

The Porch of the Church of St. Nicholas,

NORTH WALSHAM,

WITH SOME REMARKS ON THE CHURCH, AND THE EXTENT OF THE INJURIES
IT SUSTAINED AT THE TIME OF LITTESTER'S REBELLION.

COMMUNICATED.

BY THE REV. JOHN GUNN.

THE Church of St. Nicholas, at North Walsham, and especially the South Porch, has attracted the notice of several writers on Ecclesiastical Architecture. It is figured and described in Neale's "Views of Churches," and in *The Builder*; and our Secretary, Mr. Manning, has, in Vol. IV. page 307, of the Original Papers of this Society, called our attention to its principal features.

There remains, however, ample room for further investigation with reference to the date of the several parts of the building; and the interesting historical events with which it is connected.

The Porch has recently been rescued from its former state of filth and dilapidation by the liberality of an unknown benefactor, and it has been restored to its pristine beauty and graceful proportions. As a work of restoration, it deserves to be recorded, because it has been carried out on sound principles. Stone has been replaced for stone. As much of the original fabric has been retained as possible; and, while no needful expenditure has been spared, no unnecessary expense has been incurred by novel and fantastic alterations.

As you approach the entrance, the flint-work, tastefully arranged in window-pattern, together with a battlemented or crenellated banding, first strikes the eye; and the intermixture of flint with freestone gives a pleasing relief. On either side of the entrance-arch, there are two crocketed niches, and a third, above the arch, with richly carved brackets. In the spandrils, on the right hand, are the Royal Arms of England, quartering France ancient; and, on the other side, are those of the Prince of Wales, with a label of three points, similar to those on the ceiling of the south aisle of Yarmouth church.* At either angle, surmounting the buttresses, two crocketed pinnacles rise to nearly the same height as a beautiful gable cross in the centre. The sides of the porch have each two windows, now re-opened and glazed. The tracery of the windows, which is Early Perpendicular, is alternately arranged on opposite sides; and, between the windows are buttresses, which, in conjunction with those at the angles, give, not only strength, but symmetry to the building.

Within the porch, and between the windows on the east side, are the arms of St. Bennet's Abbey, to which North Walsham pertained. These arms have the peculiarity of a hand on the sinister side; and, opposite them, are supposed to be those of John of Gaunt,—with great probability, as this parish is in the Duchy of Lancaster. These arms, however, do not, like those in Yarmouth church, appear to be differenced with a label ermine; but, possibly, the ermine was emblazoned, and has been obliterated.

The original roof still remains, and three crowned heads (to which I shall have occasion to refer) form bosses beneath the roof-tree. There are two of the original shields at the foot of the principals, bearing the emblem of the Trinity; and what appears to be a Cross saltire. The remainder are

* See Original Papers, Vol. II., page 155.

new ; and it may seem ungracious to find any fault in a work so generally praiseworthy, but the practice ought to be condemned of uniting any modern devices with ancient. On looking at these devices, which the carver had worked at his own suggestion, I remarked, by the side of an I. H. S. on the adjoining shield, I. M. The thought arose in my mind, "Can this stand for 'Iesu Maria?'"—but it was quickly checked on observing, on the next shield, a book opened, with "Holy Bible" inscribed upon it. On inquiry, I learned that I. M. were the initials of the present incumbent ; and that the carver, of his own accord, had paid him this tribute of respect, because he had liberally contributed the wood-work, and had besides erected costly gates to prevent desecration.

These gates, I may be permitted to observe, are at present far too gaudy, and out of keeping with the sober grandeur of the building. The practice, moreover, of closing porches which serve as resting-places to those who may walk from a distance to visit the graves of their departed friends, ought to be generally discountenanced ; but this, sad to say, is an exceptional case ; for in the centre of a populous town the churchyard is too often converted into a play-ground.

I can only hope that, when repairs are carried out more extensively in this church in the same spirit as the restoration of the porch, the result will prove similar to that I have observed in another parish. In that parish the church windows used to be constantly broken and acts of desecration committed ; but, since care has been taken of the church and churchyard, and decent windows with painted glass have been inserted, not a single pane of glass has been wantonly broken during the last fifteen years.

I may be deviating from the strict path of archæology in making these remarks, but they point to the good uses it may be applied to, and the moral effects which may be produced by its legitimate influence.

I will proceed, next, to inquire into the date of the porch, and of the church generally. The prevalent opinion is that the porch was built, and that the church, or the greater part of it, was rebuilt, shortly after the defeat of the rebels by Bishop Spencer, in 1381.

A minute examination of the armorial bearings, and of the architectural details, has led me to a different opinion, viz., that the porch was erected near the close of the reign of Edward III; and that the greater part of the original church is still standing, which was built about twenty years earlier, and was partially repaired after Litterester's rebellion in Richard the Second's time. I beg most respectfully to submit to the members the grounds on which that opinion is founded.

With respect to the porch, it is obvious, at first glance, that it must have been erected between the year 1340, when Edward III. assumed the Royal Arms of France, and the year 1405,* when the arms of France modern were introduced instead of those of France ancient.

The circumstance of the Royal Arms of England and those of the Prince of Wales occurring together in the same building limits that period still more, and allows us to choose between three periods of time: first, of Edward III. and the Black Prince, from 1343, when he was created Prince of Wales, to 1376, when he died: secondly, of Edward III. and one year during which his grandson Richard, afterwards Richard II., was Prince of Wales; and thirdly, of Henry IV. and Henry of Monmouth from 1399, when he was created Prince of Wales, and continued so till after the change of the arms from France ancient to France modern, in 1405.

Thus, there was a space of twenty-two years, from the accession of Richard II. to the throne till 1399, when there was no Prince of Wales at all. During that time, we may safely conclude that the porch, containing the Royal Arms together

* See Original Papers, Vol. II., page 165.

with those of the Prince of Wales, could not have been built, and it was during that very time that the victory was gained by Bishop Spencer over the rebels.

In addition to this negative evidence, proving that the porch was not built, according to the popular tradition, together with the present church, shortly after the defeat of the rebels, the architectural details furnish very strong proofs of the precise time when both the porch and the church were erected.

To dispose first of the porch:—The capitals of the window-jambs have Perpendicular mouldings, while the tracery is of the Transition character, and retains some of the flowing and graceful lines of the Decorated.

In point of style it agrees with the monuments of Edward the Black Prince in Canterbury Cathedral, and of Edward III. in Westminster Abbey, and appears to be of nearly the same date. The crenellated and battlemented work, together with the tracery of the windows and the armorial bearings, are almost identical with those in the south aisle of Yarmouth church.

The royal heads and arms in both alike denote the reigning sovereign and princes of the time, and are, as Mr. Francis Worship has shown, strictly synchronous.

The three crowned heads, forming bosses on the roof of North Walsham porch, no doubt represent Edward III. and some of his sons, whose armorial bearings appear both on the walls of this porch and on the ceiling of the south aisle of Yarmouth church.*

With respect to the church. It may be regarded as a very

* Mr. Worship, on visiting the adjoining church of Worstead, also identified the mullions of the windows there with those of the south aisle of Yarmouth church. They are not only as nearly as possible the same, but are arranged alternately in the same manner. It would be interesting to discover, on examining the records in the treasury of the Norwich Cathedral, that orders were issued to the mason about the same time, and from the same hand.

fine example of that type of ecclesiastical buildings which have no clerestory windows. In churches so constructed, the loftiness of the piers and expanse of the arches, and the size of the windows of the aisles are made to compensate for the want of light from the clerestory range. This is strikingly exemplified in North Walsham church, as well as in Tunstead church, which was built somewhat later.

The piers are six in number, and, with the two responds or half-piers, form a continuous line, unbroken by any separation, between the nave and the chancel, except a once splendid rood-screen. The perfect erectness of these slender and gracefully proportioned piers and of the walls at once strikes the eye, and, on looking upwards, the cause of this is obvious. It arises from the strong, plain, but scientifically constructed roof. The tie-beams have effectually prevented the splaying out of the walls. Had this roof ever been destroyed, or fallen down, the walls would not have preserved their perpendicularity as they have. It is of the original pitch, and agrees with the description of roofs of the Decorated period. I have, therefore, come to the conclusion that it is the original one; and, as the mouldings of the capitals of the piers attest, that they are of the same date as the beautiful flowing Decorated tracery in the east windows of the aisles, described by Mr. Manning, that the entire demolition and rebuilding of the church about the time of the rebellion is without foundation. That much injury was done to the church by the occupation of it by the rebels, is extremely probable; and there is evidence of it in the destruction of the mullions in the north and south sides of the aisles; and Mr. Manning has pointed out the dress of one of the corbel heads of the time of Richard II. or Henry IV., which has evidently been replaced for another; but the hood mouldings of the windows are Late Decorated, and agree with those of the east window of St. John's Maddermarket church, figured and described in the Transactions of our Society.

It would not be a matter of regret, if, by some similar accident, the present pews and gallery were swept away, provided the remains of the beautiful screen were left intact; and the example of unostentatious piety set by the restorer of the porch were followed by others in replacing them with decent, free, and unappropriated benches.

The late Restoration of the Market Cross, which has been done in a highly creditable manner, proves that there is a good spirit alive in the parish and the neighbourhood; and the objects of local interest, even the scathes and scars the church received during the rebellion in Richard the Second's time—(the ancient remnant of, probably, an Anglo-Saxon church at the west end of the north aisle should not be passed over)—the site of the battle-field and victory obtained by Bishop Spencer in the vicinity—the Cross* which appears to mark the spot, and the mound which probably covers the bodies of the slain;—all these historical memorials cast a bright ray of interest over the scene. The spirit of the past, and the love of the dear old records of bygone times, which attach us so strongly to the institutions of our country, will, I trust, have their due influence, and combine with still higher motives to lead some more, at present unknown, benefactors to restore the church, and even to raise the tower to its original height.

* A question has been raised as to whether this cross is not an ordinary way-side cross; but the circumstance that there is another about half a mile off, called "Stump Cross," nearer the town, and the evident date of the building together with the tradition, are strong arguments in favour of its having been erected for such memorial purposes.