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## Notes on the Churches of Stebenton, Hartwell, Didcot and Hagbourne.

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A DRIVE of about two miles will bring us to Didcot, a pretty and secluded village, still small, in spite of its proximity to the railway and the junction which bears its name. It has some nice old timber houses, notably the school, and the Parish Church, which is well worth a visit. It formerly went by the name of Dudcote, and an account of it may be found in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1820, Part II. pp. 605 and 606. At that time there were only 27 houses in the parish and a population of about 210. This has now considerably increased, especially during the last ten years. The description of this place in Lysons' *Magna Britannia* occupies only eight lines, though the account in the *Gentleman's Magazine* written some few years later, gives us a little more insight into its history. We learn that the Manor was originally in the hands of the Blount family, and afterwards of the Stonors, who retained it till 1663, when it was sold, and has since passed through several hands. The presentation of the living is vested in the Principal and Fellows of Brasenose College, Oxford, though it formerly belonged to the Priory of Marlow, or rather the nunnery at Little

Marlow. We learn that in 1820, "The air of it is healthy, and the general longevity of its inhabitants no small recommendation in its favour."

The Church (fig. 27) is dedicated to All Saints, though the writer of the article in the *Gentleman's Magazine* considers it was formerly dedicated to St. Michael. It stands on high ground, and now consists of nave and aisles, with turret and spire at the west end of the south aisle, and Chancel. The Church was restored in 1876, and a new north aisle has been added, and other renovations introduced into the fabric. It measures  $62\frac{1}{2}$  feet in length, by 42 feet across the nave and aisles. The earliest portion of the structure now remaining is the south arcade of the nave, though the font and a capital preserved in the north aisle are relics of the former Norman Church. The arcade is considered by Mr. Parker in his description in the *Ecclesiastical Topography* to be Early English and early in the style, but it appears to be more like late 13th century work, and may have been erected at the cost of the Abbot whose effigy lies in the south aisle. The Chancel and aisle are of the Decorated period, and in the 15th century some slight alterations and insertions were made, which will be noted during our perambulation of the building.

Let us now, as before, commence our description in the interior of the Chancel (fig. 28).

The east window of three lights of geometrical design dates from about the year 1300, and there are two two-light windows on the north side differing in their design, but probably of the same date. The two windows on the south side are new, and have taken the place of two 15th century windows which had been inserted here. A string-course runs round the walls, and forms a hoodmould to the containing arches of the several windows. There is a small square recess for the former piscina under the east on south window. On the north wall to the west of the termination of the hoodmould of the west window is a sculptured head of a civilian, and to the west of the east on north window a small head with an iron ring in its mouth. It is suggested that there was a similar head in the south wall, and that at certain times a veil was stretched across the Chancel and fastened by hooks to the ring in the head on either side. There are said to be two heads at Blewbury in this situation. The Chancel roof is poor and not old. The Chancel arch is new, but the responds are the original supports to the former decorated arch. They are semi-octagonal in plan with rather late capitals.

On the north side of the nave near the east end (fig. 29) are the steps to the roodloft with lower and upper four-centred arched doorway of late 15th century date. Above this has been inserted a very good two-light decorated window with wide deeply splayed containing arch. This now opens into the north aisle, but was formerly in the east wall of the nave above the Chancel arch. On south side of nave is one plain oblong blocked clerestory window. The nave roof is old, low pitched with tie beams and squat king posts of 15th century date. The west window is also an insertion of this period, of three lights, and a good example of perpendicular work. In the head is some old glass with two small figures, parts of two more, and some other fragments. The two principal figures represent female saints. One has a white dress, yellow cloak, and long golden hair; the other has a yellow robe. Both have the nimbus, and can no doubt be identified. In the north-east corner of the north aisle is preserved a Norman capital with the scalloped ornament, a relic of the former Church. The north aisle with an arcade of three arches to the nave is new, and is intended to correspond with the arcade on the south side. This with three low arches is somewhat peculiar, and there may be some difference of opinion as to its date. The arches have two plain chamfered ribs. The east respond (fig. 30) has a slender engaged shaft and curious capital divided into six steps of rather clumsy design, and with plain semi-octagonal abacus. The lower part has three semi-circular bands, and rests on a semi-octagonal base. The east column is composed of four engaged shafts with fillet band down each angle, and well-moulded capital, the design being very good. The west column is octagonal with large and rather clumsy capital, while the west respond has a shaft with fillet band down it, and capital of similar design to the eastern one. With the exception of the eastern column, the design is unusual, and suggests some renovation of the original work. The east window of the aisle is of three lights segmental headed of the decorated period. It has the half-round on the containing arch and down the jambs. On the south side near the east end is another three-light segmental headed window of the same date with excellent tracery and triangular headed hoodmould having a groove round the head, and a pointed moulding down the jambs terminating on stops. In the south-east corner is a small bracket for an image, and in the south wall the canopied arch with nice fringe for the piscina, the basin having been destroyed. To the west of the south doorway is another two-light window with flamboyant tracery and the half-round

moulding on the hoodmould. The font (fig. 31), which stands by the western column of the south nave arcade, is large and low tub shaped, with plain bowl, and a band round the lower part. It is of Norman date and a relic of the earlier Church. Against the south wall near the west end of the aisle is now placed the full sized and very fine effigy of a Bishop or Abbot (fig. 32). This was found many years ago face downwards and in three pieces, forming part of the old Churchyard path, and has fortunately been preserved and brought into the Church. It is referred to by the writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, having then (in 1820) been recently discovered. It is in freestone, and represents a Bishop or Abbot in full vestments with mitre on his head, and a mutilated canopy above him. He appears to be holding a crozier with the head broken off in the left hand, and to be giving the Benediction with the right. His feet rest on a pedestal with some object not now discernible below. There have been various conjectures as to whom this effigy represents. In the first place, Is it a Bishop or Abbot? It is certainly of late 13th century date, and if it is a monumental effigy probably represents a benefactor to the Church, and one who was responsible for the building of some portion of the decorated work. There is a tradition, accepted by Parker in the *Ecclesiastical Topography*, that it represents the first mitred Abbot of Abingdon, and this has been followed by other writers. This would be Richard de Henderd, or Hendred, who first assumed the mitre in 1268 and died in 1272. But why should he have been buried here in a Church with which neither he nor the Abbey was connected? The conjecture of the writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* seems much more reliable. After relating the discovery of the figure he states that a certain Ralph de Dudecote was the third Abbot of Dorchester Abbey in Oxfordshire, and then adds: "Now it is impossible without incurring the censure of a laugh, with which these inquiries are generally attended, to suppose that the above Ralph of Dudecote might be interred in the place of his nativity, and his monument, long held in veneration, was only removed when its decay suggested it, at the time when the Church was new seated, from whence the materials of the good Abbot's monument might with no great impropriety fill up, as far as it went, the Churchway." Abbot Ralph de Dudecote was Abbot in 1290 and died in 1293-4, and this date would very well accord with that of the effigy. The argument seems also to be good, and one may therefore accept it as the most probable solution as to the identity of the figure.

The turret at the west end of the aisle rests on massive timber frame work, which is partly old, and probably of 15th century date.

The south doorway within a modern (fig. 33) porch is nice late decorated with two recessed orders, the outer with the quarter round the inner with a groove to the arch and jambs to the ground. The walls of the south aisle and west end of the nave are still coated with the old roughcast. The turret and slender spire are covered with wooden shingles, but are not old. To the west window on south side of south aisle is an undercut hoodmould with termination on head on west side. The hoodmould of the east on south side (fig. 34) window terminates on the head of a man on east, and on west (fig. 35) on a dragon or bird with long tail and a bone or some other object in its mouth. The terminations of the hoodmould of the east window are cut away to make room for tablets. There are angle buttresses at the east end of the Chancel. The east window (fig. 36) has a plain hoodmould. Those on north of Chancel (fig. 37) have the usual decorated hoodmould. The west window (fig. 38) has an undercut label. There are low buttresses at the west angles. To the south of the Church there is a noble yew tree, 20ft. 6ins. in girth, three feet from the ground. There is also part of the shaft of a Cross by the south doorway. On a tablet on the east wall of the south aisle is the following inscription :—

Neare this place lyeth  
Mervall y<sup>e</sup> daughter of  
Francis Bichopton of  
Burnells Broome in the  
Countie of Warw Gent  
The dearly wife of Ed  
ward Sawyer of this Pa  
rish to whome shee bare  
4 sonnes & 4 daughters  
which said Edwa to the  
Memorie of his most love-  
inge wife with teares  
erected this monement  
She departed this life  
the 22 of April 1641  
being of the age of 67 ye  
The said Edward died y  
ano D 16

*(To be continued.)*