

BLECHINGLEY CHURCH RECENT INVESTIGATIONS AND DISCOVERIES

BY

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THE bringing to light of some ancient features of the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Blechingley,¹ aroused considerable local interest. Suggestions were put forward in an effort to establish the nature of a newly-found arched opening, and to explain alterations which were made to the south wall of the Clayton Chapel centuries ago, and which resulted in the sealing up of this opening, the lancet windows and quatrefoil. Eventually a proposal to seek authoritative opinion was adopted, and, in due course, such opinion was given, together with observations on certain other features of the church. A complete account of the investigations and finds, and of the subsequent visit of representatives of the Historical Monuments Commission, has been entered in the Parish Record Book. In order that similar information may be available well beyond the confines of the parish, and to provide ready reference, the Rector, Rev. L. S. Hawkes, M.A., has given full approval to its publication in this volume.

In February 1952 a Victorian radiator on the south side of the Clayton Chapel (South Chapel) was taken down, and in the process the plaster behind it sustained some damage. It became obvious that under the plaster was hidden some stone work which might be of interest, and under the supervision of the Rector and Mr. Uvedale Lambert, M.A., a well-known member of our Society, the wall was carefully examined and cut away. Eventually a "Decorated" shallow arched opening was revealed, positioned immediately above the present floor level, and measuring some 3 feet 6 inches in height (at centre) and 3 feet in width. The left side of the arch had to be rebuilt, and the whole is now exposed as a permanent feature of the church (Plate XVII).

Above the arch the remains of the centre and eastern of three 13th-century lancet windows were discovered: the outline of these has been left displayed. Attention was then turned to the blocked western lancet and a quatrefoil, which for long have been visible

¹ For general description of the church and plan see *V.C.H.*, Vol. IV, II. *Blechingley Parish History*, Lambert, 1921, and *Blechingley, A Short History*, Lambert, 1949.



BLECHINGLEY CHURCH. LANCET AND QUATREFOIL.



Photo: C. E. Sexton

BLECHINGLEY CHURCH. CANOPY.

from outside.¹ This lancet was then unblocked from the inside, and found to be intact. Underneath, the quatrefoil window was also unblocked, and it was apparent that this had served as an air vent for the crypt under the chapel which, since 1707, had been used as a Clayton mausoleum. A stone slab has now been placed over the vent, to form a sill to the window. In the top right hand corner of the window splay was found a mark, which might have been either a mason's or a motive mark. Both the unblocked lancet and quatrefoil have been left to view as permanent features, and each is covered externally by clear glass within a frame (Plate XVII).

The unblocking of the lancet window brought the discovery of a fine 15th-century shrine canopy, about 4 feet in height and nearly 2 feet in width, built in, the wrong way round and upside down, and in a very good state of preservation. This was carefully removed, and has been set up in the north aisle to the left of the new Altar of the Holy Spirit (see note on dedication at the conclusion of this article) to form a canopy over the aumbry (Plate XVIII). A 13th-century capital head has been utilized as a support. At the same time the stone mural tablet to General Sir William Clayton was moved to the south wall of the aisle, west of the south door. The brass to Richard Glyd of Pendhill (d. 1665) was lowered to eye level, and the memorial to Dr. Nathaniel Harris (Rector 1609-25) was removed to the north wall of the north aisle, to balance the Northey memorial between the windows.

In March 1954 a visit was made by Mr. A. R. Dufty and Mr. E. A. R. Rahbula, Principal Investigators, Historical Monuments Commission, and with them in the church were the Rector, Mr. Uvedale Lambert, and our member, Mr. Bruce E. Money (churchwarden). The following account of the inspection, and the conclusions reached by the two investigators, is compiled from the notes made by Mr. Money.

CLAYTON CHAPEL

The large "Decorated" shallow arched recess in the south wall the investigators believe to be an early 14th-century (c. 1320) double piscina, the drains of which have been obliterated. This, with the three 13th-century lancet windows, and the low side quatrefoil window (c. 1250) underneath the westernmost lancet, was later blocked up,² and the smaller early 15th-century piscina further east (still existing) was then formed. A possible reason for the blocking of these features was that the building of the double piscina obscured much of the lancet windows, and consequently the present Perpendicular window was built above (c. 1450). It is probable that the piscina became obsolete owing to extensions that moved the high

¹ Illustrated in *Blechingley Parish History*, Vol. II, 1921, 339, and *Blechingley Short History*, 1949.

² *V.C.H.*, Vol. IV, 261-2 refers to such alterations. (The small piscina is therein dated 14th century.)

altar out of convenient reach. It was unlikely that the 15th-century shrine canopy would have been diverted from its original purpose at this date, but more probable that the shrine which it covered was demolished, with many other ornaments (as the Church Records and Accounts indicate) at the Reformation in the 16th century, and the canopy then utilized as a handy piece of stone in blocking up the western lancet, where it was found. The Early English quatrefoil low side window¹ was probably used by the clerk to ring the sacring or sanctus bell at the time of Consecration, to remind those outside the church of the solemn moment of the Mass. Later—about 1450—the little turret containing the rood stair was built, and held the bell. The mark at the top right-hand corner of the deeply splayed western window reveal was considered to be only some graphic scribble made centuries ago, such as the cutting of initials by someone in an idle moment. A simpler mark on the left hand reveal is probably a mason's mark.

FEATURES ELSEWHERE

The arcading of the north wall of the chancel was regarded as the most difficult problem of the church. The lancet windows were examined, and it was considered that probably they are of the 13th century, like the three opposite in the South Chapel, though part of the stonework of the jambs between is modern. The low pillars and capitals are 13th century, restored, and perhaps were moved from elsewhere in the church. Below the lancets are, or were, stone benches of the same date, and perhaps at one time sedilia;² the three openings certainly suggest sedilia (three seats for the three ministers at High Mass). Remains of these seats are much restored. The various levels of the floor here are difficult to understand, and it was considered almost impossible to decide what had been done by Victorian or other restorers at various times.

The low stone doorway in the north wall of the chancel is Tudor, and possibly led to an early Tudor vestry. The angel corbels in the chancel are original—15th century. Probably the chancel arch was rebuilt during the 19th century. In the first church the arched opening from the Norman tower to the Norman nave must have been much narrower, and when this arch was demolished, the opening was greatly enlarged in the mediæval rebuilding. The stone capitals and the Norman pilasters have been pushed back, and re-set in their present positions. Cut Norman stone is clearly visible on the shafts of these piers to the present Transitional arch.

The original Norman church was probably the full length of the present church, though the nave and chancel roofs would have been considerably lower.

¹ Its suggested association with an Anchorite's cell has been referred to elsewhere. See *V.C.H.*, Vol. II, 438, and *Blechingley Short History*, 1949.

² *V.C.H.*, Vol. II, 439.

The immensely thick (9 inches) gravestones, at the head and foot of the grave in the churchyard beside the south wall of the church, immediately east of the porch, were examined; the grave is 17th century. The headstone has a faint inscription on its west face, now indecipherable. On the east face is carved a heart, pierced by crossed arrows. On the footstone an hour glass is carved between two sets of crossed bones. At the top of the stone are two skulls, one on either side.

The writer feels that a word of commendation is due to Mr. Bruce Money for his efforts to foster interest in this fine old edifice. He has inserted in a Church Photographic Record Book particulars of all architectural features; and new information is to be added as it comes to hand. Taking the view that some, at least, of the particularly interesting items buried in old and valuable registers and the like—seen by the few—should be brought to light to interest all and sundry, Mr. Money has formed a collection of excellent framed photographs, adding descriptive matter. This has recently (1954) been displayed on the walls of the tower, where records of campanology dating from the 18th century are also to be seen. The subjects include certain entries from the Parish Registers of the 16th and 17th centuries, and from the Churchwardens' Register and Accounts of the 17th and 18th centuries, and Royal and other notable personages of the Tudor period closely associated with Blechingley. In this collection is a photographic copy of the title page of the Parish Register 1538-97. This is accompanied by a transcription and explanatory note as follows:

Transcription

Thys is the bowke or Regystre of the paryshe Churc (damaged) of blechynglygh in the Countie of Surrey in the diocesse off Wynchest' ffor the Regystreng off all such names as schall be crystned buryed and wedded wythin the said Paryshe accordyng to the Commandement & Iniunctyons off our most noble and excellent prynce Henry by the grace of God Kyng off Englande and Fraunce defensour of the Ffaythe lorde of Irelande and in Erthe supreme Hed under Cryste off the Churche of Englande

Exiuyt to us (the XXVth daye of Octobre in the XXX yere off the Raegne off our sayd sov'ane) by Gryffyn Leyson Comysseyoner under Thomas lorde Crumewell Lorde privie seale vyce gerent to the Kyngs said Highnes for all Jurysdyctyon Ecclesiasticall wythin thys Realme.

Explanatory Note

In 1538 Thomas Cromwell, as Vicar-General for the King, ordered that registers of christenings, burials, and marriages, should be regularly kept in every parish.

This is one of the very rare original and *paper* registers begun in 1538, presumably by Benedict Mulsho, Rector of Blechingley, and continued until 1597, when the use of parchment was ordained.

CHAPEL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

This was set up and furnished by Uvedale and Melanie Lambert, in memory of certain members of the Lambert family connected with Blechingley. Together with the aumbry it was dedicated on November 20, 1952, by the Bishop of Southwark.

As the church had no date established for its dedication festival, the Bishop appointed that this should be observed on November 20 each year.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to the Rev. L. S. Hawkes, M.A., for his co-operation, and for permitting the taking of photographs; to Mr. Bruce E. Money for allowing me to refer to his own notes and those made by Mr. Uvedale Lambert, who was abroad at the time of writing, but who so carefully shewed our members round the church in 1954; and to our member Mr. C. E. Sexton, for undertaking the photography.



Photo: C. E. Sexton

BLECHINGLEY CHURCH. DOUBLE PISCINA.