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Notes on the Churches of Letcombe Regis and Letcombe Bassett.

*Read before the Berks Archæological Society, December 6th, 1905,
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I HAVE to-day selected as the subject of my lecture an account, I fear very incomplete, of two of the Churches in our County of Berks, which are noteworthy, not so much on account of their architectural merit, but from the fact of their being seldom visited and little known, owing to their comparatively out-of-the-way and secluded situation. Very little can be gleaned from the existing authorities as to the early history of the Letcombes, and no attempt, therefore, will be made to sweep away the obscurity which still envelopes the position taken by these two parishes in ancient times. They are situate in a combe or valley, as their name implies, formed by a tributary of the little river Ock, immediately under the Berkshire Downs, Letcombe Regis being about $1\frac{1}{2}$ and Letcombe Bassett $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from the ancient town of Wantage, and it is probable that in early times, and especially during the reign of King Alfred, stirring events may have occurred to disturb the serenity of

Since this Paper was read an interesting pamphlet, entitled "A short account of Letcombe Regis," by H. J. Daniell, has been published. It contains much valuable information about the Manor, Village, Church and Court Rolls.

the ancient inhabitants. The pre-historic Ridgeway passes to the south and the Portway to the north of the villages, and on the Downs is the powerful earthwork called Letcombe Castle, one of the chain of encampments, no doubt thrown up to afford protection to the residents in the fertile Vale of the White Horse in times of danger. The distinguishing additions to the name Letcombe were given, according to Lysons in the *Magna Britannia*, (1) in the case of Letcombe Bassett from the Bassets who were proprietors of the Manor in the 13th century, having inherited it from Robert D'Oilly, to whom it was given by the Conqueror, and (2) in the case of Letcombe Regis as having been a parcel of the ancient demesnes of the Crown. The Manor continued in the Royal family till after the death of Richard, Earl of Cornwall, King of the Romans, brother of King Henry the 3rd, in 1246. It was afterwards in the family of the Lisles. There is a tradition that an old moated enclosure in the parish marks the site of a hunting lodge of King John, but I don't think there is any evidence to support it. In later times we find the Fettiplaces, of Childrey and elsewhere, holding considerable property in both these parishes, and in the will of Sir John Estbury, or Isbury as he there calls himself, the founder of the almshouses and hospital at Lambourne, and of a chantry in that Church, we find him described as of Letcombe Regis. There is nothing except a small brass to Alice Estbury in Letcombe Regis Church to commemorate the connection of these eminent families with the parishes in pre-Reformation times. At an early period one of the Manors of Letcombe Regis came into the possession of the great Abbey of Clugny, in France, and some of the re-building of the Church may be due to the influence of the Monastery. With such meagre details to start upon, though no doubt much more information can be obtained from the Registry at Salisbury and elsewhere, it may appear rash to attempt a description of the Parish Churches, but we can only rely on the architectural features to tell their own tale as to the period at which the several portions of the edifices were erected or reconstructed.

Let us first make our way to Letcombe Regis, where the Church dedicated to St. Andrew consists of a western tower, nave and chancel. It has been much renovated, but appears to be of three architectural periods. The earliest portion is the lower part of the tower, which was constructed towards the end of the 12th century, and is of transitional Norman work. No alterations seem to have been made in the 13th century, but in the following century

the chancel was probably reconstructed, as evidenced by a decorated doorway on the South side, and the piers of the arch opening to the nave. In the 15th century a great deal of work was carried out in the Church, an upper stage was added to the tower, the nave was probably rebuilt, and the chancel either pulled down or restored by the insertion of perpendicular windows in the earlier 14th century walls. Since this time no doubt the Church has suffered in common with others in the neighbourhood, and much that was interesting has been swept away or has disappeared.

Let us now make our perambulation of the Church, starting as usual inside at the east end of the chancel. The east window is of three lights, of perpendicular character; on the south are two three-light windows, square-headed within segmental headed containing arches, and there is a similar one on the north side. In the east window is a very considerable amount of old stained glass of more than one date, and most of it not in its original situation, and this undoubtedly forms the most interesting feature in the Church. In the small upper lights is the crowned "M" and "S" (? for Sancta Maria) within circular borders, a crowned female head and palm, the head and part of the body of another figure, probably a male, and portions of the original border. In the northern of the lower main lights is a border of crowned M's and S's and a large shield, argent three fusils or lozenges conjoined in fesse gules. These were the arms of Montacute or Montague, Earl of Salisbury, and I am not able to trace any connection between that family and this place. There is also a made-up shield with one lozenge and part of a pavement in black and white squares, and a portion of a black letter inscription with "audium," part of the word "gaudium," still remaining. In the centre light the border has been made up with crowned M's and S's, a yellow rose with white centre, and scroll foliage. In the upper light is the word "INRI" on a scroll, above a small figure about 12 inches high of our Lord, seated and showing the wounds. He is sitting on a bench, and has a rich nimbus shown up by a background of blue and gold. Our Lord is portrayed with a beard. His body is bare, and a yellow garment is thrown over His shoulders and lower limbs. His hands are raised, and blood is flowing from the wounds on His hands and side. The feet are on either side of a circular object, with wreath for a border enclosing a castellated edifice. There is a groundwork of the black and white pavement below. The figure of our Lord is within a quatrefoil partly made up with later materials, with gold border and

black and white background. This portraiture is much more ancient than the window now containing it, and may be as early as the 13th century. Below are a pair of cross bones, like the inscription "Inri," probably an accessory to a former representation of the crucifixion, on a white and gold ground, and below again a Maltese cross in yellow. Beneath this is a shield partly made up and some what complicated in its details. The dexter side of the shield is quarterly—(1 and 4) quarterly indented or and azure; (2 and 3) the tinctures and bearings are gone, this impales argent a dragon vert and a lion azure crowned gules combatant. The names appear above, Langley over the dexter, and Tame over the sinister portion. Langley is described as of Kent, and Tame is a member of the family of the great clothiers who built the fine Church at Fairford and enriched it with the remarkable stained glass so fortunately preserved to our time. I have not been able to discover what lady of the Tame family was married to a Langley, nor can I find any connection of either of these families with the parish of Letcombe Regis.* Below this shield, within a circular medallion, is a blazing star, and in all three lights are small diamond quarries with six-leaved foliage or flowers of late 15th century date.

In the right hand department is a border of roses, crowned S's and M's. There is a shield corresponding in size with that of Montacute in the north light with the following charge, or a bat volant vert, alleged to be the arms of the Mermyle family. Below is a made-up shield like that in the north light, and at the bottom part of an inscription in black letters, "ohn Mermyle uxor sue." Ashmole, in his *History of the Antiquities of Berkshire*, has the following note on this window:—"Towards the lower end of the east Window is painted in the Glass a Man with a horn hanging behind him, and his Wife near him, both of them kneeling; under them is this inscription: 'Orate pro animabus Johannis Mermyle & Alicie Uxoris ejus.' In English thus: 'Pray for the souls of John Mermyle and Alice his wife.'" Lysons makes the following statement:—"In the east window of the Parish Church are the arms of Langley of Kent impaling Tame of Fairford. Ashmole mentions the figures of John Mermyle with a hunting horn and his wife.

*In Leland's *Itinerary*, Vol. VI., folio 18, we find the following:—

"The Elder House of the Tames is at Stowel by Northleche in Glouc.shire.

"Mr. Horne of Oxfordshire dwelling by Langeley hath married this Tame Doughter, and shaul have by her a 80 li. Lande by the Yere."

? Can these be the persons commemorated by this shield.

Part of the inscription only now remains with the arms of Mermyle, or a bat volant vert." I presume this refers to the existing shield as portraying a bat as here stated, but in the authorities I have been able to consult I do not find a bat given as the charge of the Mermyle family, nor can I ascertain who the Mermyles were, or what connection they had with our parish. Clarke, in the *Parochial Topography of the Hundred of Wanting*, in his list of families connected with the County, who lived previous to or unnoticed in the *Herald's Visitation*, mentions Mermyle as of the time of Edward III., and gives the same arms, or a bat volant vert, as cited by Lysons.

In the *Ecclesiastical and Architectural Topography of England*, Diocese of Oxford, the late Mr. J. H. Parker in his description of the Church states that "the east window has the original painted glass nearly perfect," which can hardly be correct, as this account is subsequent to that given by Lysons. A suspicion is naturally engendered that some of the glass has been imported from elsewhere, and it will be interesting if more light can be thrown upon it. On north of chancel is the vestry, and on the wall is preserved the small brass of a lady, the head gone, and the following inscription:—

"Hic jacet Alicia Estbury filia Johis Estbury et Agnetis."

Here is also preserved a curious family tree, painted in a black frame to the Golding family.

Ashmole mentions a brass as being in his time in the parish chest with the following inscription:—

"Here lyeth William Plokenet Gentilman otherwise called William Yong and Margaret his Wyfe late the Wyfe of John York Gentilman the whyche Margaret dyed the xxiii Day of Aprilis, the yere of our Lord God A^o MCCCCXIII on whose sowlys God have Mercy. Amen."

The chancel arch was formerly of the 15th century date, but has been renewed, though the piers are ancient, and of the decorated period. The lower part of the oak chancel screen has been preserved, with four panelled compartments on each side varnished over. On the south of the nave are two two-light windows of 15th century character, but new or much renewed. On the north are two smaller ones, also of perpendicular date, at the extreme east and west ends, and immediately above each is another two light clerestory window, the eastern one perhaps inserted as a high side window. In the head of the east or north window are some diamond quarries with small flowers or leaves on separate stems. On north wall of nave is

a large tablet with the following inscription :—

Here lie the Bodies of
Alexander Fettiplace, Esqr.,
who was Buried Aug^t 25 1712 Aged 81
and of Joan his Wife Buried Nov^r 19 1709
and of Alexander
and Edmond their Sons
the one died Oct^r 9 1712 Aged 55
the other died Oct^r 11th 1712 Aged 48
and of Mary their Daughter
who died May 26 1726 Aged 73

(Below)

Here lieth also the Body of
George their youngest Son
who married Grace Daughter of John Head Esq.
and Died May 23^d 1730 aged 63
his Widow in Memory of the Family
Erected this Memorial
June the 25 1731.

The font at the west end is probably the most ancient feature in the Church. It is circular, tub shaped, with the scallop ornament round the rim and dates from the Norman period. The tower arch is acutely pointed transitional Norman, plain and with chamfered abacus. There is a single lancet in the west wall. There are six bells which have recently been re-hung, with the following inscriptions :—

- No. 6. Henry Knight made me 1621.
- No. 5. Joseph Carter made mee 1599.
- No. 4. V COR 1726.
- No. 3. Henry Knight made me 1620.
- No. 2. } James Wells Aldbourn fecit 1805.
- No. 1. } Thomas Goodlake and John Stone, CW.

Scratched on the abacus of the tower arch are the names William Chapman, 1726, William Paynter, 1640.

Some paintings were noted on the nave walls. (1) figure of man with scythe ? Time, (2) a female with sheaf ? Ruth.

There is not much to note on the exterior of the Church. The middle stage of the tower is transitional Norman with a two light window on central shaft with foliated capitals on each face. The upper stage is embattled of perpendicular date, with two light belfry windows. The south doorway and porch are modern. The north

doorway is of the 15th century date with a recess for the Holy Water stoup at the side. The south chancel doorway is of the decorated period with a hoodmould above the arch.

There are labels above the belfry windows and to those in the Chancel.

The registers are very interesting and complete, commencing in the year 1536.

There is an old house in the village with the date 1698 inscribed on it.

The Patrons of the living are Corpus Christi College, Oxford, who also have the right of presentation to Letcombe Bassett Church.

This Church is dedicated to St. Michael, or according to the Ecclesiastical and Architectural Topography, to All Saints, and consists of a west tower, nave, new south aisle and chancel. It is not even mentioned by Ashmole in his History of the Antiquities of Berkshire, has no ancient monuments or memorials, nor are there any records to throw any light on the time when, and the benefactors by whom, the various portions of the Church were built. The chancel is the earliest part, and with its small chancel arch, and blocked north doorway may be somewhat early in the Norman period. In the latter half of the 13th century some alterations were made in the Church. The west tower was built and some windows were inserted in the chancel. A little later, perhaps, the nave was re-built, as evidenced by a three light window on the south side, and the north doorway. In the 15th century some larger windows were inserted in the nave, and the present low pitched roof put on. It is difficult, however, without a more careful examination of the walls of the nave, to give a more precise opinion as to the exact age of that part of the edifice. The Church is small, but probably large enough for the needs of the parish. The Church was restored in 1862, and the new south aisle added at that time.

Let us now make our perambulation of the Church, commencing as usual in the interior of the chancel. The east window is of two lights, with a quatrefoil in the head, and belongs to a date about 1270, or the transition from the early English to the decorated style. On the south side is another two-light window, with trefoil headed lancets and circle in the head, of the same date as the eastern one. On the south side at the west end, is a double lancet, possibly a little earlier than the other two. These are all insertions in the earlier Norman wall as evidenced by a small deeply splayed semi-circular headed window about the centre of the north and south walls. One

old tie beam of the roof still remains. The chancel arch is small and quite plain, semi-circular headed and of the Norman period. The plaster round the arch has been cut so as to form a zigzag pattern. The arch and jambs are now quite plain, but possibly there may have been enriched mouldings, which at some 17th or 18th century reparation may have been shaved off by the village mason, who was unable to restore them. It seems hardly likely that the arch should have been left unadorned, when so much skill was bestowed on the carving of the abaci. This is exceedingly rich and possibly somewhat later than the arch and the abacus itself, which is massive and of early character. On the south side on both the north and west faces, is a very beautiful scroll pattern with a cable band below, while on the north side is the scroll on the western face, and the antique or leaf pattern on the south, both having the cable below. There are few country churches with a richer specimen of the sculptors' art of the Norman period than that under notice.

On either side of the chancel arch on the east wall of the nave is a large trefoil headed niche, no doubt originally intended for an image, and not as I have seen it suggested, the western opening of a squint through to the chancel. Above that on the north side is a plain oblong arch, being the upper doorway to the rood loft, which has disappeared. On the north side of the nave are two two-light square-headed windows of perpendicular character, but the eastern one is new. On the south side to the east of the new arcade opening to the new south aisle is a three-light square headed decorated window within a segmental headed containing arch. The nave roof is low pitched and panelled of 15th century date with white colour or paint on various portions. The font, which is placed near the west end of the nave is of rather peculiar character. It is of white stone, and has a circular bowl on a receding stem and octagonal base. It is perhaps of late Norman date. The tower arch is segmental headed, recessed with three chamfered orders dying into the wall. It belongs to the 1270 period, as does the west window, a nice double trefoil headed lancet, within a deeply recessed containing arch. There is a small recess for a holy water stoup in the interior wall by the north door. There are no monuments or memorials of any antiquity or interest remaining within the Church.

The tower, of the 1270 date, is low and not embattled, with small oblong openings to the belfry stage, and receding angle buttresses. A good deal of brick work has been introduced on the west side, no doubt a subsequent renovation. The north doorway

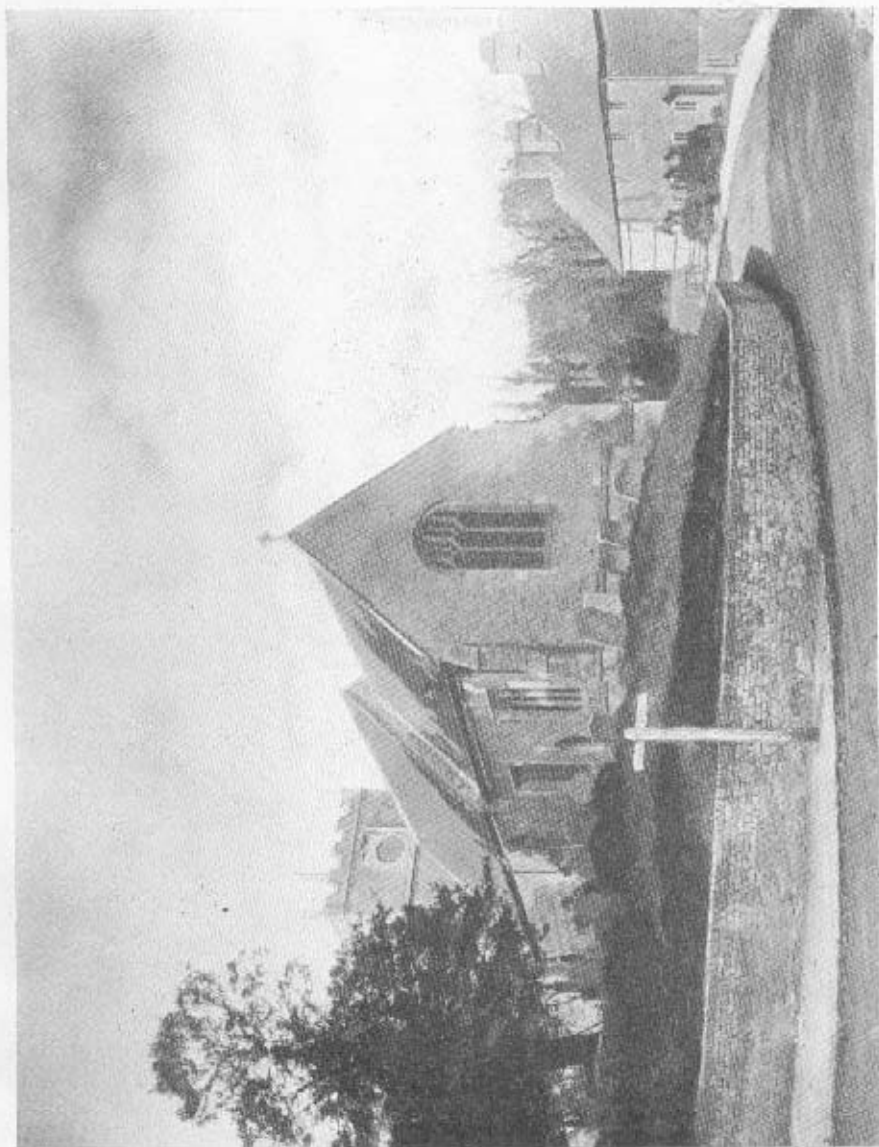
within a porch belongs to the decorated period and has a roll moulding with fillet band carried round the arch and down the jambs. The perpendicular window on north of nave has an exterior label.

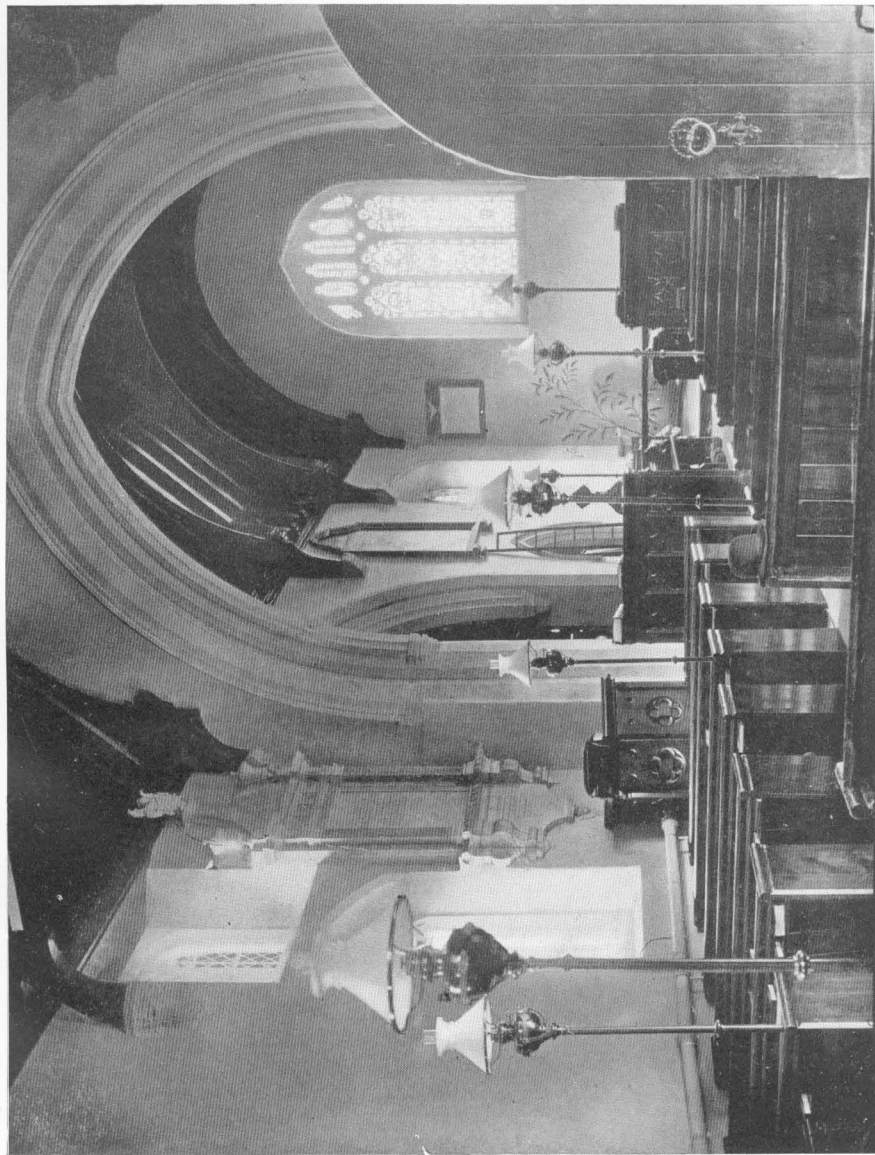
The most interesting feature in the Church is the Norman doorway on the north side of the chancel. It has the roll moulding round the arch, massive abacus with grooved line above the chamfered portion, and one shaft on each side with large capitals. On these capitals are carved the emblems of the four evangelists, an unique instance of these sacred representations in such a situation. On the east capital we find the angel of St. Matthew on the north face and the eagle of St. John on the west, with a band of the guilloche ornament below. On the western capital is the lion of St. Mark on the north and the ox of St. Luke on the east face, and a cable band below. All the figures are nimbed, and the sculpture is very bold and good. The capitals are about eight by seven inches. Supported on very wide inner jambs, which only leave a very narrow passage for the doorway, is a tympanum 40 inches in length by 18 inches in height at the centre. It is rather curiously scored with horizontal, perpendicular and diagonal lines, and almost suggests that originally it may have been covered with a layer of plaster, on which was painted a representation of Christ in Majesty, to which the evangelistic emblems would be a natural and fitting accompaniment. The lintel is plain with a chamfered edge to the lower portion.

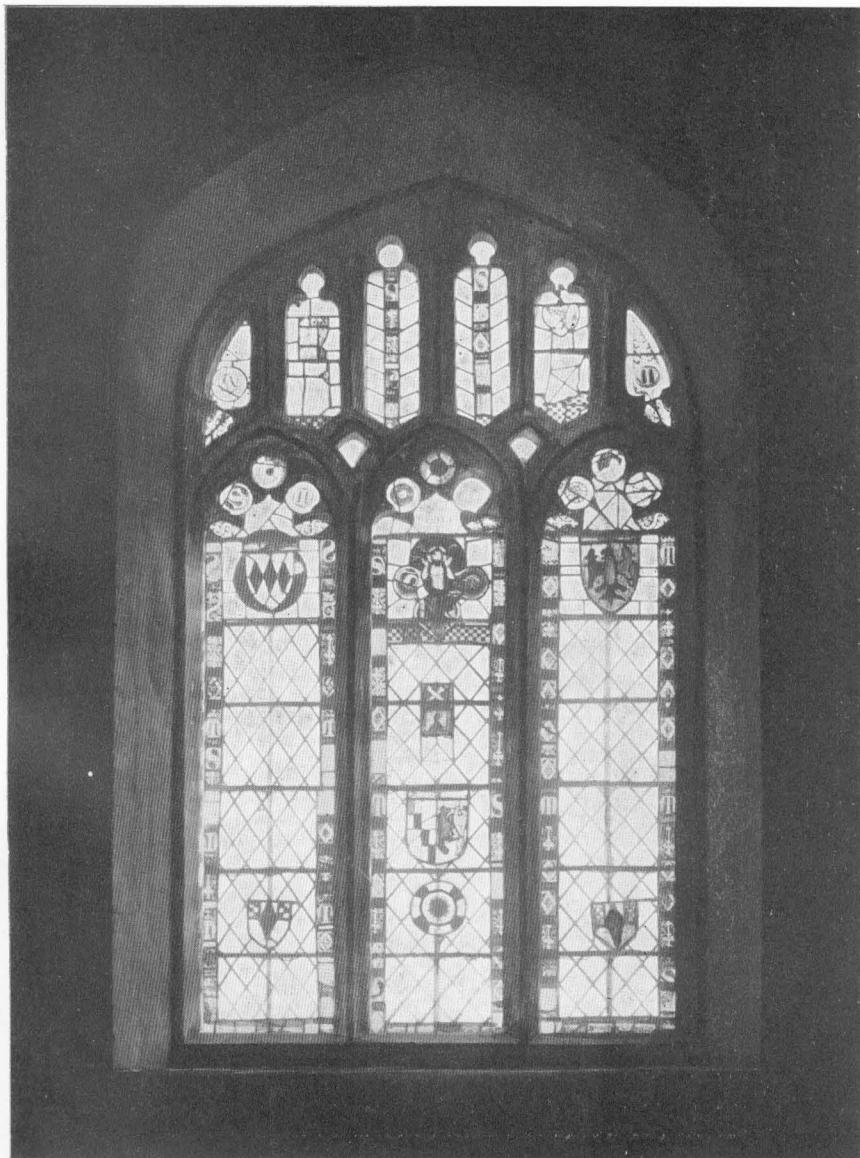
In the churchyard, close to the north wall of the Church are four very large sepulchral monuments of stone of early 18th century date. One has a fair imitation of Gothic panelling.

Such is a somewhat sketchy account of the architectural features in the Letcombe Churches, and it is hoped that the stained glass in the one, and the Norman work in the other, with other details will be deemed of sufficient importance to justify me in bringing them specially under the notice of the members of our Society.





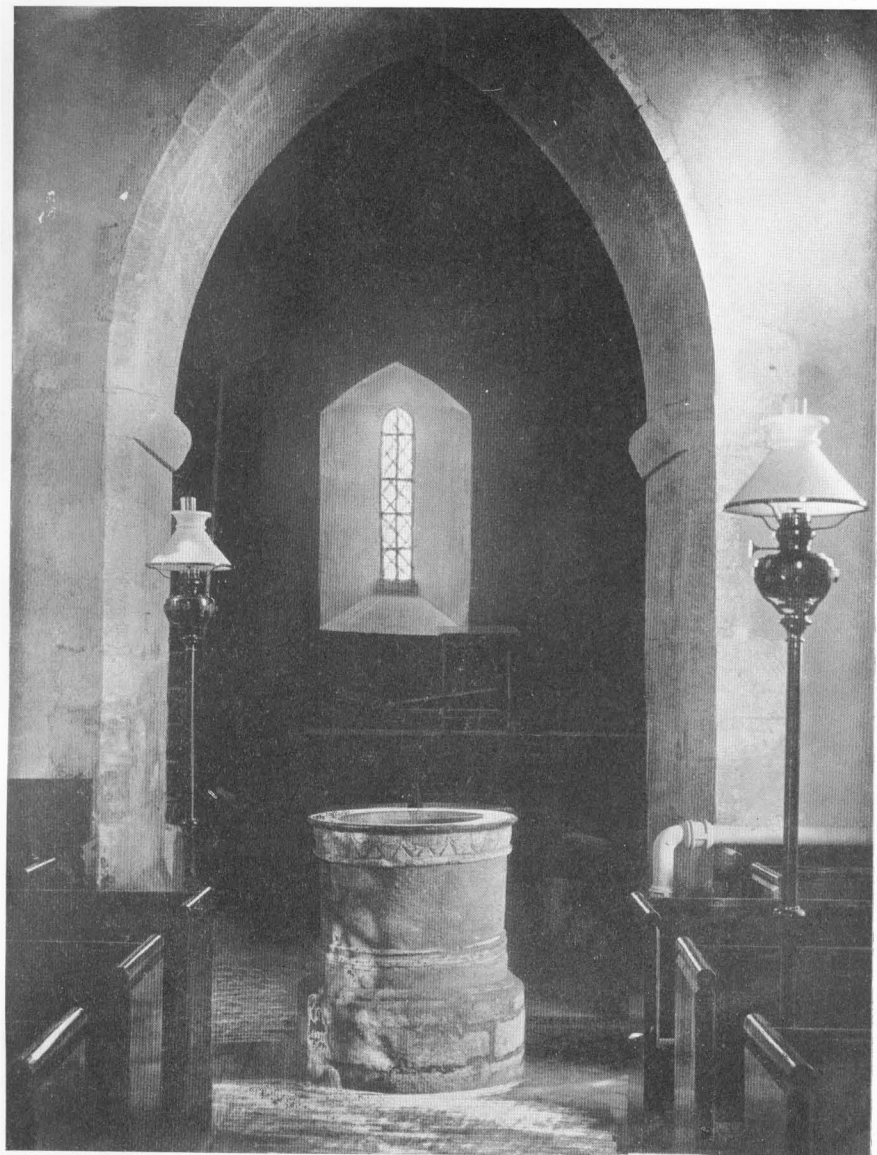




EAST WINDOW.

Plate 4.

LETCOMBE REGIS CHURCH.



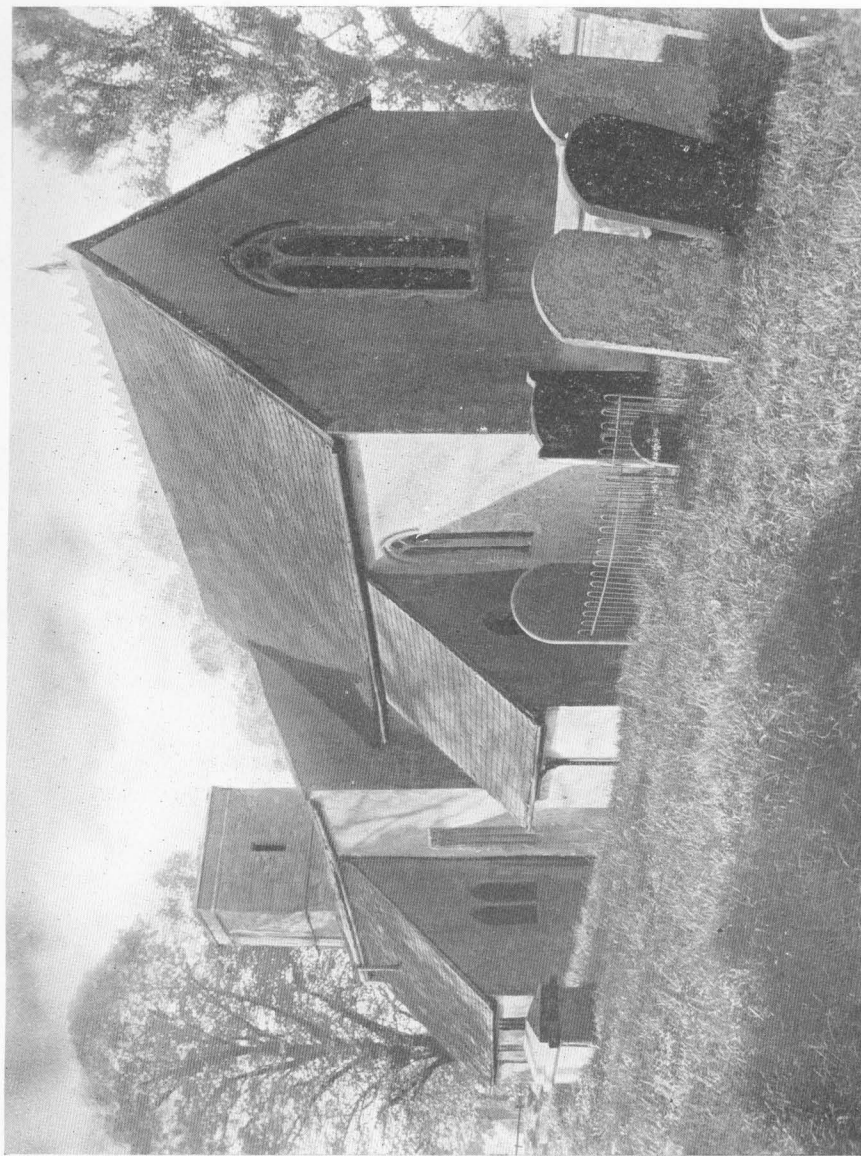
TOWER ARCH.

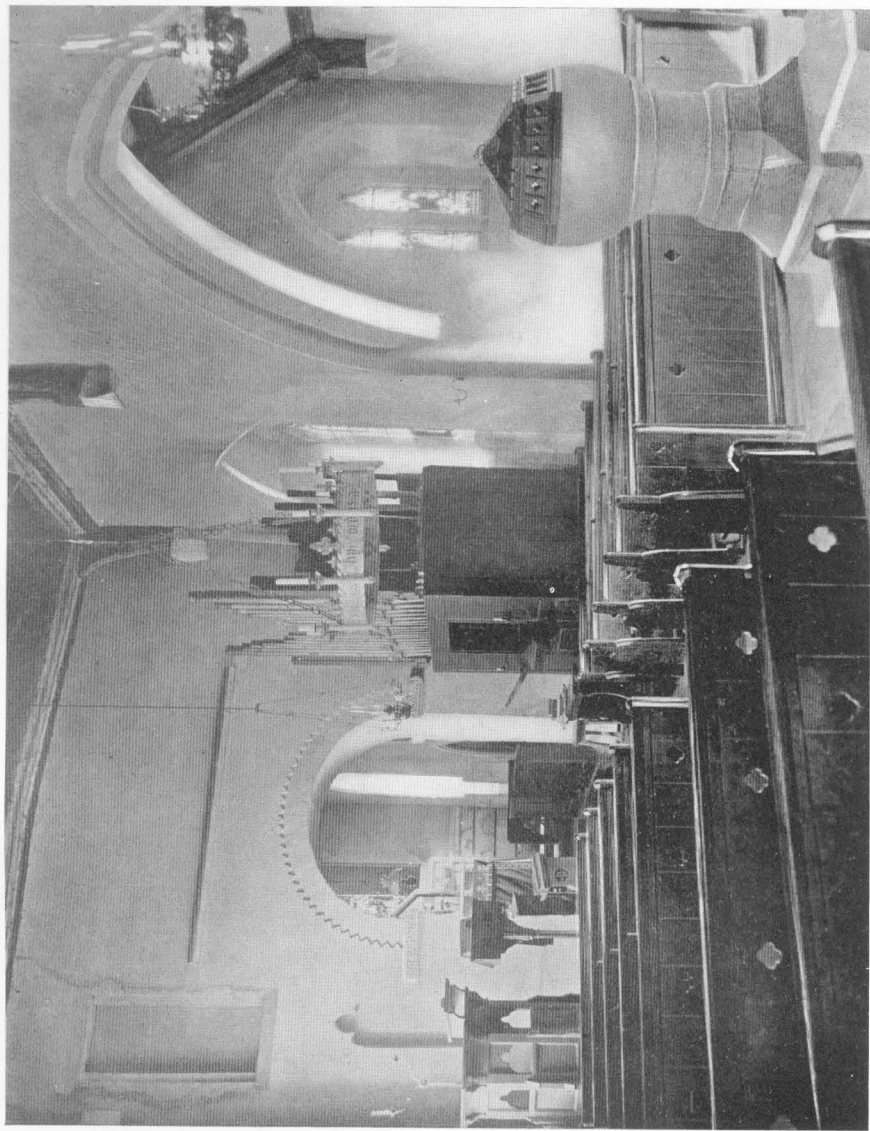
Plate 5.

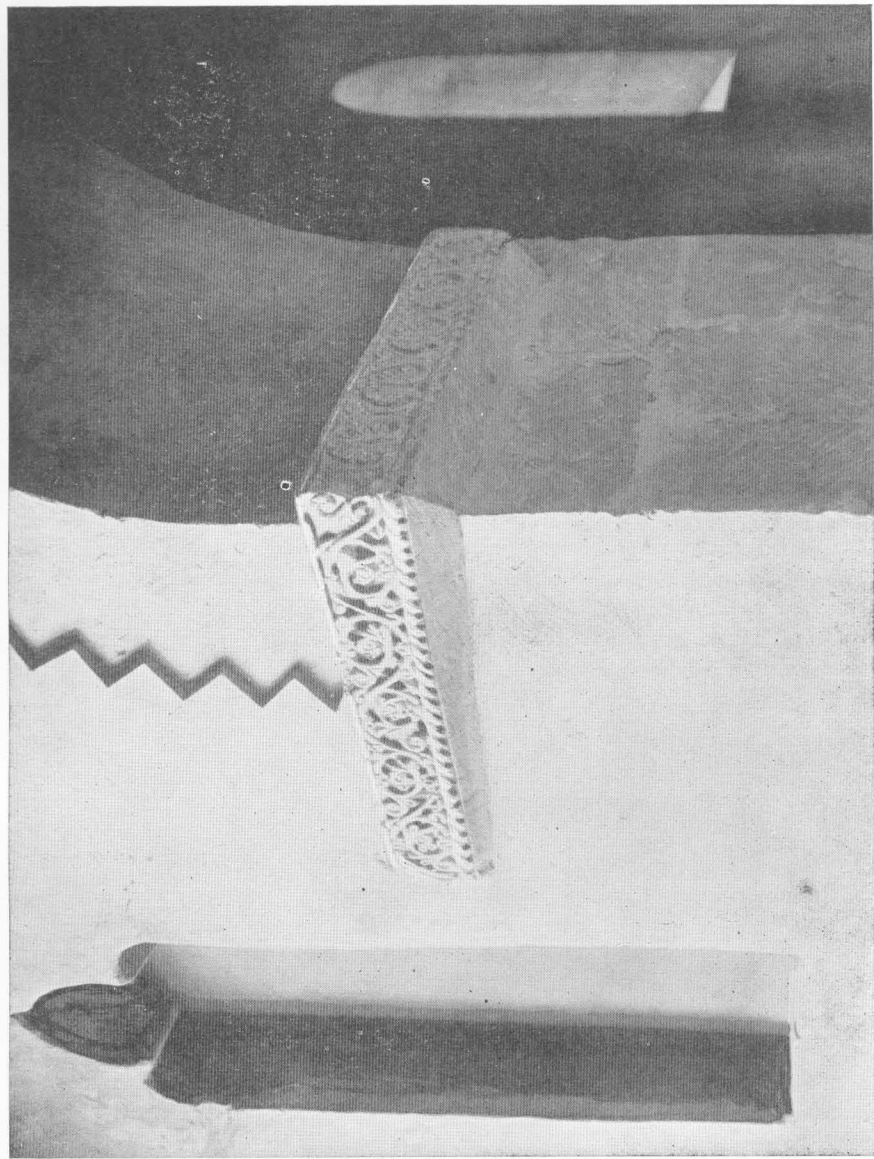
LETCOMBE REGIS CHURCH.



NORMAN FONT.

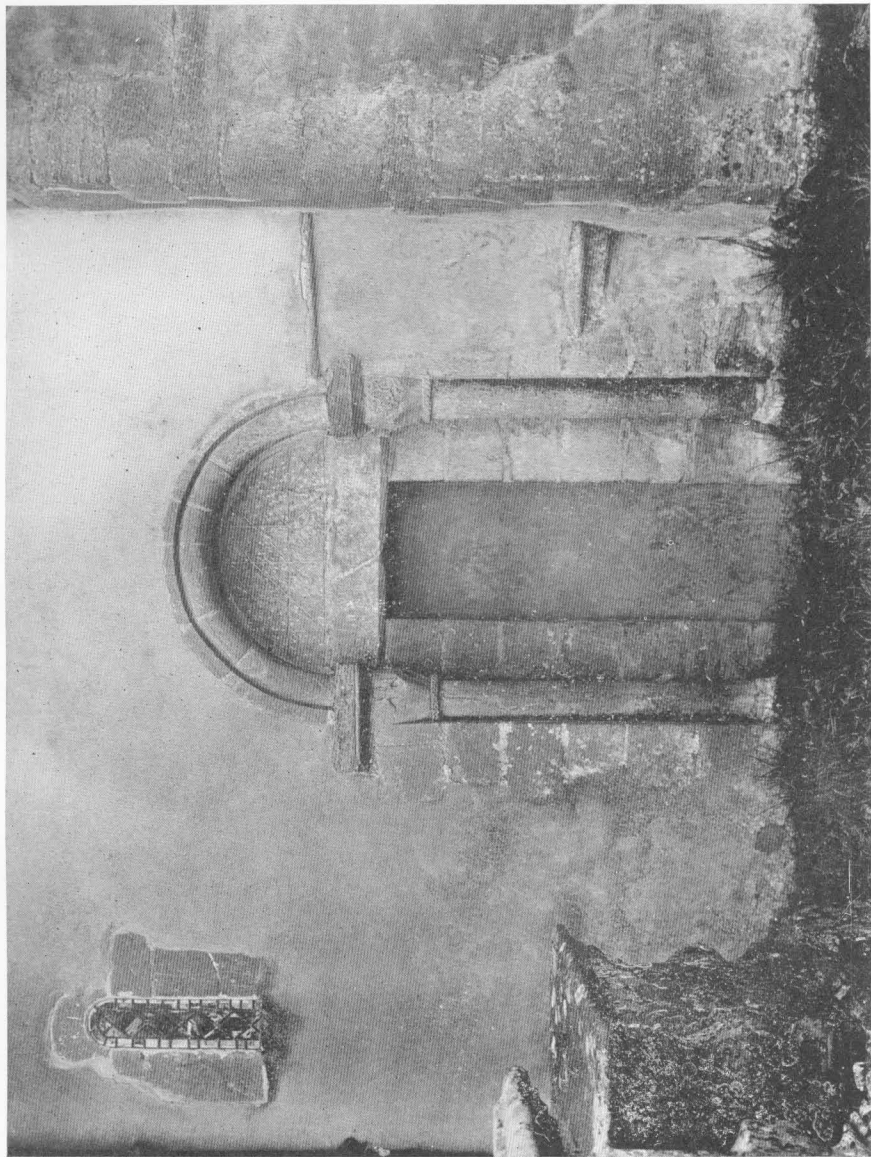








OLD TOMBS (NORTH SIDE OF CHURCH).



NORMAN DOORWAY (NORTH SIDE OF CHANCEL).



ST. MATTHEW



EAST CAPITAL OF NORTH CHANCEL DOORWAY.

ST. JOHN.



ST. LUKE.



WEST CAPITAL OF NORTH CHANCEL DOORWAY.

ST. MARK.