

Merton Church and Hall.

COMMUNICATED BY

THE REV. GEORGE CRABBE.

IN welcoming the Members of the Archæological Association to Merton, and in offering them a few remarks on its Church, I would beg leave to say that it is only from my having had better opportunities than they of studying its architecture, that I venture to speak at all before those who have so much greater experience and knowledge on the subject than myself.

Merton Church is dedicated to St. Peter. It consists of a tower, nave, chancel, south aisle, and north and south porches. The chancel is inside rather broader than the nave; outside it is of the same breadth.

Two churches, at least, have stood on the same spot, and in removing the plaster from the interior of the present church, a few years ago, the very different colour of the rubble work (now marked out by laths) showed plainly the respective height of the walls of these two churches.

The round tower, whose form was probably chosen here as elsewhere in the East Anglia, to save the expense of bringing stone quoins from a distance, is, with the exception of that part of the walls below the lowest laths, the only part of the Norman building remaining. The walls of the tower

batter or diminish internally from the base upwards. From the rough masonry in the bell-chamber double Norman windows, with shaft and capital in the middle, and from the internal arch with large plain blocks for imposts, we may infer that the tower is of very early Norman work. The lower part of the tower may be, indeed, of an earlier or Saxon period. The belfry windows were formerly very widely splayed internally. That to the west is now blocked up, and that looking into the church was probably made when the gable of the second church was built. The bell-chamber windows look to the cardinal points. That to the east has been replaced by a smaller one, to make room for the present roof.

The second church, whose walls extended upwards to the second line of laths, seems to have been built pretty much as it now exists, and included the present chancel, aisle, and north porch. The roof of the nave was then continuous with that of the chancel. Four arches supported by octagonal pillars separate the nave from the aisle.

Nearly the whole of our church, then, seems to have been built from about 1310 to 1340, or about the time that the de Greys (by a marriage with the heiress of the Baynards) became possessed of Merton, and belongs to the Early or Geometric Decorated period.

We have abundant proof of this in the solid and beautiful geometric tracery of the windows, the lower exterior mullions of those in the chancel and north side of the nave being formed into shafts, with capitals and bases. These windows have the peculiarity of having rich mouldings on the outside, and being flat and plain within, thus reversing the usual arrangement. The windows, however, in the aisle, have beautiful Decorated mouldings, with hollows very deeply cut both on the outside and inside. The drip-stones and hood-moulds of the windows and doors terminate in foliage or heads. The string course below the windows is continuous

round the chancel, as is also the internal string course, which has the narrow fillet worked on the waved moulding. This same Decorated fillet, too, is observable on the round mouldings of the north porch, and on those of many of the architraves of the windows. The buttresses are sloped, the slopes being composed of over-lapping slabs, as was usual in the Decorated period. The buttresses of the aisle are placed diagonally.

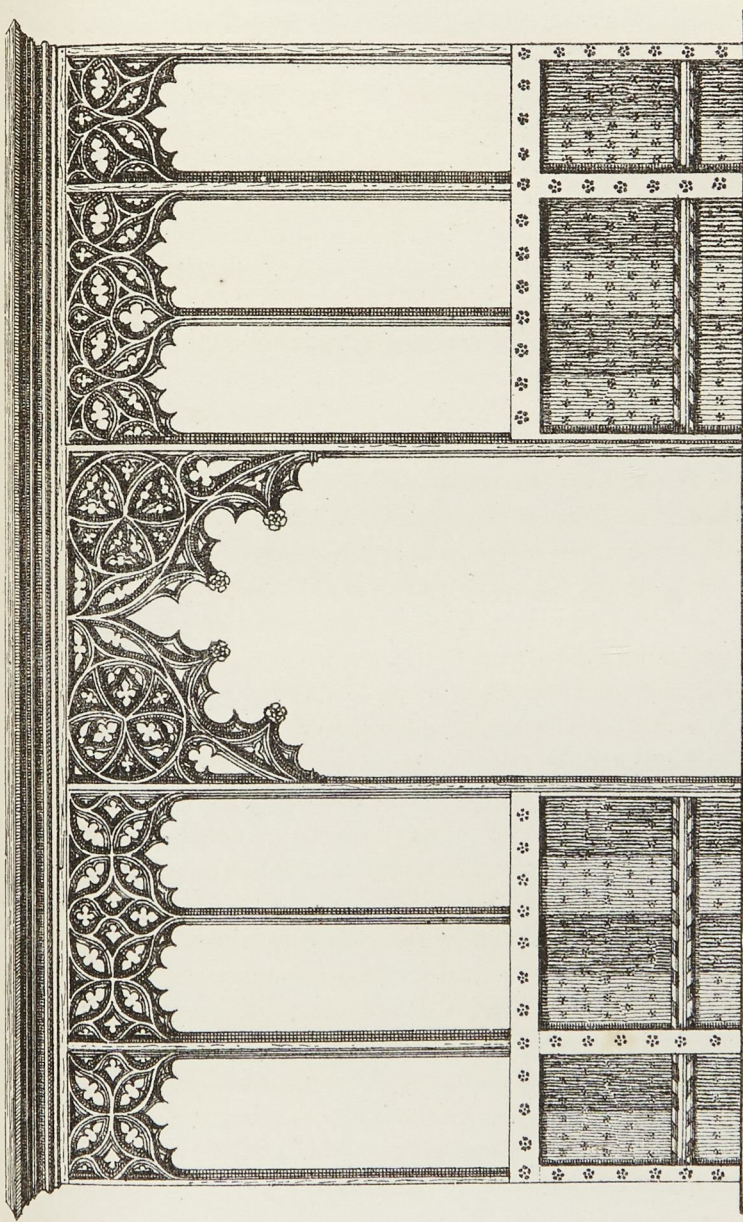
The square-headed windows of the north porch are copies of the old ones. The tracery is double feathered. The entrance arch has Decorated mouldings, and there are gablets and a modern cross on the copings of the gable. There is on the outside a large but rough holy-water stoup. The hood-mould over the north door was added in 1860.

The screen is well worthy of notice, and I believe but few examples remain of a Decorated screen so good as this. The tracery is varied, and the ogee arch in the centre is double feathered, and supported by corbels in the shape of Decorated capitals. The cusps are finished with the rose ornament. The ancient colouring of the screen has been removed. The piscina and sedilia also are good, and beautiful examples of early Decorated work.

The north and south doors are copies of the old north door. Each board is worked with a projecting ridge up the middle, which was a good fourteenth-century pattern. Indeed I may say that nearly everything that has been done of late years in this church is but a renewal of what was decayed, and the old patterns have been carefully copied. The south porch, however, is not a copy of the old one, but is from a design of Mr. E. B. Lambe; and the seating, or pewing, is also of modern work and design.

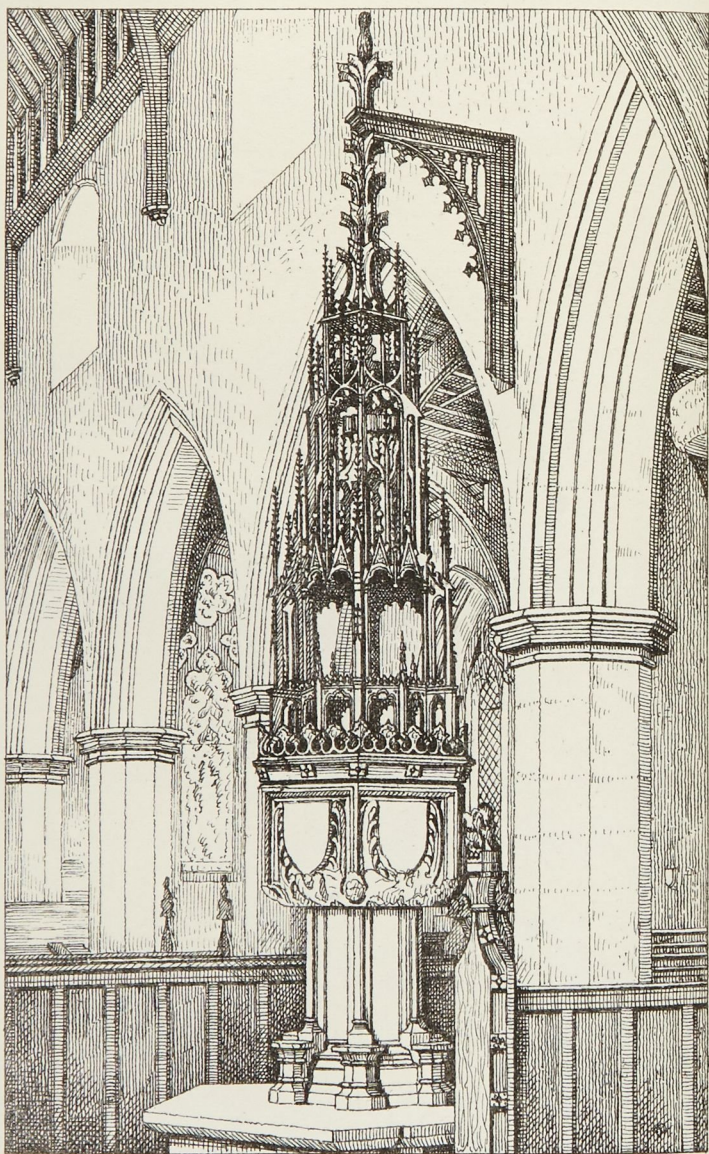
The clerestory, and the part of the north wall of the nave opposite to it, as well as the roof of the nave, are evidently of the Perpendicular period.

The roof of the aisle is probably of the same period.



COWELL'S ANASTATIC PRESS, IPSWICH.

Screen of Dorton Church.



COWELL'S ANASTATIC PRESS, IPSWICH

FONT IN MERTON CHURCH.

These two roofs have their principals, ridge pieces, purlins, and wall-plates moulded.

The rubble work of the clerestory corresponds and is continuous with that over the fourth or easternmost arch, and also with that part of the north wall opposite to the fourth arch, which contains the rood doors and stairs. The mouldings of the fourth arch and of the chancel arch are similar, and differ from those of the three first arches. The three first arches are nearly equilateral, while the fourth arch is more dropped. I can come to no other conclusion than that the fourth arch, and the rood doorways and stairs, are of the same date as the clerestory; and this is the more likely, if we remember that it is very unusual to find rood doors and stairs of earlier date than Perpendicular.

The fourth arch of the nave might have been a wall to the side chapel. The third pillar would then have been a respond, or half pillar, which may account for the half blocks of which it is partly formed. The north buttresses were probably added at the same time as the clerestory, and then, too, the north windows may have been lengthened, and assumed their present beautiful proportions. I know not how else to account for the tops of these windows being higher than the wall of the second church.

The font, which has rather a rare form, being a hexagon, there is little doubt, belongs to the Perpendicular period. On one of the base pillars are the claws of some heraldic bird or animal, and no doubt there were similar figures on the other pillars. There were angels (whose wings remain) at the corners and in the centres of the bases of the sides. Those at the corners hold shields. The font was formerly coloured.

The upper part or stage of the wooden cover of tabernacle work, and the crane from which it hangs, are ancient, and probably of the same date as the font. The two lower stages are a supposed restoration of the original, executed in 1843

by Captain Kitto. I think the font and cover were earlier than the clerestory, and, if so, they reached to the roof as it then existed.

The bells are three in number, and are thus inscribed :—

- 1.—Anno Domini 1564, IB.¹
- 2.—John Draper made me 1629.
- 3.—John Darbie made me 1664.

James De Grey Eques.

The roof of the chancel, from the entire absence of arches and mouldings, and from its hammer beams, to make room for which the architraves of the windows are cut away, I suppose is Perpendicular, but of the same pitch as the original Decorated roof.

The squint, or hagio-scope, (surmounted by a corbel) through which the priest at the side altar (of which the piscina still remains) observed the elevation of the host, is worthy of notice; as is also the hour-glass stand. There are, I believe, some twenty hour-glass stands still remaining in England, of which three at least are in Norfolk.

Of the painted glass, the figures in the north-east window of the chancel are of old glass formerly in the church, repaired and restored, and a small portion of the glass in the east window of the aisle is also old and belonging to the church. The glass in the east window of the chancel is the work of the present Lady Walsingham.

A pair of small battlemented brackets or beams in the north wall of the chancel may have supported a wooden canopy for an Easter Sepulchre.

Of the numerous brasses to the de Grey family, which have unfortunately so many of their matrices vacant, that against the north wall of the nave, to William de Grey and his two wives, is perhaps the most worthy of notice.

¹ IB, John Brend, of Norwich; John Draper, of Thetford; John Darbie, of Ipswich.

The pulpit and reading desk are of the time of James the First.

The two poppy-heads near the tower are copies of old ones formerly in the church. One of them represents a butler or cooper, with his hammer and barrels, and may have been a rebus of the name of a resident. It has also been suggested to have some connection with the last half (Ton) of the name of our village. The other poppy-head represents a priest kneeling before a desk. It is a copy of one formerly in the south aisle.

In the four corners of the churchyard are four of the stones which once formed the shaft of the churchyard cross. From their octagonal shape, I suppose the cross to have been of the fourteenth century, or the same date as the church.

The date of our earliest register is 1564. There are in the oldest book many curious entries, but as they are recorded in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1825, I have not thought it desirable to do more than mention their existence.

MERTON HALL.

THE name of our village is said, by Blomefield, to have been taken from some mere or large standing water, and it is evident, from the peat underneath and around the pond near the hall, that here there was formerly a large piece of water, which probably reached from the east end of the house nearly up to the church.

At the Conquest, the manor of Merton was given to Ralph Baynard, from whom (by the marriage, about 1330,

of Sir Thomas de Grey, Kt., with Isabel, coheir of Fulk Baynard) the present Lord Walsingham is lineally descended.

In the garden there is an oak tree which has been judged, by one accustomed to estimate the age of timber, to be about one thousand years old.

It is probable that the manor-house has always stood on the present site of Merton Hall. Of the ancient house that existed before 1613 there remain only the foundations, a portion of the walls, two stacks of chimneys of Elizabethan character, and, possibly, the two remarkable plaster-work ceilings on the first floor, the date of which I have not been able to determine.

In 1613, during the reign of James I., the house was almost rebuilt, in its present style, on the old foundations. Over the entrance door is still legible the text, "*Nisi Dominus edificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam. Anno Domini 1613.*" One of the bed-room chimney-pieces bears in the spandril of its arch the same date, 1613; and a chimney-piece in the gate-house (whose date is 1620) of about the same character, has on it the arms of Cornerth or Baynard,² which, for five centuries, were borne by the de Greys of Merton, to distinguish that branch of the family from the many others bearing the Grey arms. The staircase is also of this date.

About 1831, the house was thoroughly restored, and large portions of it rebuilt on the same foundations, and after the same design as the house of 1613, when also the south-west wing containing the drawing-room was added. The north-east wing was built about twenty years ago. Mr. Blore was the architect on each occasion, and he also, in 1843, designed the drawing-room ceiling, which is of good Elizabethan character.

² The Cornerth family took the arms of Baynard, their superior lord, changing only the tincture.

Among the curiosities in the house is a leather Jack, of the time of Elizabeth, with the letters E. R. and a crown; and a trunk or chest with the initials H. R., surmounted by a Royal crown. There is a tradition respecting this chest, that it belonged to King Henry VIII. who, in 1510, made a pilgrimage bare-footed to the shrine of our Lady of Walsingham, and may have turned aside to lodge at Merton from the Walsingham-way which passed within three miles of this house.

One of the pictures in the drawing-room, representing the "Triumph of David," is by Matteo Rosselli. It is only slightly different from a picture of the same subject by the same master in the Pitti Palace, at Florence. There is also a Caravaggio, representing the "Betrayal of our Lord;" a Madonna attributed to Raffaellino del Colle, the bright gilding of whose frame is three hundred years old; and a Flora, by Guercino, from the Penna Gallery at Perugia.

Two carvings in box-wood, of much beauty and delicacy, represent "The Presentation in the Temple," and "The visit of Nicodemus to our Saviour." These were purchased in Venice.

In the dining-room are two remarkable frescoes from Herculaneum, representing the story of Cupid and Psyche. They are of great weight, being portions of the wall cut out. They bear the artist's name. There is also in this room a bronze lamp from Pompeii, of grotesque and elaborate workmanship.

In the window of the staircase is some fine Belgian sixteenth-century glass, which represents the arms and quarterings of the French family of Croy, which is supposed to descend from the same ancestors as the English family of Grey, which has always been considered to derive its name from the village of Croy, in Picardy, the seat of the French family. This glass was part of a window which was placed in the

cathedral of Arschoot, in Belgium, by Philip Duc d'Arschoot, about 1520. The remainder of the window, representing the duke and his wife, is in the South Kensington Museum. This family of Croy claims very great antiquity; indeed there was a story in a recent number of the *Quarterly Review*, which stated that it once possessed a painting representing Noah with one foot in the ark, exclaiming, "*Sauvez les papiers de la maison de Croy.*" But this is nothing compared to a pedigree which is known to exist, which traces the family up to Adam. This descent, however, is claimed, not through the Croys, but through the Kings of Hungary, a younger son of this royal house, named Marc, having married in 1214 the heiress of the family of Croy, whose descendants, though Hungarian paternally, are said to have always borne their maternal name and arms of Croy.

The earliest mention of the Croys, which is to be found in history, is in 1066. This, too, is the date at which the first recorded member of the de Grey family came over to England with William the Conqueror.

The identity of the families of Croy and Grey is doubtful, resting as it does upon tradition; yet the tradition receives some confirmation from the fact of the two families bearing the same arms. The tinctures, indeed, are different; the arms of the French family, as may be seen on this window, being barry of six argent and gules, and that of the English family, barry of six argent and azure; but this, perhaps, arose from the descendants of Mark of Hungary, who married the heiress of Croy, having taken the arms of their mother, and kept the tincture of their father. The arms of the Kings of Hungary are barry of ten argent and gules.

With respect to the family of de Grey, its history since the Conquest is so well known to Norfolk genealogists, from Blomefield's notes, that I need not enter upon it.

Lord Bacon shall give us a few words of finish to this paper, which I hope has not exceeded the five minutes allotted to it, nor has wearied the patience of my audience. He says :—

“It is a reverend thing to see an ancient castle, or building, not in decay, or to see a fair timber tree sound and perfect; how much more to behold an ancient noble family, which hath stood against the waves and weathers of time—for new nobility is but the act of power, but ancient nobility is the act of time.”—*Essays*, page 120.