different medieval styles, perhaps more actual building periods, in addition to Jacobean reparations.

1. The original church was a little Norman building, not mentioned in *Domesday*. The north wall still survives, and on the exterior can be seen part of one of its little splayed openings, cut into by the later window. It seems likely that the two original windows in its west wall are built into the tower in its upper stage, beside those contemporary with its erection—where they have a rather awkward appearance.¹ The small door of the south chapel (Fig. 1), whose round top is composed of

¹ In the west wall of West Blatchington Church may be seen two Norman windows of very similar character.

two stones, seems also to have belonged to the Norman church, which apparently consisted simply of nave and apse, or square east end, like those still to be seen at Pyecombe, Stopham, and Shipley. The Norman chancel arch was removed, probably in the thirteenth century, never to be replaced.

2. Towards the end of the twelfth century a narrow aisle was added on the south side of the nave. Its arcade consists of two just pointed arches, each in two chamfered orders, resting on a very massive and low, round pillar built of many stones with west respond to match; the capitals are perfectly plain. The font is of about the same period, and of Sussex marble, a square bowl on a round base with corner shafts which were renewed in 1870, Purbeck marble being employed as the Petworth beds had been worked out.

3. About the year 1200 the western portion of the present chancel was added, and a blocked lancet of the period may still be seen on the outside of the north wall.¹ The walled-up north door of the nave, under the west end of its later window was probably pierced about the same time. The plain external arch remains, while within may be seen the jambs, but the arch is cut off by the sill of the window.

4. A far more interesting addition was the lengthening of the chancel so as to make it longer than the nave, a most unusual feature in a purely parochial church, of which other examples are Guestling, and Bolton in Cumberland. The north wall is pierced by a lancet and a two-light window—quatrefoil in the head—side by side and connected internally by the same shafted arcade, displaying moulded capitals (Fig. 2). It is a most remarkable example of the beginnings of tracery, and a charming piece of work; the date is about the middle of the thirteenth century. A contemporary window on the south has been destroyed except for the jamb on the east side, whose splay has very delicate painting, foliaceous scroll work. The northern windows have more perfectly

¹ It is quite possible that the walling is original Norman work, the lancet being an insertion.

preserved examples of the same thing but of much bolder design, recently restored under the care of Professor Tristram.

The upper part of the east window is modern (replacing a Jacobean insertion, p. 209) copied from that of the chapel. It seems likely that the upper part of the east wall was rebuilt in the seventeenth century. Trefoil-

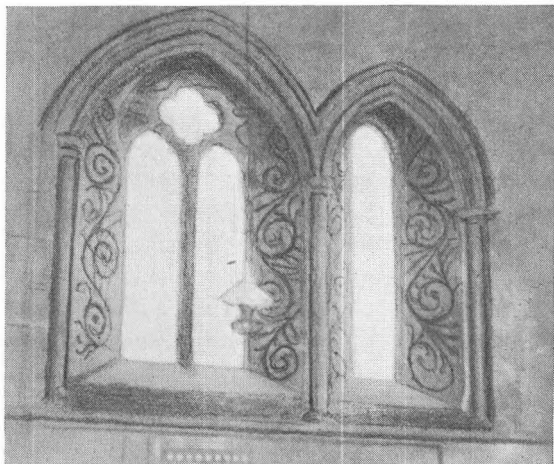


FIG. 2. WINDOWS ON NORTH OF CHANCEL.

headed piscina and triple sedilia, the former with shelf and the latter shafted, are so low down that it would seem that the thirteenth-century altar had no step at all. The piscina basin is plain.

5. Somewhere about 1270 was added the south chapel which is almost certainly referred to in the will of Will J. Bryan (1555): 'also I bequeth for makying the altare in the ladye quire viijd.' The original parts of the chapel appear to be the east wall with a window consisting of three trefoiled lancets under a larger arch with shafts, and beneath it is an external string-course (which almost certainly came from the original south wall of the chancel) as well as a lancet towards the west end of the south wall, close to the re-used Norman door. The fact that this early alteration destroyed the south window of the

chancel would appear to prove that the painting on the jambs is practically contemporary with the windows. No one would have so decorated a discarded fragment.

The lancet just referred to (by the door) was continued downwards to form a low side window, but the lower part (normally closed by a shutter) has been built up. A remarkable feature is the fact that while a person sitting by it could have readily watched the altar of the lady chapel he could not, without straining, have seen the high altar in the chancel. Doubts as to the original use of low side windows seem to be set at rest by the arrangement at Melton Constable in Norfolk, where sitting in a niche on the west side of a deep mural recess a man could watch the altar—the wall being carefully splayed away—and without shifting his position put his hand out through the low side window to ring a bell in the yard. Everything is perfect, though the wooden shutter of the window base is renewed. Unfortunately at Paston near Peterborough the shuttered opening of the low side window is secured by iron bars in squares of about 4 inches, which seem undoubtedly to have been built into the masonry during construction. This would not be particularly convenient for ringing the Sanctus bell, which could not be extended through the window; but it appears to be certain that at any rate one use of low side windows was the ringing of a bell during the elevation of the Host. Assuredly it was not the only provision; in the eastern counties Sanctus bell-cotes are frequently found over chancel arches, and certain hagioscopes¹ from ringing chambers can hardly be otherwise explained than that the bell was rung in the tower.

6. During the early part of the fourteenth century the chapel underwent extensive reconstruction. The east wall was retained and stiffened by the addition of buttresses at its south-east angle; the eastern portion of the

¹ Thus at Much Hadham (Hertfordshire) a squint is found over the arch of the western tower; at St. Serf, Dysart (Fife), there is one on the ground level from a south-west tower; at Biggar (Lanarkshire) a hagioscope over the east arch of the crossing enables the altar to be seen from the ringing chamber of the central tower.

southern wall was rebuilt with two rather coarsely executed two-light windows, trefoiled and with quatrefoils in the heads. The piscina has a bowl which is rather worn, but was either 25- or 26-foiled. Belonging to the same period is the arcade of two pointed, double-chamfered arches with octagonal pillar and semi-octagonal responds between the chapel and the chancel; the caps are moulded. It seems likely that some disaster necessitated these reparations; it may have been a fire, or more probably a heavy tree had fallen on the building. The destruction of the original south window of the chancel may date from this restoration.

The widening of the nave aisle may have been part of the same construction; but finished a little later. The south walls of both chapel and aisle are very roughly set out, not rectangular with the rest of the church. Such irregularities are too common to be of any special significance. There can be little doubt that the reason was just careless measuring. This aisle has a two-light window very similar to those of the chapel, but with much more careful worked mouldings, as is well seen in the illustration (Fig. 1). There is also a trefoiled lancet and in the west wall a large quatrefoil. The amount of re-using is indicated by the fact that the stones used for jambs in the two-light window retain two roughly made 'mass-dials', and two more exist close by. A very similar window is inserted near the west end of the north chancel wall, the earlier lancet (p. 203) being blocked. A lofty arch without responds connects this aisle with the chapel. Beside the very plain south door is a stoup internally placed, now smoothed off so as not to project.

7. Very early in the fifteenth century a tower was added at the west end of the nave. The very heavy diagonal buttresses would have been required had it been carried up to the height which was clearly intended, but only about 3 ft. above the string-course which surrounds the fabric just over the buttresses the work was stopped and a broach spire of timber of a very usual form, becoming octagonal almost at once, was substituted for any further masonry (Fig. 3). Over the plain west door is

a simple two-light window. The east window of the upper stage is round with tracery in the form of a cross;¹ the others are single-light and trefoiled, the two Norman ones (p. 202) reset beside those north and south. A very

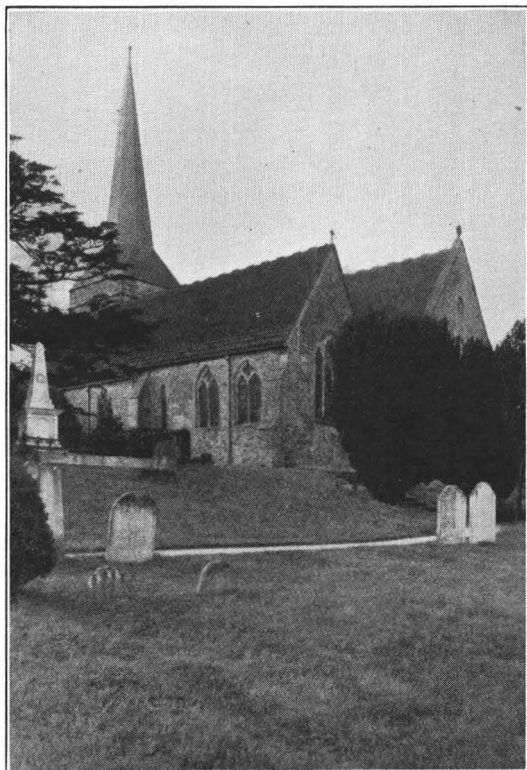


FIG. 3. WEST HOATHLY CHURCH, FROM SE.

heavy, low arch in two chamfered orders without any capitals, much worn by bell-ropes, opens to the nave. It is noteworthy that the church was only appropriated to Lewes Priory in 1391,² long after the lengthening of the chancel but before the erection of the tower.

It was probably because the nave was darkened by the erection of the tower that a wide, new window with

¹ This cross looks as if it may have come from a gable.

² *Cal. Papal Regist.* iv. 396.

three cinquefoiled lights under a depressed arch was substituted for the small Norman slit a little east of the middle of the north wall. A new south window of two trefoiled lights under a square head had been inserted in the chancel; there was just room, as the chapel does not extend so far to the east.

By the fifteenth century the rood loft had become very usual in English churches. It is a mistake to suppose it was universal. At West Tarring the original low screen remains, finished with iron spikes; at Costessey in Norfolk the high screen is coped with an original cresting that precludes any possible loft. At West Hoathly an upper door was pierced through the twelfth-century wall above the east respond of the nave arcade, which appears to have been reconstructed either then or a little later: it is a curiously rough piece of work.

The rood stair must have been of wood against the aisle wall; probably the loft extended only across the chancel, not (as was frequently the case)¹ across the whole church. Preserved in the vestry and in the priest-house museum are fragments of a screen with trefoiled and cinquefoiled lights and traces of red and blue colouring, which may have supported the loft or enclosed the chapel. The actual rood with the side figures was morticed into a tie beam above the screen.² It is clear (by process of exhaustion) that this must have been the one measuring some 40 ft. in length which ran through the roofs of both nave and south aisle; unfortunately found in 1870 to be too decayed for preservation.³ It was about 3 ft. to the east of the rood screen, so that the effect must have been a little unusual, though the rood was quite as often on a beam *immediately* over the screen as upon the actual loft.

The chancel roof is wholly new, florid, and unsatisfactory, dating from an unnecessarily costly, and not very happy, restoration of the church under the direction

¹ At the neighbouring Kentish churches of Sissinghurst and Goudhurst fifteenth-century masons rebuilt the eastern arches of the arcades in a three-quarter form, so that, impinging against the chancel wall at a high level, they left room for the loft to extend across centre and aisles.

² *S.A.C.* xxxix. 40, article by J. Lewis Andrè.

³ *Builder*, 1871, p. 143, article on West Hoathly Church by Mrs. Hill.

of R. H. Carpenter in 1870. The other roofs are good fifteenth-century work, unless perhaps that of the chapel be a little earlier. All are of the same character, a very usual form both for domestic and church work at the period, each pair of rafters connected by a collar and pegged together at the top without any ridge-piece. The nave roof has tie-beams whose mouldings connect with those of the wall-plate (except that the central one is altered on the south). An octagonal king-post with moulded cap and base supports a purlin which runs the whole way along beneath the collars, supported by brackets. The original tie-beam of the chapel roof is very well moulded beneath; on account of a slight difference of level between the two sides it comes above the narrow wall-plate on the north and cuts into it on the south. In the case of the aisle the difference of level is so great that the tie-beams are above the wall-plate on the south, but on the north side they are built into the walling over a foot below the roof. This adds very much to the irregular effect that is produced by the slanting of the south wall. The outer covering used to be of Horsham slabs, but only the lower courses survived the restoration of 1870; rather unsightly tiles are substituted higher up. (See Fig. 1.)

The Jacobean pulpit has disappeared, but drawings of its scrollwork panels remain. All that appears to survive of the work of the period is the plain woodwork of the south door which is dated in blacksmith-made nails: 'March 31, 1626.' The substitution of Victorian Gothic details for other seventeenth-century work is unfortunate, while the porch and vestry are perfectly deplorable examples.

A detailed inventory of 1707 among the parish archives provides for the reshingling of the spire. It is drawn up between the churchwardens of the period and D. and J. Russell of Worth. The latter undertake to lay the shingles on half-inch boards 'soe yt ye Taile of ye third shingle upward shall reach half an inch over ye top of ye third shingle downward soe that there may not lye but three inches & a halfe of ye shingle bare'. The fact that further work was done (or at least contemplated) in 1731

and in 1734 makes it very doubtful if this was ever carried out. In 1731 the proposed shinglers lived at Rotherfield, which was a well-known centre of the industry.

A more complete job was certainly done in 1741, on which occasion there were '300 old shingles saved when ye south side of ye East End of ye Church was tiled'. This method of protecting walls from damp is still quite usual in private houses. Shingles made of split oak were formerly very much more widely used than at present. At Tenterden and elsewhere in the district whole roofs of churches are shingled, but as a rule only spires are so protected now.

The five bells are inscribed:

Tenor: 'W. Griffeth, Vicar, Brinklow & T. Paine, Churchwardens. R. Phelp made me 1712.'

2. 'Sancta Maria Ora Pro Nobis.' (This is possibly the bell referred to in the will of John Bryan, Sept. 7. 1554:¹ 'Also I bequeth unto the church of Westhothleygh to the casting of a bell vjs viijd.')
3. 'Mr. William Griffeth, Vicar. John Brinklow & Thomas Paine, Churchwardens. 1712.'
4. 'joseph carter made me Betterr; 1581.' (i.e. probably recast.)
5. 'Blessed Be the name of the lorde. 1581 Joseph carter.'

A west gallery was built by subscription in 1723.² This was destroyed at the restoration, and in 1899 another was erected. The church suffers in interest and gains nothing in beauty from the destruction of all its post-reformation fittings.

There are two old chests. The older is a most striking example, dug out in an oaken log, rude work of the twelfth or early thirteenth century. The other seems seventeenth-century work; the sides are all framed into oblong corner-pieces and there are the usual three hasp locks.

The church contains no monument of importance, though there are a number of eighteenth-century mural tablets. Three iron grave 'stones' of the Infield family, formerly iron masters at Gravetye in the parish, are of cast iron; dated 1612, 1624, and 1635. The two former have their inscriptions cast in the iron slabs; the last has an inlaid brass plate—a much less usual form.

¹ *S.A.C.* xvi. 152.

² *Burrell MSS.* add. 5698.

The different landowners in the parish formerly had the obligation of maintaining specific portions of the stone churchyard wall. This is commemorated by the existence of a number of unbonded short sections, a few with remains of initials and seventeenth-century dates. A very interesting list under date 1752 shows that at that period no less than sixty proprietors bore this obligation, while the owner of the adjoining land had to fence the whole south side.

Eastward the ground falls very rapidly to the bottom of a little valley. Half-way down is a remarkable artificial cave of a roughly oval form excavated in the sandrock, which has a rather early look. Local traditions connect it with smugglers, but it seems possibly of medieval date. The recent extension has brought it into the churchyard, which with its terraced gardens and views over the weald to the South Downs is extraordinarily beautiful.

I have to thank our member W. H. Godfrey for kind help and many suggestions, notably that the west part of the north chancel wall may be part of the original Norman work. Mr. W. H. Shelford, Miss Powell, and Dean Kirkpatrick of Ely have supplied valuable information of different kinds.

The progress of the present reparations (May 1935) has disclosed a number of gravestones under the glazed tiles put down in 1870. The most interesting is that to Anne (Wood), daughter of Sir Edward Culpeper (builder of Wakehurst Place): she died in 1624, and was buried within the altar rails. See *Wakehurst Place*, by G. W. E. Loder (now Baron Wakehurst of Ardingly), 1907.