

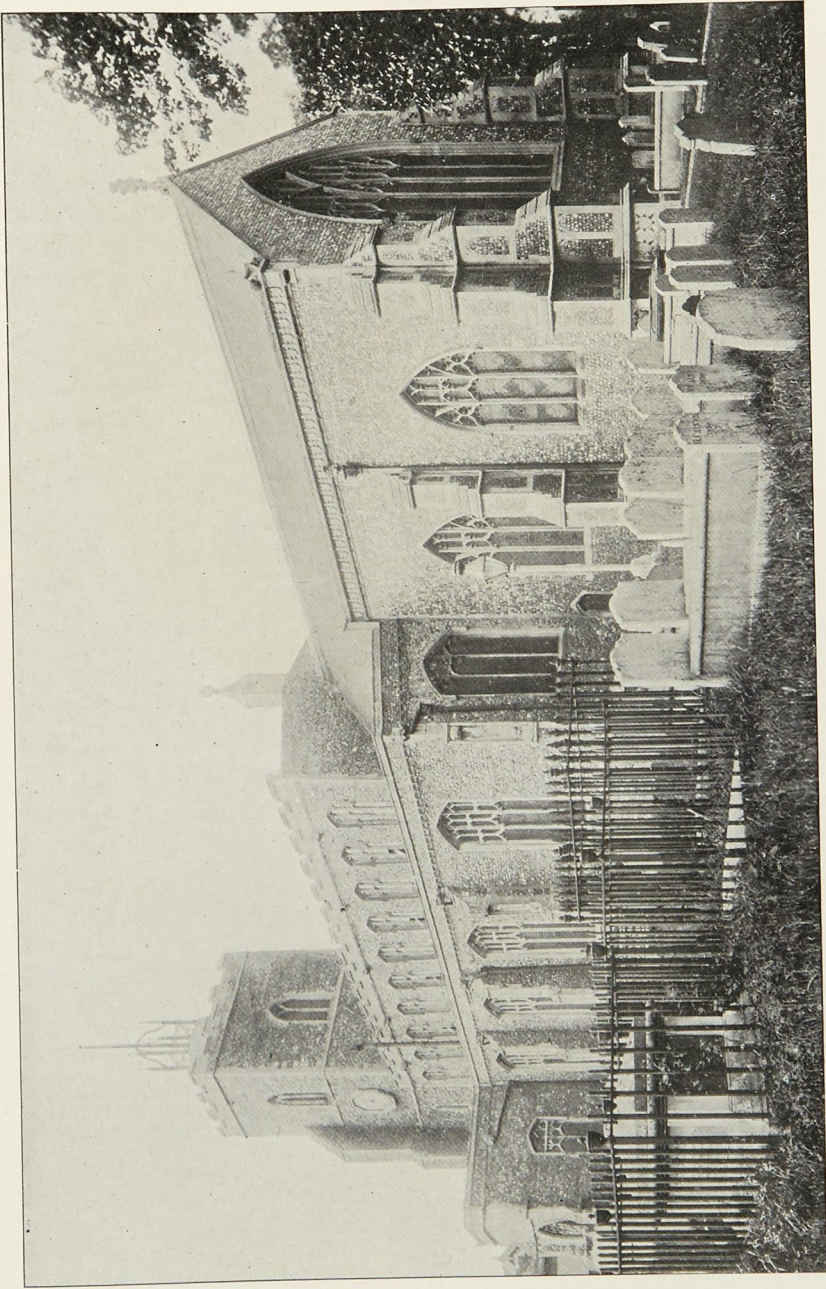
Notes on
Diss and Bressingham Churches.

BY THE LATE

CANON MANNING, F.S.A.

I.—DISS CHURCH.

THE origin of the name Diss, or Dice as it is spelt in the oldest records, is one that as yet I have been unable to feel satisfied about. Rejecting Blomefield's suggestion that because the Saxon word means a ditch, it may be enlarged to mean the Mere, and that the town was called after it, I lean to the opinion that if it is not a settler's patronymic, as so many of our place-names are, *i.e.*, Dick, as in Dickleburgh and Ditchingham, it may mean the sloping bank by which the land falls to the Waveney. We learn from the Domesday Book for Suffolk, that in the time of Edward the Confessor, part of Diss was in that county, "in the King's possession as demesne of the Crown," and had a church and twenty-four acres of glebe. I understand by this, not that the parish of Diss extended over the present boundary of the Waveney into the County of Suffolk, but that this end of the parish, where the chief part of the town and the church



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stands, was then part of the County of Suffolk, the remaining part being then called Watlingsete. The Waveney Valley was then a much wider expanse of water, as the subsoil testifies, of which the Mere is no doubt a remnant, and Blomefield mentions an opinion that Hartismere was so called from it, there being no other large water or mere in that hundred.

Of the first church on this site there are no remains whatever. It was probably a smaller building with deeply splayed windows and a round tower. The principal manor and the advowson of the rectory remained with the Crown until Henry I. granted them to Sir Richard de Lucy, whose daughter and heiress brought them to the Fitzwalter family, by one of whom, Sir Robert, who was knighted in 1274, Blomefield considers, with much probability, the present church was built. It was he who in 1299 obtained a charter for a fair at his manor at Diss to be held every year on the Feast of SS. Simon and Jude. The architecture of the oldest parts of the church agrees very well with the style that prevailed in the reign of Edward I., and we may not be far wrong in putting the date at about 1290. Looking at the church from the outside, we see nothing of this except the tower, as the windows and buttresses and parapets have all been renewed in the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the plan remains the same, with the exception of the chapels at the east end of each aisle, and the walls may not have been much interfered with. It consists of a chancel sixty-seven feet in length and twenty-two feet wide; a nave eighty-one feet long, and of the same width as the chancel; north and south aisles, only eleven feet four inches in width, divided from the nave by an arcade of five arches on octagon pillars; a chantry chapel at the end of each aisle; north and south porches; and a square tower at the west end.

Those who are acquainted with the sequence of English architectural styles will easily recognise the early-Decorated style of the tower. On the ground floor the archways, north and south, are of two orders, with perfectly plain mouldings, without jamb shafts; in each of the two lofty buttresses on the west face, at the second stage, are trefoil-headed niches, with straight-sided canopies, formerly containing images, of which only the pedestals remain; and the belfry windows are of two lights, without cusping in the heads. All this is very characteristic of the end of the thirteenth century. The staircase of the tower is within the thickness of the west wall, but it only reaches to the first floor, and appears never to have gone higher, and the bells are only accessible by ladder. It seems to be a later addition, as the small doorway to it on the ground floor is of late-Perpendicular work.

There is one rather unusual peculiarity to be mentioned. Most persons notice that within the church there is no lofty arch at the west end, opening into the tower as usual, but only a doorway, of the same date as the tower; but there are open archways through the tower, north and south. My explanation of this is, that as the tower abuts on the public street, there was no room for a procession path outside it, and therefore access was obtained for proceeding round the church by the passage through the tower, and the usual belfry arch inside was inadmissible, as it would have been open to the outer air.

Within the church, the chancel arch and the eight pillars, with their responds, belong to the same period, having the simple Decorated scroll-moulding on their capitals, much undercut below, as usually found; and the arches above them having two hollowed chamfers, as in the tower, and also in the north and south doorways

of the aisles. These, with a trefoil-headed piscina in the south aisle, are all the visible remains of the church as it was in the time of Edward I. No doubt the aisles then contained windows of the same date, perhaps with beautiful geometrical tracery. The chancel would have the same; and the whole interior, with finely-carved screens and parcloses, chancel stalls and nave benches, and other sumptuous furniture, and glowing with painted glass in every window, would make a scene such as we can scarcely realise now.

Towards the close of the fourteenth century a change of architectural fashion set in, and the Perpendicular style grew out of the Decorated. Straight lines and transoms in window tracery took the place of flowing ones; mouldings were shallower and narrow; arches were more obtuse, and even four-centred. This change synchronised in the Eastern Counties with much prosperity in manufactures, and wealthy merchants and landowners spent large sums on church building during the succeeding century, so that almost every church to this day has portions of that date.

It seems to have been during the first half of the fifteenth century that extensive alterations were made here, perhaps by Walter, Lord Fitzwalter, who came of age in 1422. He died about 1432, and his widow held the manor for several years. One of her daughters married into the family of Ratcliff, and her descendants became Lords Fitzwalter, and eventually Earls of Sussex.

I am inclined to place the date of the alterations about 1430 to 1440, or the early part of the reign of Henry VI. One reason for this is that the costume of the heads supporting the dripstones of the windows on the north side are of the fashion of that time; and another is that the two chapels at the east ends of the aisles, which are evidently additions, cannot be later, as

the Guilds of Corpus Christi and St. Nicholas, which occupied them, relinquished their use before the end of Henry VI.'s reign, and were consolidated into one, and built a new chapel for themselves in the town, which stood at the junction of Market Hill and St. Nicholas Street, on the site now occupied by the premises of Mr. Barns, jeweller. The aisle and chapel roofs have twenty-eight stone corbels of angels, probably of the same date.

The chancel appears also to have been taken in hand, and the two arches constructed into the side chapels. A comparison of the mouldings of the capitals and bases there with those of the nave pillars forms a little lesson in architectural style. The chancel roof is of this date, and is well preserved; there were angels with crowns between them on the cornice, as now at Yaxley; and the staircase to the rood loft remains on the north side.

We do not know what the east window was like, as at some time, much subsequent, the whole wall seems to have been removed, and until 1857 there was a square wooden window in a thin wall, as shown in old prints and drawings.

In the centre of the chancel floor is a stone that formerly had a brass of a chalice, and it is likely that it is the burial place of the rector in whose time these alterations were made, who perhaps was Edward Atherton, instituted in 1428, and who was Clerk of the Closet to Henry VI.

Besides the chancel and the chapels, the whole of the aisle windows, as I have said, were replaced, and those on the north side are the original ones, those on the south being mostly restorations of about fifty years ago. The two porches also belong to the same date. The south one had a fine front, with good flint tracery and shields of arms, but is now much decayed; the north

one has still its chamber and some good bosses in the ceiling. The aisle parapets, with much good sculpture of shields and foliage and grotesques, have been preserved, and the buttresses have had fine canopied niches. The only important pieces of woodwork of the time that remain are the west doors, which have been very richly carved. The chapel where the organ now is, was divided by a floor half way up, where a small organ was placed in pre-Reformation times. The old painted glass in the large window in that chapel did not belong to this church. The sanctus bell hung in the bell-cot outside, over the chancel arch, until 1840, and used to be rung as a sermon bell in my grandfather's time. There are no old monuments of interest: the earliest is a tablet in the north aisle to the Deyns family, dated 1661.

Still later, probably in the first quarter of the sixteenth century, the clerestory above the nave arches was altered, and probably heightened, and the present windows inserted; and the high-pitched roof, of which the weather moulding remains outside on the tower, was much lowered and appears nearly flat inside. There was, in my own recollection, some characteristic painting on the roof, especially in the easternmost bay, over where the rood stood, and a carved cornice of strawberry-leaf running the whole length of the roof, some of which I afterwards obtained, and it is to be seen surmounting the organ screen in the north aisle. The roof over the present organ was also similarly decorated, and I had a drawing made of it. These were coloured over, to a uniform brown, by the taste of the early Victorian period, in 1850. The church was then reseated with the uniform closed sittings still remaining; a gallery in the south aisle was removed; a deal pulpit and reading-desk and clerk's seat were against a north pillar in the middle of the church. The font was a wooden vase on a pedestal.

In the first year of my incumbency, 1857, the chancel was lengthened about seventeen feet, but upon old foundations. Some building, if not the chancel itself, had existed there. A new font and pulpit were erected; and the vestry, which had been rebuilt in 1785, in the "carpenter's Gothic" style, was restored. The reredos was erected in 1869, and several memorial windows soon followed.

In 1877 the west gallery was removed, and a new organ placed in the present position; and the chancel refitted with choir-stalls. Dean Goulburn preached the sermon at the opening service.

I might mention several matters of minor archæological interest relating to the church and its former history, but I will only refer to two events of old times which occurred here.

In 1524, Thomas Howard, K.G., second Duke of Norfolk, died at Framlingham Castle, and on the 22nd of June his body was brought to Thetford Priory for burial, resting the night on the way at Diss Church. A long account is to be found in a MS. of 1618, quoted in Guthrie's *Peerage*. A chariot bore the corpse, attended by a magnificent cavalcade, decked with cloth and heraldry. There were three coaches of friars, the chaplain, a standard, and 400 staves with torches; followed by knights, esquires, gentlemen of his household, treasurer and comptroller, Windsor herald, Clarenceux and Garter, kings of arms, many mourners in long gowns of black cloth, their horses in heraldic trappings, to the number of 900. They were met at each village by the clergy and choristers, and services were sung and alms distributed. At Hoxne the Bishop of Norwich met them *in pontificalibus*, with a procession, singing the service. "At the town of Diss they were met with all the procession belonging to the church choir and town. The

church porch was hanged with black, garnished with arms, and in the midst of the choir the noble corpse there rested for that night. A solemn dirge was sung. The Duke of Norfolk, son and heir of the deceased Duke, chief mourner, with the rest of the mourners, whereof the chief were the Earl of Oxford, the Lord Edmund Howard, the Lord Fitzwalter and his son and heir, the Lord Willoughby, the son and heir of Rice ap Thomas, and Sir Thomas Bullen [father of Anne Bullen, afterwards Queen,] were all kneeling about the hearse during the service. A watch attended all night in the church, about the corpse, of twelve yeomen, twelve gentlemen, two yeomen ushers, and two gentlemen ushers. The next morning, between six and seven of the clock, all repaired to the church, and the mourners to the place about the hearse, as they were the day before. Then a solemn mass was sung; and at the offering of the said mass, the chief mourner was brought to the offering by the kings of arms and heralds, Sir William Findlay, knt., the chamberlain, bearing up his train, and the Earl of Oxford delivering unto him his offering; also all the mourners accompanying him, two and two together, according to their degree; and after the offering, the Duke was brought in like manner to his place again. The service done, everyone was marshalled by the heralds, in the same order and array as they had been the day before, and so passed from the town of Disse to Thetford."

The other circumstance I would mention is of a less creditable character. The sport of hawking once took place in this church. John Skelton, poet laureate to Henry VIII., the celebrated satirist, extolled by Erasmus, was rector of Diss from about the year 1500 to 1529. His work was well known. Some of his poetry is witty and imaginative, with much of coarseness and buffoonery,

In a piece called "Ware the Hawke," he tells of a benefited parson who hawked in Diss Church:—

"A priest unrepent
Straight to the Sacrament
He made his Hawke to fly
With hugeous showte and cry,
The hye alter he strypte naked."

And then this "fonde frantike falconer" swore horrible oaths, vowing that before he left the church his hawk should eat a pigeon till the blood ran raw upon the very altar-stone. This ribald ecclesiastic fast bolted and barred himself in the church; yet, says Skelton:—

"With a pretty gin
I fortunèd to come in,
This rebell to behold,
Where of hym I contrould;
But he said that he wolde,
Agaynst my mind and will
In my church hawke still."

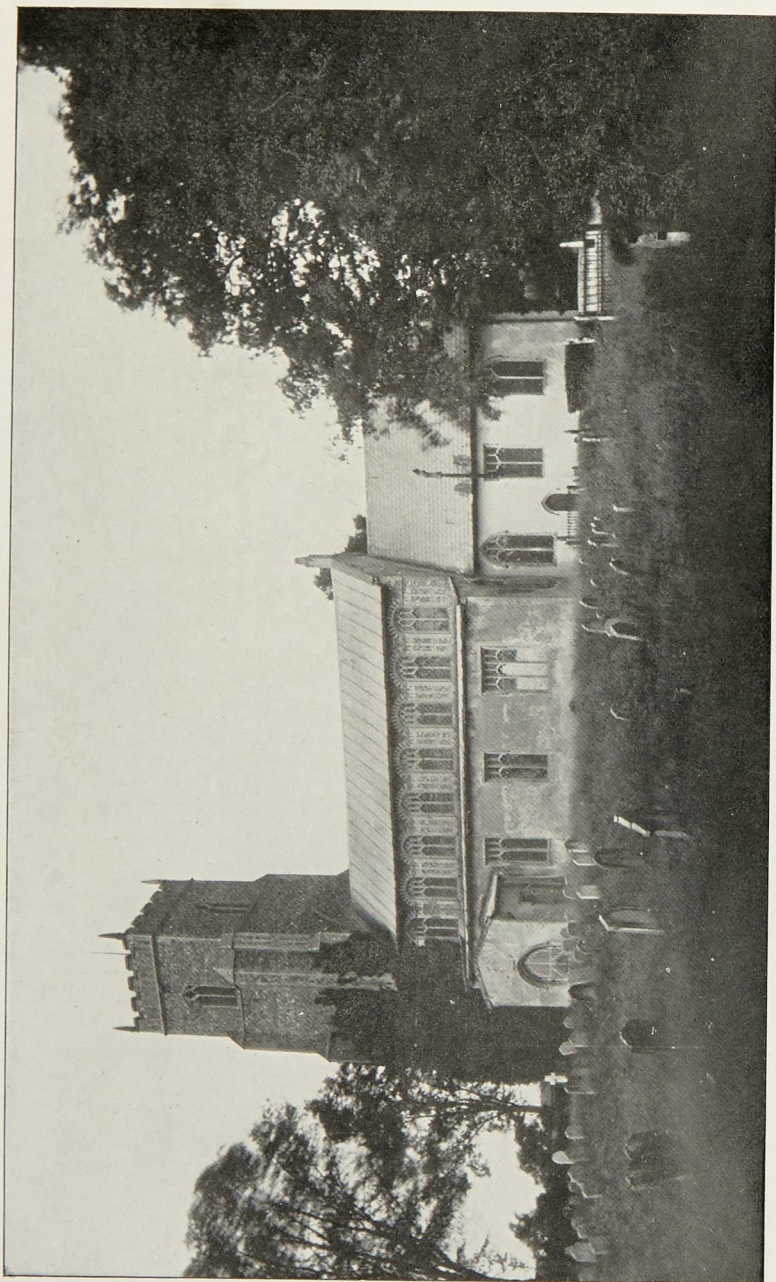
In the altercation, a huntsman threatened to set his hounds on a fox in the church, and at this point—

"Down went my offering box
Boke, bell, and candell
All that he might handell."

Further outrageous sacrilege was committed, more than enough to justify Skelton in saying that such "lossels" made the church of small authority.¹

Skelton's violent and bitter attacks on Cardinal Wolsey caused measures to be taken to apprehend him; but he took sanctuary at Westminster about 1522, and seems to have remained there till his death in 1529. His were the days of non-residence among incumbents, but it is

¹ Mr. James Hooper, in article on Skelton, *Gentleman's Magazine* for September, 1897, p. 308.



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likely that he did reside here at times, as he witnessed some of the wills of his parishioners, and so no doubt he lived where the present rectory stands.

Most of the printed accounts relating to Diss will tell you that Ralph de Diceto, Dean of St. Paul's in 1183, a very famous man in his day, was a native of Diss. There is no evidence for it beyond the similarity of name. I had some correspondence with Bishop Browne of Bristol on the subject when he was Canon of St. Paul's, in connection with a list of the Deans to be placed on a brass plate in that cathedral; and he came to the conclusion, which was also that of Bishop Stubbs of Oxford, that this Ralph was not an Englishman at all. The arguments will be found stated in the preface to an edition of the Dean's Treatises published in the Government Record series.

II.—BRESSINGHAM CHURCH.

This church is of two periods of architectural style, early-Decorated and late-Perpendicular. The only sign of earlier work is that a holy water stoup in the porch appears to be made out of a Norman capital, but whether originally belonging to this church or not I cannot say. There is also an early corbel in the coping of the south aisle.

The main building belongs to the end of the thirteenth century or *c.* 1300. Of this date are the walls of the chancel, with a window on the north side, and the sedilia on the south, the nave pillars and arches, with the north and south doorways and the font. The pillars have an octagonal plan and are light and graceful, and their capitals are much undercut. The font has shallow tracery and foliage frequently found at that date; the oaken chest may be equally old. The church may have

been erected partly by Sir Richard de Boyland, an itinerant judge in the reign of Edward I., who was disgraced for his extortions when the King was abroad, and fined 4000 marks, and who came to live in this parish, and built a great mansion, now a farm-house called Boyland Hall. He there constructed a conduit for water and baths, some of which remains, and for supplying water to some extensive moats which he caused to be made round his orchards and park. The leaden pipes are even now sometimes turned up in ploughing. Between this date and the end of the fifteenth century there are no signs of any alterations to the building.

There was very likely a round tower, which gave place to the present square one with its tasteful west front, about 1493, when Sir Roger Pilkington, of a Lancashire family—whose ancestor, Sir John Pilkington, had married the heiress of the Verdon family, lords here about a century before—is believed to have begun its erection. It is a fine piece of flint-work with a good west doorway, having in its mouldings the crowns of Bury Abbey, and in the spandrils two coats of arms, the sinister one being those of Pilkington quartering Verdon, and the dexter one those of Lancaster, another manorial family of the parish. To this date and during the following twenty or thirty years the rest of the Perpendicular work here may be attributed, viz., the aisle windows and the beautiful nave roof. The clerestory of eight windows, with good flint panelling between them, is dated outside below a window on the north in Arabic numerals, 1527. To this date or a little later we may also ascribe the grand bench ends in the nave and aisles, with their decidedly Renaissance ornamentation. They have semi-classical figures with scrolls, etc., but are a good deal mutilated, and it is not easy to say

whom they were intended to represent; several of them seem to be angels. Sir Roger Pilkington did not live to see the whole of this restoration accomplished. He was buried on the north side of the altar, and had an altar-tomb with brasses to himself and his wife. The top slab with the casement of the brasses was still on the floor until the tile pavement was put down.

In 1638 a faculty was obtained for "beautifying" the church, and a parclose screen in the south aisle appears to have been taken away. In 1644 the "superstitious pictures" in painted glass were destroyed, but the portions now in the east window were preserved at the hall till they were restored to the church by Humphry Clayton, rector in Blomefield's time. The inscriptions on the bells were also partially erased by John Nun in 1644, for which he received 13s. 4*d.* In 1674, or before, fourteen wainscot pews were erected, and the highest allotted to Edmund Salter, M.A., for his liberality in the previous "beautifying," upon which he put a Latin inscription. The vestry was demolished in 1658, but has been rebuilt in modern times. There were two Guilds here, St. John the Baptist and St. Peter, and Blomefield mentions a book of their accounts preserved in the church chest, but I fear it has since been lost or destroyed. The arrangement of the upper seats in the nave as they now appear is quite recent.