

---

**S. Mary's Church, Baldock.**

BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS.

In our examination of this very fine and interesting church, we must call to our assistance the history of the town in the midst of which it stands. We have here a place which derived most of its importance from its connection, first with the Knights-Templars, and afterwards, on the dissolution of their order in 1312, with the Knights-Hospitallers, with whom the

property of the manor remained till the dissolution of religious houses in the time of King Henry VIII., when it fell, with so much other property bequeathed to sacred uses, into other hands. The connection of the order of Knights-Templars with this place dates from the 12th century, when it was granted to them by Gilbert Earl Strongbow out of his manor of Weston. From the salubrity of the place, and the excellent water with which it abounded, coupled with the fact that it was easy of access by the great North road, as well as by the older Ickneild-street, it appears to have been fixed upon by the Knights-Templars at an early period as a sanatorium. Exposed as these Churchmen warriors were to the leprosy of the East in their Holy Mission to Palestine, it is not improbable that many might from time to time have contracted that disease, and brought it home with them, and this place was therefore fixed upon for the site of a leper hospital, to the existence of which, and to the residence therein of many members of this important fraternity, we may probably refer much of the dignity of this church, in which they would probably worship. It is generally supposed that a church was built here as early as, or even earlier than, the time of King Stephen, and that we now see a structure which, in its main fabric, is of the date of King Edward II.; the fact seems to be generally assumed, but no documentary evidence is, as far as I know, forthcoming to prove it. If this date be correct, as Edward II. reigned from 1307 to 1327, and the Templars were dissolved and the Hospitallers took possession in 1312, we should have the Hospitallers making a great effort to enlarge, rebuild, and magnify their church, soon after coming into possession, a by no means impossible or improbable effort for ecclesiastical new brooms; but my eyes considerably deceive me if I do not detect, in the piers and arches of the nave of this church, earlier work than that of the time of Edward II. We must remember that upon the accession of this king, the great church of Westminster had been rebuilt, and that the Eleanor Crosses had been erected, structures carried out in what is known as the geometrical period of Early Decorated architecture; moreover, in our own county, and not at any great distance from Baldock, the

geometrical campanile had been erected at Wheat-hampstead in 1290, so that such earlier work as we apparently have before us here would take us back a couple of reigns for the date of its erection. I am also informed that when the walls of this church were undergoing restoration, distinct traces of lancet windows were discovered, so that with all due deference to those who would date these arcades in the reign of Edward II., I should be much disposed to refer them to the reign of Henry III. or Edward I. at latest. There is something, too, in the short, heavy character of these piers and arches which seems to connect them rather with a Templar than a Hospitaller design, for they look as if they had derived their elevation rather from the round churches than those of less massive conception. I have but to point to the curiously engaged shafts between the larger four, carried up without capital, in these piers, and to mention that we shall shortly see the same idea copied and carried out on a loftier scale at Ashwell, to close what I have to say about these very remarkable arcades. The tower of the church, from its engaged angle shafts, would seem to have been the design of the designer of the nave piers, but the belfry windows must be much later. One can only, in contemplating this once beautiful tower, recall the story of a church restoration, where the incumbent was waited upon by some anxious parishioners, who came to say that they had heard with alarm that the contractor was about to use "*Roman*" cement, though our regrets here are for architectural, and not theological reasons. This church underwent great changes in the Perpendicular period, changes which greatly altered its original appearance. Large windows were inserted, porches were added or rebuilt, that on the South side with a chamber over it, which within the memory of man was opened and ransacked and a quantity of valuable ancient armour removed, some of which found itself shortly afterwards at the bottom of a well, while the chamber itself lost its floor, the porch being thrown open to its roof. But the great glory of this church is its, I may almost say, matchless screen or screens, for we have them here, perfect in continuity, over both central and side aisles, with doors of entrance to the rood gallery both below and above. Students of

ecclesiastical woodwork have here a festival. The work, as we see it, is apparently that of the latter years of the reign of Edward III., and it probably replaced an earlier barrier between what was the parochial nave of the church and the chancel, which was the choir of the military monastic order. The South Aisle of the chancel has been called the Lady Chapel, where was the altar to which the remaining sedilia and piscina belonged; it may have been so, but it is, I believe, a fact that in many of the churches dedicated to S. Mary, as was invariably the case with the churches of the Cistercian order, the high altar itself was also a S. Mary altar. I have but to call attention to the sepulchral arches built into the walls externally, and to mention that it has been suggested that they were the graves of the knights, who were buried here, to complete a very rough outline of the principal features of the church. I shall now ask you to accompany me round it, when we shall be able to look further into its details, and after this examination, Canon Kewley will be so kind as to exhibit the registers, and to favour us with such further information as his careful study of this church and the discoveries he has made in it will enable him to supply.

---