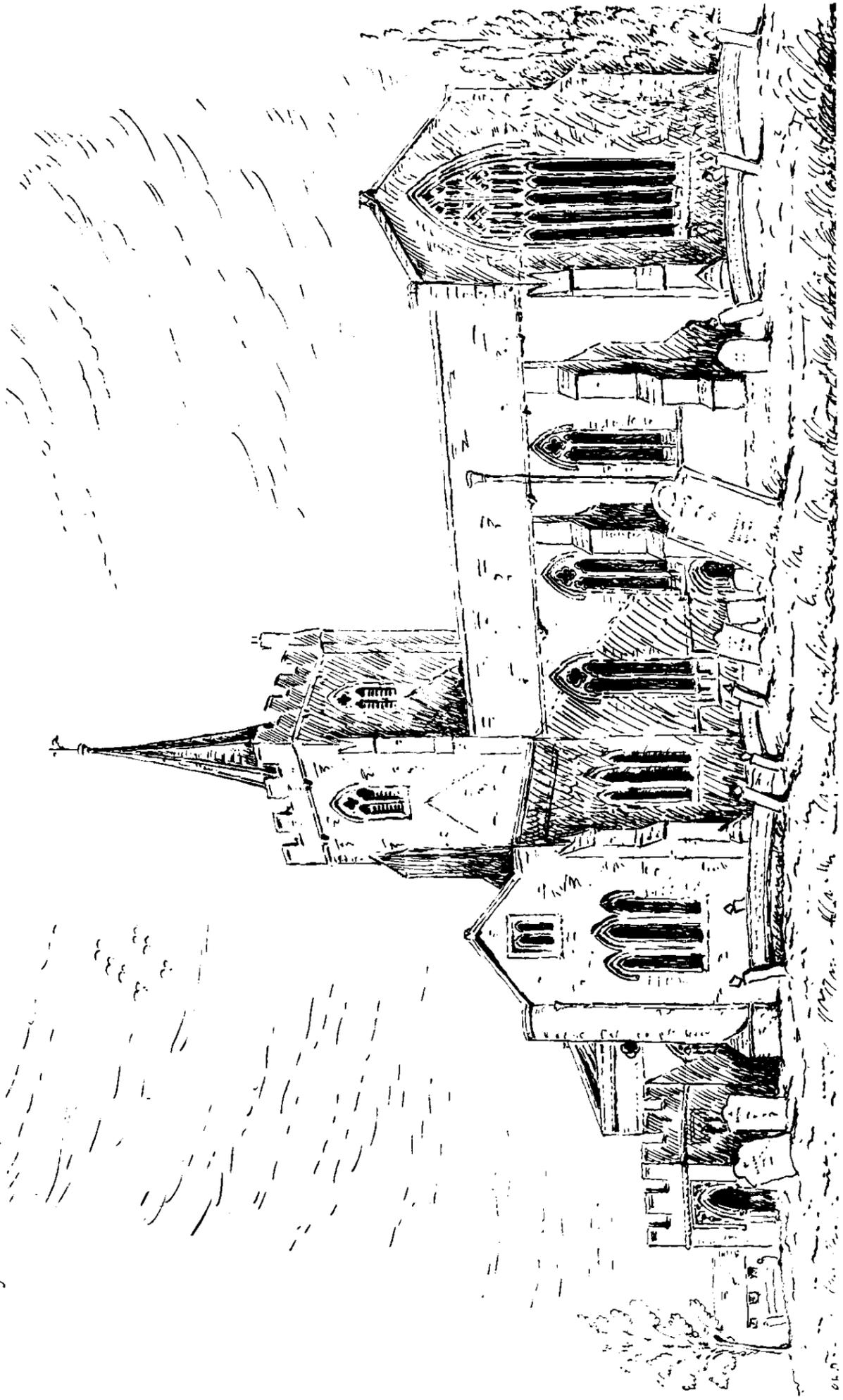


Ansley Church, Newfordsville, S. E. 1884.



---

*Astey Church.*

BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS, M.A.

It seems to me that the best way of discharging my duty as the guide of our Architectural Society at this very interesting church to-day, is first to read a brief

notice of some of its more remarkable features, and afterwards to personally conduct our party over the structure.

This church has been well described by the last writer on the History and Antiquities of Hertfordshire, Mr. Cussans, as one of the most interesting in the county. I have heard of this church all my life, for my grandfather, who rests beside its altar, was Rector here for 21 years, and my mother, his only child, was born in the Rectory, which, I understand, he built here; and I had the great satisfaction, through the kindness of the present Rector, Mr. Sale, of seeing the entry of her baptism the other day in the registers in his keeping. But I was not prepared by my previous information to find in this now somewhat secluded village, so magnificent and well preserved an ecclesiastical edifice as I beheld with my own eyes for the first time three weeks ago. As to its ground plan, it is like what I may almost call its sister church at Wheathampstead, a miniature minster, perfect in its people's nave and aisles, its chapels in the transepts, and its ancient choir; and, if I may be allowed another personal allusion, it seems a little remarkable that a grandfather and a grandson should have had the care of two such very similar churches in the same county, and of churches by no means common in their plans and arrangements, or easy to find elsewhere: they are indeed so much alike in many ways, that a comparison between these two churches, or a joint paper upon them, would be interesting; but Wheathampstead is now well-known to most of our members, and to many here this is the first sight of Anstey, so, remembering where we have come, it will be best at the present moment only to make comparison where the history of the one church may assist us in elucidating that of the other. Anstey is not so fortunate as Wheathampstead in having preserved its dedication. The Rector tells me that he is not aware who is its Patron Saint, and would be most glad of any help in the discovery. As for the derivation of the parochial name, the careful historian to whom I have already alluded, considers Anstey probably a deduction from the Saxon "Heanstige," the *Highway*; for though we seem to have reached it to-day partly by *by-ways*, the ancient highway from London to the north-east must have passed very near to it. Anstey was formerly noted for the very noble castle, upon the site of a portion of which, through the kindness of Mr.

Bates, we have just been refreshing the inward man. This was an important stronghold of the Barons, and appears to have given King John some trouble, for on the accession of Henry III., for the better pacification of these parts, the King commanded its proprietor, Nicholas de Anstey, to destroy a large portion of it. There is a tradition that the materials thus set at liberty were used in re-building portions of the church; and the architectural character of the work of the chancel, and the pier arches and cleristery of the nave remarkably confirm that tradition; for the chancel corresponds in character with the work of Henry III. at Westminster Abbey, and the pier arches of the nave are of the remarkable and unusual straightened form, of which the work of the north transept of Hereford Cathedral provides a striking example. Of what I shall venture to describe as Henry the Third's Early English we have not very many extensive examples in the kingdom; at that date the earlier Lancet Early English had developed into what is generally known as Geometrical work, from the geometrical character of its lines. The work at Westminster Abbey, conducted under Henry III's auspices are grand illustrations of this period, both as regards their form, and material, the English marble of the Isle of Purbeck: but a most exquisite building was *completed*, and, as far as I know, was the only one *wholly completed* in this style, the beautiful Cistercian Abbey of Tintern, the glory of the objects of antiquarian and artistic interest on the Wye. The style did not continue in use for more than fifty years, and that for several obvious reasons, the most practical being its great expense, for it was impossible to produce its forms without large masses of stone, difficult to obtain, and most expensive of carriage, so that we rarely see such examples as the striking one before us, and probably should not have had the privilege of seeing this, if the massive stones of a huge baronial castle had not been placed at the disposal of an ecclesiastical architect of that period. There is something, however, in the Geometrical style which has presented extraordinary attractions, and in our own day it has been the favourite style of the greatest professional architect, as well as the greatest amateur architect of modern times, the one Sir Gilbert Scott, and the other Sir Edmund Beckett. But the works at this time were but additions to, or

alterations of, an earlier fabric existing here, a fabric belonging to another interesting transitional period in English architecture; for the piers of the central tower are of singular value as examples of what has been called "Semi-Norman" work. To the church, which was the erection then of these two transitional periods, and of the Lancet period also, as seen in the south transept, two important additions were subsequently made; for the upper stage of the tower is late Decorated, while the south porch is of rich Perpendicular character. Two great constructional peculiarities I must notice; the first, that the chancel walls are so arranged as to have half-arched openings from the transepts, preventing by these commodious hagioscopes the common isolation, in a cross church without transept aisles, of the transept altars from the high altar of the chancel. The second peculiarity is, that the staircase to the tower is placed at the south-west corner of the south transept; this led to a floor or gallery in the transept, along which communication was originally obtained with the bell-chamber. Externally, in the churchyard, another most interesting and rare remnant is visible in an ancient Litche-gate. Happily this church has been but little injured in alterations or restorations. All must regret the Perpendicular east window, which must have replaced a Geometrical window of far greater interest; together with at the same period the dropping of the roofs, and the substitution of clumsy and cumbersome parapets; while at the west end a modern piece of stone work is seen in place of the beautiful window which must have been originally there. Of the restorations of Mr. Butterfield, under the direction of the present Rector, I have nothing but praise to offer. The magnificent old stalls of the chancel have been carefully preserved; the whole of that noble structure has been safely underpinned, and copies of the old seats, with some of the original ends, have been placed in the nave. It was a great happiness to me the other day to be able to find, and to sketch, the exterior of the church, with all its characteristics preserved, and its ancient appearance completely unimpaired.

---

*Note.*—The photo-lithograph etching at the head of this paper is a copy of a sketch made on this occasion.