

A Note on the Church of Cley.

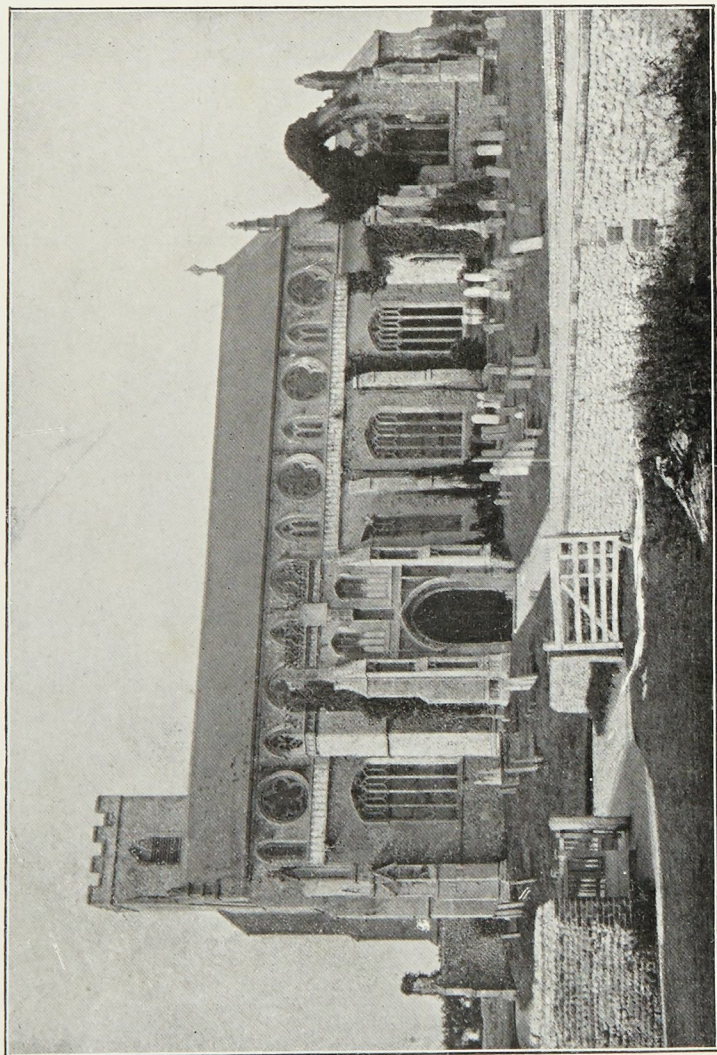
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THE Parish Church of Cley has a character which distinguishes it even in a county so rich in fine churches as Norfolk is. The oldest part now remaining is the tower, but that tower and the north aisle, at the end of which it stood, were added to an already existing nave, of the age of which nothing is left to tell. The tower was built about the middle of the thirteenth century; and the contemporary aisle had a gabled roof. The older nave was shorter than the present one by the width of the tower, and it is possible that an aisle may have been added to it on the south side before the rebuilding in the fourteenth century.

Next in age to the tower is the east end of the chancel, which seems to have been built outside an older and shorter chancel. In studying the story of an old church it is always to be remembered that, however much men altered and rebuilt it, they never let it go out of use if they could help it. This condition of unbroken use often gives us the explanation of peculiarities in the building of old churches.

The rate at which building was done varied much. Sometimes when money was plentiful work went on steadily from beginning to ending as it would do now; but there were no bank deposits in the middle ages, and,



CLEY CHURCH FROM THE SOUTH WEST.

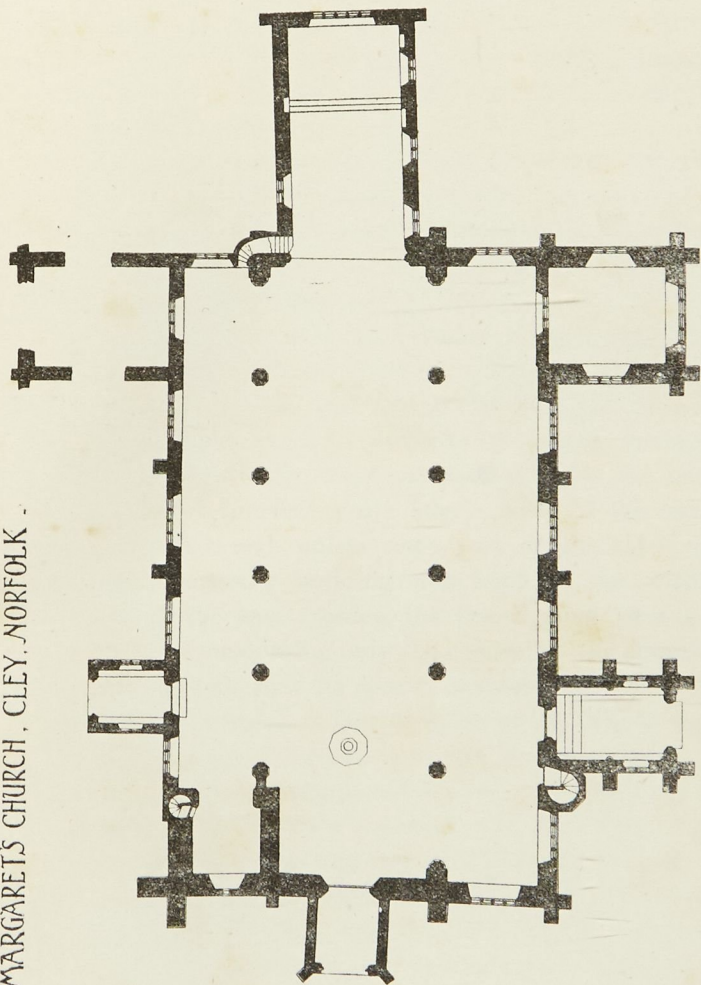
if money came in slowly, it was not allowed to accumulate long, but was spent as it came in; and thus it happened often that a comparatively small piece of building was extended over a long period of time.

It was so with the chancel here, and the fourteenth century was reached before it was finished. The older chancel would continue in use as long as it was possible to carry on the work of the new one without pulling it down, and then some temporary arrangement would be made until the new could be used.

In the first half of the fourteenth century the town of Cley must have reached the highest point of its prosperity: and about 1330 there was begun, what was no doubt intended to be a rebuilding of the whole church, on a much larger scale than before, and with great architectural magnificence. The nave and both its aisles with a transeptal chapel on each side were undertaken all at once, and this time the work went on quickly. But we find a sudden stop, and then no more done for over a hundred years.

The great plague of 1349, now generally referred to as the Black Death, but by those who survived it, called, still more significantly, *The Death*, was an event to which there has been no parallel, so far as history goes. It swept over all the known world, and no doubt far beyond it, and wherever it went it took away most, and sometimes nearly all of the population. In Europe it was the great turning point between the ancient world and the modern, and the beginning of a political development which is still going on. Amongst its minor consequences in England was a considerable alteration in the distribution of the population. The numbers appear to have been made up again in a few generations, but they did not always settle in the old places. Some towns grew into importance, whilst others, which had been busy places of commerce, sank to be mere

ST. MARGARET'S CHURCH, CLEY, NORFOLK.



villages, which many remain to this day. Often a grand parish church, built in the days of prosperity, and now serving for only a small rural population, tells of this change, and often, as here at Cley, we see the evidence of it in work begun and left unfinished at the date of the Death.

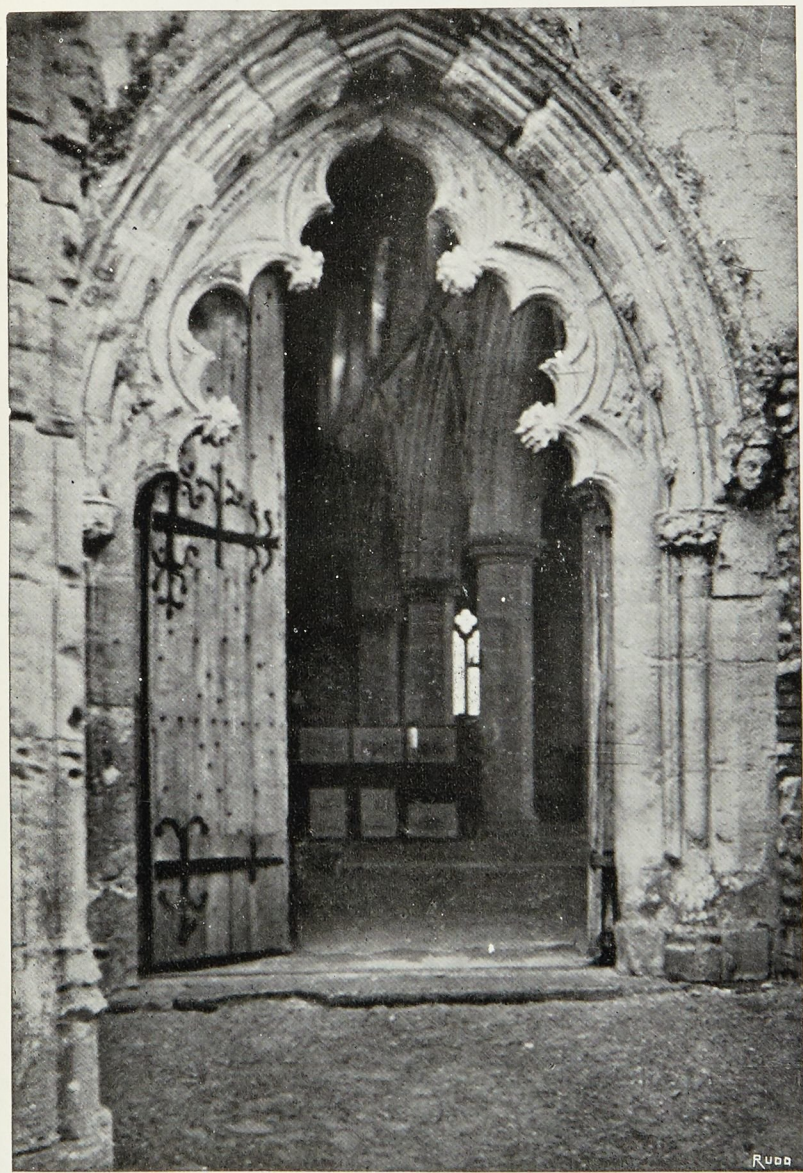
Here the nave arcades and the clerestory were finished to the top, and the transept chapels seem to have been so. Considerable progress had been made with the aisle walls, and the north and south doorways were complete as we see them. But nothing had been done at the aisle windows. The work immediately in hand seems to have been the west end of the nave. The doorway there was done, and a good deal of the window, but it was not finished, and there is evidence of stones having been prepared for it in the fourteenth century, but not built up until a hundred years later. None of the new work was roofed, and, unless some part of the older nave or some temporary building was kept in use within the lines of the new arcades, the parish must have gone on for many years using only the chancel of the church.

The church owes its special character to the work thus suddenly stopped. The director of it, whose name we are not likely ever to know, was a man of great ability and fertility of design, and he was not held in check by any need to consider the cost. He had things his own way; and if that way was a wilful one, and sometimes led him into extravagances which a good architectural judgment can not approve, still through all there is evidence of power, which commands our respect even in his wildest freaks. Note the excellent proportion and detail of the great arcades, and the overloading of them with excessive ornament in the spandrels; the two sets of clerestory windows, mutually discordant in scale, and either sufficient by itself for all architectural requirements;

the ungainly "horseshoe" form of the south gable window, adopted to allow the two circles in the tracery to be made each of the full width of the two lights below; the exaggerated size and slenderness of the gable crosses, and the over elaboration of the cusped work generally. But in spite of all, how really *good* everything is. How delightful it would be if we could argue things out with the man who did it all. We are sometimes told that there were no architects in the middle ages, and that our old churches were muddled into shape by independent workmen, going on by rule of thumb. There was indeed plenty of muddle in churches in times past, as there is still where the guardians of them either can not get, or will not take competent advice about them. But no man who knows what architecture is will deny that towards the middle of the fourteenth century there was an architect at Cley, and a very able one. The Death most likely took him. R.I.P.

More than a century had passed away before the work so sadly stopped was taken up again. At that time the parish must have recovered something of its former prosperity, for the new building shows no signs of stint in the cost. The aisle walls were finished and carried up higher than the first designer had intended them to be. The west end was completed, or perhaps it was altered and the gable lowered. The nave and the aisles were roofed in, and the fine south porch added, and the chancel had a new roof and east window with some other alterations. All is well done in the best manner of the time, and the architectural result is excellent; but we do not find in the later work that fascinating *personal* quality which gives such a charm to the earlier.

It seems that the transept chapels were not included in the scheme of completion, or if they were, they were abandoned and let to go to ruin very soon afterwards. At



WEST DOOR, CLEY CHURCH.

the time of the Death their walls and gables were finished and waiting for the roofs. The masonry of the south chapel would be complete to-day but for the ravages of the ivy, which has torn much of it down. That on the north side was a good deal demolished some time in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, and windows from it used to make up the ends of the aisles.

The later story of the church is one of neglect and decay until about sixty years since, when some attempt was made to put it into decent order. New roofs, of very poor architectural character and material, were put to the nave and chancel, and a good deal more was done which we may now wish had been left undone. The roofs which were taken away were of the date and character of those which remain over the aisles, and very likely they were so far decayed as to be dangerous. At the time they were taken away few men had learned the value of the old work; and as for new, it was generally held to be sufficient that it should be "Gothic," and very poor stuff would pass muster with the public as "Gothic." They who put up the new roofs meant to do well, and did no worse than most of their contemporaries. We will hope that some day something better may be put in their places, but meanwhile they must serve till the church's greater needs have been attended to.

A good deal of necessary repair has been done to the external masonry lately, and last year the repair of the old roofs of the aisles was undertaken. That of the south roof is now finished. Its condition was very bad indeed, but a great deal of the original work remained, and it has been carefully preserved and the deficiency made good with new, following the old lines. One of the traceried spandrels which had to be made new has worked into it the date of the repair. The next work should be the

mending of the north roof in the same way. Its state is scarcely better than that of the other was.

On the completion of the building in the fifteenth century it seems to have been new furnished throughout, and some of the furniture of that time remains. Probably a good deal was lost in the rearrangement made sixty years since. We now have some very good standard ends worked up into the pews of that date, and six stalls in the chancel also fitted into modern work.

The font is a good example of the richest type of the Norfolk fonts, and the representations of the Seven Sacraments on its sides are full of interest to the antiquary. Note, for instance, in that representing the Mass, the sacring bell hung in a case against the wall, and the two attendants with torches. The figure of the Host is gone, and there is a neat round hole in its place. The iconoclast would scarcely have taken the trouble to work this, and it seems more likely that originally the Host was wrought in white marble, or some other bright material, and let into the stonework. There is a good seventeenth century cover for this font stored away in the chamber over the porch. It is worth repairing and bringing back into use.

In the porch chamber there is a remarkable "fixture" of very massive oak-work, apparently put in when the porch was built. It contains several lockers, and was the strong box or safe in which the "jewels" of the church were kept. The custodian of them, who may have been the clerk or one of the clergy, probably lived in the chamber. The closing of the lower lights of the south windows must have been done soon after the building, to make the place fit to live in. A very good table, of about the year 1700, stands in the chamber, and must have been fitted together there, as it can not have been brought in up the winding stair. The room may still have been inhabited then, or it may have been

fitted up as a place for meetings. Stored away there are a board with the Arms of Queen Anne, and others with inscriptions. The old tile floor remains, and the door to the chamber is a fine one.

Within the church there is a very good seventeenth century pulpit, and in the floor are a number of grave-stones of various dates, some having brasses. There are also some scraps of paving of black marble, in small pieces laid in a simple pattern. The material seems to be Belgian, and remains of floors of the same sort exist in some other churches in the Eastern Counties—for example, at Hadleigh in Suffolk. The work is probably of the sixteenth century.