

## Oakham Church.

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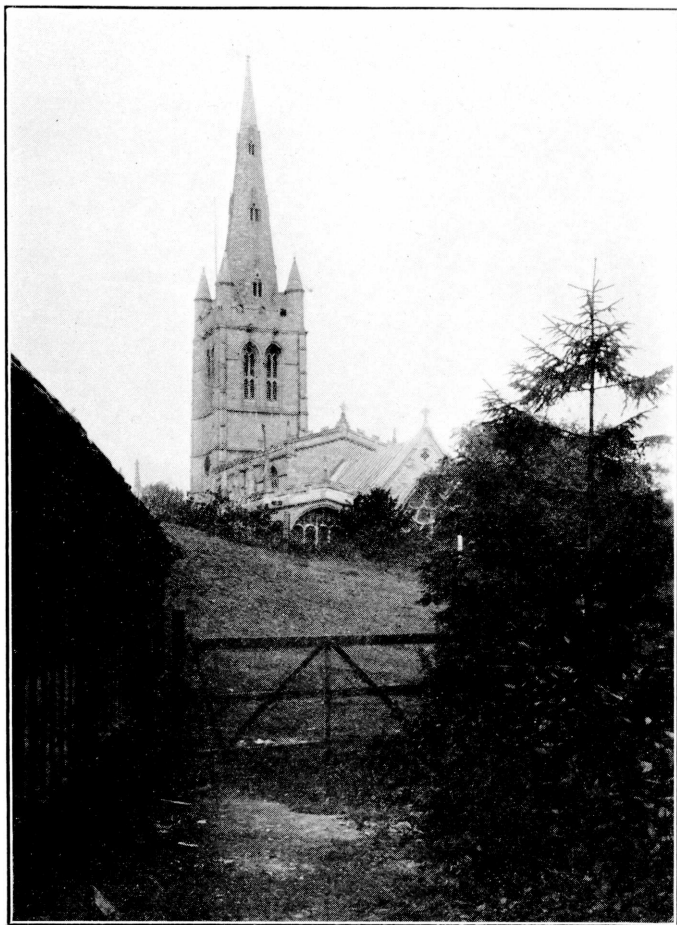
BY J. HOLLAND WALKER.

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THE church of All Saint's, Oakham, consists of an engaged tower, crowned by a spire, nave, chancel, north and south aisle, transepts, north and south chancel aisles, and south porch, the general plan being that of a great rectangle with slight protuberances at the transept. The general impression given by the interior is that of Decorated work of the 14th century ; but upon looking further one realises that many styles of architecture are represented, and that the present condition of the church is the result of continual growth, each period of which has left its mark upon the fabric, and contributes to the beautiful ensemble that we have inherited.

And first as to dates. There is evidence of a 13th century church on the site in the inner south door, the arcade of five arches on either side of the porch, the chancel arch—but not the brackets upon which it rests, and the blank arch adorned with nailhead in the east wall of the south transept. The early part of the 14th century is represented by the pillars and arches of the nave colonnade, together with the windows now filled with later tracery, the buttresses and the chancel, and these are quickly followed by the double transept, the bracket on the south wall of the tower, and the sculptured brackets supporting the chancel arch.

The tower, which is Perpendicular in outline, but Early English in detail, is of the third quarter of the 14th



OAKHAM CHURCH.

century, and the spire is mentioned as having been erected under the terms of Roger Flore's will. Roger Flore died in 1424, but the style of the spire is about fifty years earlier. This may have been adopted either to match the tower, or is a reflection of the same conservative spirit which preserved the segmental arches in the castle, although enriching them with the more modern dogtooth ornament. The north chancel aisle was the particular treasure of the Convent of St. Peter at Westminster, and was probably erected with funds derived from the estate of Archbishop Langham, who died in 1376, and is in the Perpendicular style. The south chancel aisle followed soon after it, and has attached to it a vestry, which was formerly a priest's house of two storeys, and is also of Perpendicular date.

The clerestory and embattled parapet, together with various Perpendicular window traceries, represent later alterations; and the whole building was completely renewed under the direction of Sir Gilbert Scott, about 1858.

It will be seen that although there are remains in plenty proving building activities almost continuously throughout the 13th and 14th centuries and even later, it is practically impossible to reconstruct from them a coherent story of the development of the church.

The key to this very manifest activity, seems to rest in the fact of the very intimate connection between Oakham Church and the wealthy abbey of St. Peter's at Westminster. At the time of the conquest, the Manor of Rutland, including Oakham and its church, was in the hands of Edith, Queen to Edward the Confessor, and upon her death in 1075, the fruits of the church, together with its four chapels of Egleton, Langham, Barleythorpe and Brook, went to the abbey of Westminster, and the

advowson of the church remained in the hands of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster as successors to the abbot and convent until about 1850, the great tithe going to the abbey until that date. The chapelry of Langham provides another tie to Westminster, for a family of yeoman farmers in the village of Langham, produced a boy Stephen, who became a monk at Westminster in 1349, and shortly afterwards became abbot. Edward III. made him Treasurer of the realm in 1360, Bishop of Ely 1362, Chancellor 1364, and Archbishop of Canterbury 1366. The Pope conferred the Cardinal's Hat upon him in 1368, and he died in 1376 leaving his great wealth to the convent.

With such intimacy between Oakham and Westminster it is not surprising to find that there was very considerable clerical activity in Oakham. In the 13th century there were six priests, possibly members of the convent, or more likely secular priests paid by the Convent, labouring in Oakham. They are said to have lived in a house near the Market Place, now called Flores House, whose Early English doorway is well worth inspection, and though we do not know if they were formed into some sort of college as were the later chantry priests throughout the land, it is manifest that if they were Regular clergy from Westminster, they must have lived some sort of common life. The whole incident is rather obscure, and one would almost have thought that it would have been worth while for the abbey to have established a cell at Oakham.

These six men did everything that was done in Oakham. Not only were they the clergy of the town, but the doctors, sick-nurses, lawyers and schoolmasters of the place, and from this latter activity springs Oakham

School. In Elizabethan times, somewhere about 1587, Archdeacon Johnson of Leicester and vicar of North Luffenham, found some remnants of their work, and also of similar activity at Uppingham. This he organised and refounded, and on his foundation has grown up the well known public schools of Oakham and Uppingham.

There were two chapels in the northern part of the churchyard. One dedicated to St. Michael has disappeared, but on the still visible foundations of St. Mary's Chapel, a building was erected in the time of Charles I, for the teaching of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, which still forms a useful part of the school buildings. The Church also, remains as the chapel for the school, although a school chapel is now being built.

In 1349 the church was the scene of a gruesome event. A man was detained in the gaol of Oakham Castle because he was said to have stolen four cows. He accused some people in the neighbourhood of having committed the theft, but the judges found that they were innocent, and he was condemned to be hanged. This sentence however, was carried out unskilfully, and after he had hanged the allotted time, his body was taken to Oakham church, to await interment. While so waiting he revived, and after a series of adventures received a royal pardon.

There are very few monuments in the church, and this is probably explained by the fact that although the manor of Oakham has been held by many important families, it has never been the chief seat of any one of them, and they have used either the parish church of their principal seat, or else their private chapel as their cemetery.

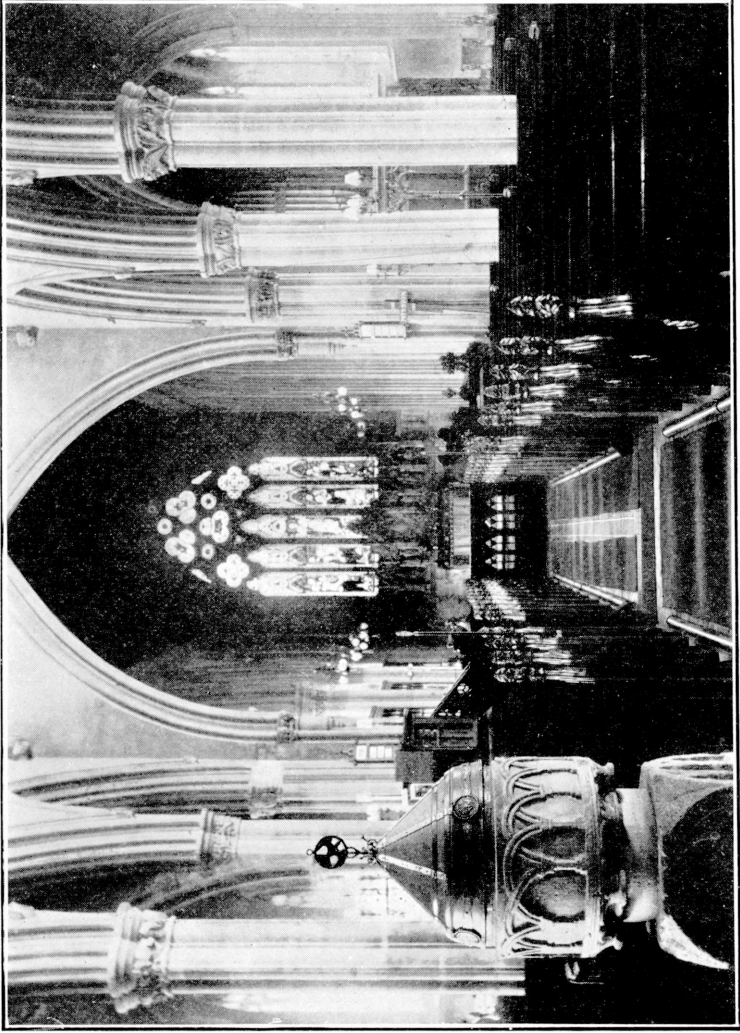
A detailed study of the architecture of the church, commencing with the nave, reveals many interesting features. The arcades of four bays are of early Decorated work of about 1300. The piers are square in section, with shafts of a little less than three quarter circle section attached to each face, leaving the angles free. The shafts are filleted, giving fine shadow effects. The fine suites of arch mouldings are cut on the chamfer but nearly on the rectangle, thus proving their early date. They are enclosed by hood moulds, stopped in the spandrils by interesting masks.

The corbels carrying the wall pieces are elaborately carved, and resemble miserere seats, while the 15th century Perpendicular windows of the clerestorey deserve notice.

The roof, restored by Sir Gilbert Scott, is 15th century, and displays elaborate bosses and angles carrying shields, rather reminiscent of Walter Dreadman's work at March.

The capitals of the arcade, however, are the most interesting feature. Commencing at the south east we have—

1. A threefold carving, to the south the Annunciation, to the west the Baptism, and to the north the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *i.e.*, the three fundamentals of the Christian gospel, the Incarnation, the descent of the Holy Ghost, and the acceptance of the church.
2. The Gospel, so announced, is taken up and proclaimed to the world by the Evangelists, whose signs appear on the capital of the second pier.
3. Angels declaring the glory and truth of the gospel appear on the third Capital.



OAKHAM CHURCH. (INTERIOR.)

4. We leave theology and take to satire. A fox runs away with a goose, leaving the small goslings disconsolate while the fox is chased by a man. The west face is filled with the common and conventional ape-and-clog ornament. This scene is supposed to represent the convent of Westminster taking the great tithes and leaving the small.
5. The Western respond is a pelican in her piety, a favourite representation of the church.

The south arcade is thus seen to deal with happy and pleasing themes, but when we turn to the north arcade, the cardinal point dedicated to the powers of evil, we find that the pleasing subjects cease, and grotesques and dragons take their place.

1. The eastern capital is a grotesque musician.
2. Beautiful work developing into a face towards the south.
3. A grotesque and magnificent dragon.
4. A further grotesque.
5. The western respond is the expulsion from Eden.

The western tower arch is plainer than the arcades, and is enclosed in a hood mould, and above it may be seen the housing of an earlier roof than the present one.

The Font is composed of a bowl of late Norman or Transitional date, resting on a base which is of the 14th century, and has the appearance of the base of a church-yard cross.

The Early English chancel-arch rests curiously upon Decorated brackets which must, of course, represent a later improvement, and replacing of earlier corbels. The decoration on the southern corbel shews acorns, probably a rebus on *Oak-ham*.



The chancel is of the same date as the nave, about 1300. It is of three bays, the capitals to the north being coronated, while those to the south are embattled, and are curiously reminiscent of those in All Saint's, Stamford. At the east is a piscina, and the tracery of the east window is modern, as are also the parclose and ceiling, which were erected after designs by Sir Gilbert Scott. In the cornice occur curious flower ornaments, a compliment to the great local merchant family of Flore, one of whom provided funds for the steeple in 1424.

The north chancel aisle is the chapel of the Holy Trinity, and there was a guild of the Holy Trinity at Oakham. This chapel appears to have been the favourite local possession of the Convent of Westminster, and its architecture shews it to have been built soon after the death of Simon Langham in 1376, so that it is reasonable to suppose that some part of his huge legacy was employed in commemorating him by erecting this chapel in the parish church, to which the chapelry of his native Langham was attached. The Perpendicular east window of this aisle is modern, and to the south of the altar is a piscina. The roof is ancient—15th century, but differing from the nave roof,—and its details are excellent.

The tomb in this chapel is not definitely appropriated, but appears to be 14th century. It is enriched by sunk quatrefoils displaying shields carrying a cow-bell or sheep-bell. Oakham owed a great deal of its prosperity at the time this tomb was erected, to the wool trade, and Canon Charles points out that the Warnes were a great family of wool merchants about this time. He thinks that these bells may be sheep-bells, and indicate traffic in wool, and it is possible that this tomb is to a member of the Warne family.

The north transept is rather later than the nave, and is lighted by ugly perpendicular windows with transoms in their heads. On the eastern wall is a charming piscina, and above it is a vaulted niche to carry the image of some saint whose identity is now lost. Close to the pulpit is a decorated bracket for some other image, and under it occurs a crowned head. The style of the workmanship seems to suggest that this is to represent Henry VI., 1422-1461.

Towards the western end of the north aisle is a magnificent Perpendicular window, and over the north door is a bracket that would probably bear a statue of St. Christopher, the guardian against storms. The corbels for the wall pieces are all carved into masks, and the lean-to roof is modern.

The south chancel aisle dedicated to St. Mary forms the Lady Chapel. It was erected soon after the chapel of the Holy Trinity, say about 1390, and behind the organ is a piscina. The modern wooden roof was erected by Sir Gilbert Scott, who based its design upon the roof of the Trinity Chapel.

Attached to this chapel, and practically contemporaneous with it, was a building of two storeys, used as a priest's house. The lower storey now only remains, and is used as a clergy vestry, but from the outside, some traces of the second storey may be made out.

The south transept is of like date to the north transept, and contains in its southern wall a piscina, with a wooden shelf forming an aumbrey. In the east wall of this transept is a niche or filled in window of Early English date, enriched with nailhead ornament, and now bearing the Commandments. This is one of the earliest objects in the church, and appears to be a relic of a previous building of the 13th century. At present it is

architecturally meaningless. Opposite to it, in the west wall, is a window, placed high up to clear the porch.

The south aisle contains, close to the south door, a mysterious pilaster or internal buttress, terminated by the figure of a lion. At the west end is a small alabaster figure to Anne, daughter of Andrew Burton, who died, aged 15, in 1642—the year that the civil war broke out. Close to it, on the south wall of the tower, is a bracket, supported by a musician playing a rebec, very like the musicians in the hall of the castle.

Turning to the south door, we find that the portal is Early English and contemporary with the chancel arch and other remains of the 13th century building. It is enclosed by a later suite of Early English mouldings, and the column on the south west side bears crude stiff-stalk ornament on its capital. The porch is large and important, with a restored wooden roof. It is flanked on the inside by stone benches carrying arcades of five arches divided by Early English columns, with their capitals enriched in some cases with nailhead ornament.

The exterior of the porch shews that the outer door is not accurately centred with its later mouldings. A Crucifix which crowned the gable of this porch, was blown down some little time ago, and its fragments are preserved in the church.

Throughout the exterior the corbel tables and the gargoyles are full of vigour, and well worthy of attention, while the bold buttresses and noble battlements are worthy of our highest admiration.

The tower and spire carry ball flower enrichments dating the style to the last quarter of the 14th century, and are finer in effect than their workmanship warrants. The details are, in fact, clumsy. The west door is grouped with the window that surmounts it under one

arch, and above this arch occur three niches containing figures representing God the Father, and two Saints. The conception of this grouping is good, but somehow it seems to miss its mark and is not as impressive as it might be. Towards the west are two windows filled with bell louvres, badly spaced, and leaving an ugly blank space southwards, which carries the stairway. The spire, however, with its spire lights, is good.

At the east end of the vestry is a delightful Perpendicular window, now blocked up, but shown open in a plan of 1859 preserved in the church ; while in the upper part of this portion of the church is the window of the stairs, and other indications of the second storey of the priest's house already mentioned.

Outside the south door of the Lady chapel, is a very fine Holy Water Stoup. This is a very unusual feature, and the specimen is a fine one.

The east gable is crowned by a magnificent Crucifix, which Canon Charles is anxious to have copied, and the copy placed over the gable of the South porch.

Oakham Church, though presenting no great object of beauty or outstanding interest, leaves one with the impression of a building that manifests the quiet and coherent growth of a prosperous community, and as it now stands, forms a very delightful and impressive study, not only for the ecclesiologist, but for the ordinary wayfarer ; and is a building which should be better known by the general public than it appears to be.