

NOTICES OF THE CHURCH AT WELLS,

IN THE

Hundred of North Greenhoe.

BY

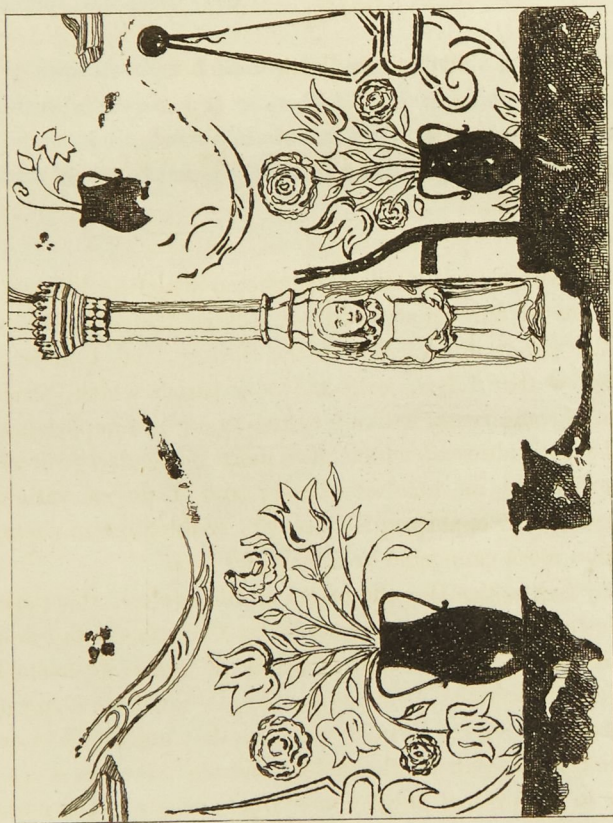
THE REV. JAMES BULWER.

Any additional particulars connected with the history or antiquities of our county parishes, not contained in Blomefield, are generally welcome to the Society, and I therefore send a few that I have collected of a parish which, after a decline of some years, is likely to rise again into importance,* and the antiquities of which may more particularly interest our readers in its neighbourhood; and I do so with an apology that my opportunities have not enabled me to present them in a more connected or interesting form.

I may first notice that the origin of the name of this parish is somewhat unsatisfactory as given by Blomefield: the more obvious derivation, like that of a city of the same name in the West of England, being a pure Anglo-Saxon word, meaning natural springs of living † water, as they are called in our excellent translation of the Bible, and such springs were a feature in the present locality most likely to attract the notice of the first settlers, and to occasion its name.

* A railway will be completed in May 1857, and will no doubt increase the exports and imports.

† Even now copious rills of crystal water run through the piles round the harbour; and, within the influence of the tide, other fresh springs may be seen gushing out of the mud at low water.



Etched by H. N. P. N. N.

1 2 3 4 5 6 Feet

MURAL PAINTING ON THE SOUTH WALL OF WELLS CHURCH AUGST 30. 1852.

No mention is made of a church at Wells in *Domesday-book*; but it is clear from the list of rectors that there was one very early in the fourteenth century, although no part of the present structure can well be assigned to that date. Like very many of the Norfolk fabrics, it is built chiefly of flint, but with less cut stone than is usually found in the churches of the larger towns, and less regard has been paid to finish in the masonry. It comprises a nave, chancel, and North and South aisles (the latter extending beyond* the limits of the nave, to nearly half the length of the chancel), a square embattled tower, South porch, and a North chapel or vestry attached to the chancel.

The tower staircase runs up outside the South wall of the tower, and is entered from the churchyard; that leading to the rood-loft is outside the North wall, and is entered from within.

The nave on either side is lighted by five perpendicular windows with short embattled transoms under the tracery, and by one at each end of the aisles; the window in the portion which extends into the chancel has four lights, the others three. There are also five three-light clerestory windows on each side. In the chancel there are three very large and slender windows, finished within by elegant jamb-shafts and good perpendicular tracery; that at the East end of the church was blown in about 1810, and the mullions which escaped the storm remain as they were then mutilated; the North window is stopped up with plaster, but the tracery remains; and the South window is partially filled in at the bottom.

The large doorway in the West side of the tower is ornamented in two of the hollows of the moulding with ball and four-leaved flowers, but the doorways on the South side under the porch are plain. The porch has a battlement round

* This arrangement is very common and very effective in many of our churches.

it with blank* shields in the panels, and this extends along the West wall of the aisle, but I could not see that it ever extended along the South side. A small priest's door into the chancel has a square hood moulding of late perpendicular work; and the gable crosses still retain their places on the nave and chancel. The choice bit of architecture, however, is within the church. A doorway, leading to the vestry or chapel on the North, the character of which had been completely hidden until lately cleaned of its coats of whitewash, has the hollow of the moulding filled with a most graceful design: on one side of a flowing stem are vine-leaves and fruit, and on the other birds with wings extended picking the grapes, the attitudes of the birds being adapted to the curve as it travels round the arch. The date of this doorway, as well as of the chancel, is known; as a brass in the wall over the former says: "Orate pro āia Thomē Bradley qui istam cancellam fieri fecit." Bradley was rector fifty-three years, from 1446 to 1499, and is buried in the church. It will not be rash then to assume 1460 as about the date of the whole of the present structure.

The roofs remain covered with lead at their original pitch, and although the ornaments within are much mutilated, the height of the supporting pillars and walls, and the general proportions of the building, though now cumbered with three heavy galleries, one across the nave and two others a few feet only under the roofs of the aisles, show that when fresh from the hands of the architect it was a building of considerable beauty and the production of no mean mind. All the roofs are of the same period as the rest of the church. The wall-plate or cornice of the nave has two rows of tudor-leaves,—the upper one large, the lower one small,—the flat space between the mouldings being relieved by angels with outstretched wings. The pendants are terminated with angels

* Blomefield says that the four shields in front had bearings upon them, which he gives,

holding shields; and this woodwork was originally supported by slender stone shafts, parts of which still remain, rising from the intersections of the nave arches. Rows of small rich tudor-leaves run round the inside of the panels, and angels bearing shields cover the intersections of the purlins and rafters, as well as the ridge piece above. The spandrels on the nave side of the aisle roofs are unusually large. Three are filled in with intricate tracery of foliage and small birds perched among it, and in one is a large swan, or pelican, well feathered, standing amongst foliage; in another, a sort of griffin or beast of the Apocalypse, with the fore part of a horned eagle and the body and feet of a lion; while others are or have been filled with rich geometric patterns. Two specimens of this open work and a poppy-head representing a man's face have been published from sketches by J. D. Harding, R.A.; the font from a drawing by John A. Repton, F.S.A., in the sixteenth volume of the *Archæologia*; and a view of the exterior of the church is given by Ladbroke.

In 1852, having received a polite note from the churchwardens telling me that some old inscriptions had been discovered on the walls, which they wished me to see, I paid my first visit to this church. The workmen were occupied at the time in scraping off the accumulation of whitewash from the stone pillars and arches of the nave, from the chancel arch, and from the vestry doorway above mentioned, the left jamb of which was hidden by an unsightly pew, which the churchwardens have had the good taste to remove. In the progress of the work in the chancel the men found in the North wall a tablet, bearing an inscription, which had been long hidden from view,* and with the help of our penknives we were able to clear the letters sufficiently to read the following piece of not the most classical Latinity:—

“Hic prope in cemeterio jacent corpora Thō Burward & Margarete uxoris suæ imprimis Makyns qui Thomas Vir****æi

* Not in Blomefield's work, published more than a century.

nauta expertus totāq * vitā bonā agens Famā obiit 15 Januarii Añ 1578 ætatis suæ 73. Predicta Margareta reverenda matrona post-quam obstetricis officium in hoc oppido per plusquam XL annos magnā modestiā multisque exequiis prospere exercitata est similiter obiit vi^{to} die mensis Augusti A^o Dñi 1598 Ætatis suæ 90. In quorum memoriā Johannes Burward de Baconsthorpe ac Thoñ de Lynne filii sui hoc opusculum posuerunt."

In the course of these works, the pointed doorway leading to the rood-loft was discovered nearly in a line with the screen itself; the staircase, as I have mentioned, was placed outside the wall, and on looking at the stone steps thus brought to light they seemed little worn,—evidence, though slight, that it was not in use much beyond a century, and confirming the date assigned to the church.

A part of the bottom of the screen remains. The panels of it are painted alternately red and green, and ornamented with a common star-like gilt pattern. With the exception of a few poppy-heads of the same date as the church, built up among the later shapeless and rickety pews, the rest of the carving is of the time of James I., about which period, or somewhat earlier, the North *free* gallery was thrust in. The parish chest, which has a circular top and is strongly bound with iron, has the date 1635 (Charles I.) upon it, inlaid with black wood.

But to return to the old inscriptions. From the rottenness of the plaster they were difficult to decipher, but we could see that the jambs between the windows had been covered with them. They were in English (the spelling of the words not very antiquated) and for the most part selected from the Psalms, the Prophets, and the Litany of the Church. One ended "Good Lord, deliver us." Another, which is still legible, is the 15th verse of the 132nd Psalm according to

* Totamque vitam.

the Prayer-book translation: "This shall be my rest for ever and here will I dwell for I have a delight therein." Another is a verse from the 65th Psalm: "Blessed is the man whom thou choosest and receivest unto thee," &c., &c. These are written at the West end near the entrance, and, like all the rest, in a bold black-letter, and enclosed in a broad border. The capital letters at the beginning of these inscriptions were *not* rubricated, but the capital letters of the references were. On the left side of the tower arch and over these was a painting of several bells* enclosed in a border, representing a large one surrounded by smaller ones, relief being obtained by two tones of black; but there was no inscription to explain it. Above the upper border which bounded the inscriptions between the aisle windows, the walls were ornamented with scroll-work, pots of flowers,† and other devices of the taste of the sixteenth century. The flowers were very limited in variety and gave but a poor notion of the artist's invention. I could see but two forms,—the tulip and the rose, represented by black outlines and a few streaks of dull red.

The coloured paintings mentioned in Blomefield as being in his time over the South door and opposite to it, may still be traced. That which is there called the Story of Jonas, I suspect is the more usual representation of St. Christopher, but both are so much mutilated that the subjects must be left to conjecture. Like the rest of the walls these paintings have been covered‡ with inscriptions. This examination has confirmed the supposition that when the coloured decorations which prevailed in our churches previous to the Reformation were afterwards hidden or obliterated, neither clergy nor people were quite satisfied with the bare whitewashed walls, and hence the adoption of a more simple and scriptural mode

* There are eight bells in the tower.

† See illustration.

‡ The remains of the screen at Binham and the saints painted upon it have been covered over and *texts* placed upon the white ground.

of adorning the churches which combined instruction with ornament; and this mode, we have reason to think, continued until the mistaken zeal of the Puritans destroyed, without any regard to the use or abuse of the custom, mural decoration of every kind.

On turning to the earliest register of the parish, "Copied oute of a paper Booke in Anno 1509 by Robert Knap, parishe Clarke of this Towne of Wells, whoe began his office the ii daye of October in a^o dñ 1575, being of th' age at that time xxx yeres and upwarde;" we find the first date to be 1509 October 8, and the first mention of a minister is at the foot of the page.

"Buryings in a^o 1558, Novēbr 8, was buried John Rayner, bachelor of Divinitie and Parson of Wells. A good keeper of hospitalitie for y^e poore."

1583.

Burialls in a^o p^e d^o.

Decemb. Perished upon the West coast,* coming from Spain, Rich^d Waller, Chris^r Dodd, John Bunting, Will^m Craven, George Page, Gregory Baxter, Chris^r Baxter, Tho^s Ayres, Henry Gouldsmith, Walter Marshall, Robert Archer, Oliver Cobb, Will^m Barrett, & Rich^d Dye, whose deaths were brought to pass by the detestable working of an execrable witche of Kings Lynn, whose name was Mother Gabley, by the boiling or rather labouring of certayn Eggs in a payle full of colde water, afterward approved sufficiently at the araignement of y^e saide Witche." †

* Of the Harbour?

† In Archbishop Cranmer's Articles of Visitation, 1549, is the following: "*Item*, You shall inquire, whether you know of any that use charms, sorcery, enchantments, witchcraft, soothsaying, or any like craft invented by the Devil." But it was not until the next century, in the reigns of James and his successors, that these poor deluded people became the victims of authorized "Witch-finders."

Buryalls in anno 1578.

Januarii 19. buried Thomas Burward.

Burialls in anno 1598.

Aug. 12. Margret Burwood, widdowe, being aboute the age of 95 yeres. She was a mydwife, gracious for never decaied any woman under her hand, she was devoute, charitable, & to her abilitie a good keeper of hospitalitie.

These were the parties whose memories are preserved in the above Latin epitaph, and it were easy to multiply extracts of the kind, but I fear few would feel grateful for them, and I desist. The details respecting the structure and decoration of the church, dry as they are, and as they must almost of necessity be, I have given with some minuteness, for in one point of view they may be worth recording. There is no doubt that this church must, at no very distant time, undergo a thorough repair, and as little doubt, I trust, that its restoration will be undertaken in a generous spirit and directed by a cultivated taste: but however perfect the restoration, some will always feel a curiosity respecting the original structure; and evidence, as to how far the present corresponds with the past, is seldom without interest to the antiquary.

Hunworth Rectory,
December, 1855.

