

*Ashwell, and its Parish Church of S. Mary.*

BY THE REV. H. FOWLER.

The village of Ashwell is said by Chauncey to be situated in the "Champion"; it lies in a hollow surrounded by chalk eminences, which appear to define the northern limits of the county.

The Hundred of Odsey, in which the parish is comprised, derives its name from the Manor or Grange of Odsey, lying about two miles to the S.W., in an angle of the county. Mr. Cussans (to whom I am mainly indebted for my information) tells us, that the Shire-baulk, with its adjacent dyke, stops short at "Rogues' Lane" (a name suggestive of marauding times). Odsey he interprets as *Od's-ea*, i.e., *Odda's water*—the water being a pool, which once existed here, in an otherwise very waterless district.

The parish of Ashwell is traversed by some roads or tracks associated with early times. The "Forty-foot" road runs from the ancient Icknield Street at "Slip End," near Ashwell Station (some two miles to the south of the Church), through Ashwell, and northwards over the Common, to the extreme northern point of the parish and county, at "White-gate" (or "Wide-gate") Bridge—(it probably means the wide-road bridge). This led on (according to Mr. Cussans) through Potton into the famous Roman road to Godmanchester. Near the bridge "Mob's Knoll" appears to mark the end of the chalk spur towards Cambs. and Beds. "Labour-in-vain Farm," close by, is certainly suggestive of sterility of soil. If we may judge, however, by the appearance of the country to-day "labour-in-vain" is decidedly the exception and not the rule on the soil of this parish, which is said to be specially noted for its fine crops of barley. Where the Forty-foot road crosses the Ashwell way at the entrance to the village is an eminence, which our Saxon forefathers called "Beacon Laag," or the Beacon hill; their descendants in more peaceful times have changed it into "Bacon Leg." We are told by Mr. Beldam (a very high authority), that "Ashwell Street" was a Roman road, leading through Litlington in Cambs. (where many Roman antiquities have been found), to Chesterford in Essex, being nearly parallel to the *Icknield way*. We are about to traverse, under the able guidance of Dr. Griffith, the branch way which

connects Ashwell Street with that most interesting earth-work of prehistoric times, *Arbury Banks*. I am not sure whether the British way, described by Mr. Cussans as passing from Slip End to Caldecot, crosses this parish or not. Along its margin have been found large quantities of bones of men and horses, perhaps the vestiges of early encounters with the Danes. The bridge, to which I have alluded, crosses the river Rhee, a tributary of the Cam; and this brings us to the origin—or supposed origin—of the name of the parish. The Rhee head or source is formed by seven springs welling out of a rocky bank at the southern extremity of the village. Camden explains\* “Ashwell” as “the fountain among ashes,” and says (Gibson’s translation), “The place is famous for springs, which here break forth out of the side of a stony bank or creek, covered over and shaded with tall ashes.” Other local names of interest here are “Westbury,” and “Digswell” or “Dykeswell,” the appellations of subordinate manors—“Sloen Slade” (perhaps the *slad* or grassy *baulk* covered with sloe trees). [We may observe that the land is still divided by baulks rather than by hedges.] The “Common Field,” also called “Red-lands,” perhaps the land on which was held the *Raed* or open-air *Moot* of a primitive community. (“Radwell” has a similar meaning attributed to it by Mr. G. L. Gomme, the author of “Primitive Folk Moots”). The “Town Closes” carry our thoughts back to the early English burgesses here with their rights and customs. And, lastly, the “Quarry Field” and “Quarry Head” naturally suggest the *Clunch*, of which, we see, the church is largely constructed. Judging from the appearance of the bell-chamber stage of the tower, the Ashwell Church is no better adapted for resisting the effects of the weather than the Totternhoe *clunch*, with which we are acquainted at S. Albans.

The names I have mentioned are taken chiefly from the “Charitable Bequests of Thomas Plomer” (A.D. 1701), quoted by Clutterbuck.

The Manor of Ashwell, in which the church is

\* The Celtic word *ess* signifies *waterfall* or *fountain*. The British name for these springs then might have been *ess*. Our Saxon forefathers, not understanding its meaning, added *well* to the word, thus forming the name *Ess-well*, *Esce-well*, *Ashwell*. For the Celtic *ess*, see Joyce’s “Origin of Irish Names.”

situated, formed a portion of the patrimony of the Saxon kings, and was granted at an early period to the Abbey of Westminster. A collection of chartularies in the Cottonian Library at the British Museum, entitled, "Registrum Westmon, Abb." (M.S. Faustina, A. III.), which I have seen, does not give the date of the earliest grant. It contains, however, the "Ordination of the Vicarage," which is identically the same document as that quoted by Clutterbuck from the Registers of Lincoln. Dugdale gives the charter of Edward the Confessor, which runs—"I have granted and confirmed the donations made by the kings, my predecessors." Among the Manors enumerated is Ashwell—"Æscewelle cum omnibus ad se pertinentibus."

In the Domesday Survey, quoted by Clutterbuck, it is stated, "The Abbot holds Escewell—it was rated at six hides. There were two mills—arable land twelve carucates—six carucates of meadow land—pasture land—woodland, yielding pannage (acorns and beach-mast) for a hundred hogs. Two hides and a half were in Demeasne. A priest, with 16 villanes (small farmers holding by villanage tenure), who have five ploughlands. There were also 14 Burgesses, with nine cottagers." The "Burgesses," of course, imply a Town or Borough with certain immunities and rights. These Burgesses, I suppose, were the holders of the "Common Field," and of the "Town Closes." They paid to the Abbot (at the time of the Survey probably Vitalis), for toll and other customs of the *Burg*, 49 shillings and 4 pence—a considerable sum. Three other great Norman landowners held subordinate manors or estates—Peter de Valoignes, Sheriff of the County; Geoffrey de Magnaville (or Mandevile); and Hardwin de Scalers (or Scales). Some Saxon under-holders were Germund, Tetbald, and Uctred.

Other important Manors in this County held by the Abbots of Westminster were Stevenage and Aldenham.

The early English *Burg* was perhaps governed by a *Town-reve* or Bailiff, subject to the Abbot, to whom he paid the dues. The town in later times consisted of several wards, for John Bill, Mercer of Ashwell (whose descendants filled some offices of distinction) gave by will (dated 1503) "for the reparation of the torches in the ward, called the High Street Ward, III<sup>s</sup>. IIII<sup>d</sup>. and to

every of thother wards of the towne of Asshwell XX<sup>d</sup>." It would appear that there was a considerable business carried on here, probably in wool, grain and malt, in the middle ages, for there was a traders' guild called "the Fraternitie of Seynt John Baptist," to which the same John Bill bequeathed VI<sup>s</sup>. VIII<sup>d</sup>. he also devised to each of twenty-two churches in this County and Beds., a quarter of malt. The tolls of the market were reserved to the Abbot, perhaps also of the Fairs held in Edward I.'s reign on the F. of the Annunciation of the B. V. (the patron Saint of the Church of Ashwell), on the F. of S. Peter (the patron Saint of Westminster), on the F. of S. James, and on the F. of the translation of S. Etheldreda, which last, we are told, is still a Statute Fair, and is now usually held on Old Michaelmas Day.

The Corporate rights of the Borough perhaps died out before the Elizabethan period, when the place is called a village. Ashwell still rivals in size some country towns, and retains some very old looking and picturesque dwellings, notwithstanding the ravages made by the conflagration of 1795.

At the dissolution of the Monastery, the Manor of Ashwell was assigned by Henry VIII. as an endowment for the Bishoprick of Westminster, which was established in 1540. On the suppression of this short-lived see ten years later, it was transferred by Edward VI., together with the patronage of the church, to the see of London, then held by Nicholas Ridley (the Martyr), and the Bishops of London successively held their courts leet at Ashwell-Bury, (as I am informed) till in 1868 the ecclesiastical commissioners took charge of these temporalities. The house called "Tetwick," *i.e.* "the Headwick," may also possibly have had some official connection, in early times, with the "Berewick" of Ashwell. A manor named in an inquisition taken in 1443, "Gasselyns," also called "Kirkbies," and now in possession of S. John's College, Cambridge, is interesting to us because it contains the "Quarrepitts," some of the contents of which we see before us, moulded into beautiful forms by the skilful hands of mediæval craftsmen. The dimensions of these pits are given as 37yds. by 15yds. It appears there were also other quarries occupying 2 acres of land. Mr. Cussans informs us that the site of the ancient Manor house of Westbury

Nernewtes is marked by the moat, which exists in an orchard, indicating it was once well fortified. To the present lord of this manor, Mr. Edward King Fordham, who resides at 'The Bury,' our society is indebted to-day for a most courteous offer of hospitality. Of the early parish church and its rectors we have no record till the year 1223.—The abbot of that day, Richard de Berkyng, appears to have been a great man, and a great appropriator of rectories. He was Chief Baron of the Exchequer and Lord Treasurer of England. Matthew of Westminster styles him "Vir prudens et competenter literatus." The "prudens" perhaps has reference to the fact that he increased the revenues of his monastery by 300 marks (equivalent, according to Chauncy's mode of reckoning, to about £3000) per annum. Among his acquisitions, Sporley, the monkish chronicler of Westminster, mentions the "Church of Ashwell." The patronage before this appears to have been in lay-hands, for the last of the Mediæval Rectors, Thomas Foliot, was presented, not by the Abbot, but by Thomas Tuschett. The powerful Abbot, who acquired not only the patronage, but the temporalities of the church by a Bull of Pope Honorius III., in the seventh year of Henry III., gave his consent in 1241 to the ordination of a vicarage, which was brought about by the renowned and saintly prelate, Robert Grosteste. It would appear from Chauncy's account that the Bishop made special exertions to obtain favourable terms for the Vicar, and after much negociation and valuation by jurors, an endowment of 40 marks out of the tithes and altar offerings was assigned to the incumbent, who was to pay all episcopal and archidiaconal dues, and to possess the parsonage house with its court (or garden) adjoining the church-yard toward the east, which had belonged to the rectors, but not the old grange (the barn), and farm and market (tolls) and water-course as far as the mill, which the rectors had enjoyed—these were reserved to the appropriator. In other respects the vicar was to possess the rights and free customs in the parish enjoyed by the rectors. The vicars presented by the Abbot were, of course, seculars. The first of these, Nicholas Baccewurth, was a sub-deacon. The church had perhaps from the earliest times the dedication of S. Mary the Virgin, the parochial festival being probably the F. of the

Annunciation. It is interesting to observe that the neighbouring church of Newenham, which we were unable to visit to-day, has the rare, and probably very early dedication, of S. Vincent, the Spanish deacon, who suffered martyrdom, like S. Alban, in the Dioclesian persecution. It is believed that there are only four churches in England with this dedication.

\*In approaching the Architectural part of the subject, I have first to acknowledge my indebtedness for some friendly help, also to express my regret that so interesting a structure has not been assigned to a more competent guide. We are viewing one of the finest of our Hertfordshire parish churches, unrivalled, I suppose, throughout the county for its imposing tower. It has the usual arrangement of parts, but all these are on a larger scale than we commonly meet with. The proportions of the church are suggestive of the importance of the mediæval town, whose burgesses worshipped here; also, perhaps, of the dignity of its monastic patrons at Westminster. At what period was this church constructed? The extant records of the Abbey of Westminster, I believe, afford us no clue. We may gain some hints from the documents quoted by the county historians, but we have to depend chiefly on the Architectural evidence. I am unfortunately without information as to the views of the eminent† architect who superintended the restoration here, some years ago, the admirable results of which we now see. We also miss to-day the assistance of the Rector, whose absence, we regret to learn, is due to the necessity of recruiting his health. To Mr. Hodgson I am indebted for the loan of his interesting account of the locality, and for other kind facilities.

After reading Mr. Cussan's description of the church, I was prepared to see an *Early English* arcade, and an *Early English* tower. My visit of inspection, though rather hurried, was sufficient to dispel that illusion.

In the eastern bays of the nave arcade we see good specimens of *Early Decorated* work; and nothing of an earlier date appears to be discoverable in the building. Their resemblance in type to the arcades of Baldock,

\* This part of my paper has been re-written since the time of the excursion.

† The late Mr. Arthur Aspitel, who was a Member of our Archæological Society.

has been alluded to by Canon Davys, who has intimated that they are later. Perhaps they were not erected before the beginning of Edward II.'s reign, (1307.)

The chancel arch with its responds is similar in character. But all that we observe in the chancel, when we look at it from the nave, is *Perpendicular*. On close inspection, however, we shall find in the *jamb*s of a blocked doorway (which once opened into an adjoining chapel on the north side), a *Decorated* moulding: also on the outside a *piscina* with a *Decorated* canopy. The chapel was extant when Salmon wrote his History of Herts, in 1728. There are good reasons for believing this to be the chantry of Thomas de Stanton, whose "grant of 12 acres of land to provide for the singing of daily masses for his soul," was made about 1306. The chapel then was built at the same period as the nave arcade; and this wall of the chancel was either then in existence, or re-built simultaneously with the chapel. It seems likely that the chancel was reconstructed about 1306, its window features, which we now see, being of course, the transformations of a much later period, and effected without pulling down the walls. It is a probable supposition, that the reconstruction of the whole church commenced about the time of the accession of \*Edward II., and the work was carried on progressively towards the west.

I pass over for the moment the two western bays of the nave, the Baptistery, the tower arch and other features of this fine interior, (as we view it from the east,) and direct your attention to the tower.

In viewing the exterior we have observed its grand proportions, the bold projection of its buttresses, and the admirable effect of its double bell-chamber windows. The top stage is clearly no part of the original structure, but an addition of *Perpendicular* times. I am informed that the wooden spire, (which has a pleasing effect,) was put up by Mr. Samuel Whitbread, and that the date, 1714, is on the leadwork at the base. The original tower consisted of three stages, the upper one being finished with a *coping*, which now does duty as a *string*. The buttresses reach up to this line. The bulkiness of the tower, the massiveness of the walls, (which are, I believe,

\*The Abbott of this period, (who would have been answerable for the Chancel,) was Richd. de Sudbury, (ob. 1315.)

seven feet thick at the base,) and the depth of the buttresses suggest that it was built to carry a spire. If, in looking at a photograph of it, you cover the top stage with a piece of paper, this idea forces itself upon you. We observe that the lattice-work inserted in the bell-chamber openings gives them the appearance of *lancets*. This was a puzzle to me, when I first viewed them—*lancets* with panelling beneath would be an anomaly. I consulted an experienced architectural friend: on looking at a photograph, he suggested that the *mullion* of the panelling must have extended upwards, supporting *tracery* in the head of the window, which it divided into two *lights*; and this is the solution of the puzzle. If we had an opportunity of mounting to the bell-chamber, we might perhaps find some of the *tracery* still existing behind the lattice. These openings, of *Decorated* design, agree in character with the fine band of *quatrefoils* with a *battlement crest*, which runs round the tower beneath the windows, and is intercepted by the buttresses. The work may be dated, according to my friend's opinion, about \*1320. These interesting features are unfortunately being wiped out by the weather, which is making sad havoc with the *clunch*. If the tower was completed about 1320, the work of reconstructing the church in the *Early Decorated* period was carried on from east to west. But we have now to observe a break in the continuity of the work, for the two western bays of the nave are different in their mouldings from the others; and, relying again on the same friendly help, I call them very early *Perpendicular*, the Baptistry and tower arch are of like character. The earliest complete example of *Perpendicular* work, Edington Church, Wilts. (according to Mr. J. N. Parker,) is dated 1361. This western part of the nave then is at least 40 years later than the tower (according to our reading.)—We infer that there has been a reconstruction here, and we have to seek a cause. This I think may be gathered from the curious Latin inscriptions written on the north wall of the interior of the tower. Those to which I refer are incised in a mediæval *court hand* on two courses of stones. The upper one is a rhyming *hexameter*, and records the first great pestilence of Edward III.'s reign. The date (which Mr. Cussans has misunderstood,)

\* In the Abbacy of William Curtlington, who perhaps had much to do with providing the funds for so costly a structure.



is given in the peculiar mediæval fashion, thus—MC *ter* X *penta*\* (*i.e.* MCCCL.) For this interpretation I am indebted to Mr. W. de Grey Birch, of the British Museum, whom I consulted as to the date of the *Court hands*. The lower inscription consists of two lines (in a somewhat smaller character,) mutilated at the commencement. The first line alludes to the second visitation of pestilence in the same reign. The second line, which is a mutilated *Pentameter*, reads—*oc anno Maurus in orbe tonat*. It may be completed from a chronicler thus: *Ecce flat hoc anno Maurus in orbe tonat*. It commemorates the extraordinary storm of wind which began on S. Maur's day, 1361-2, following the pestilence. The date is given at the end in Roman numerals—LXI—(in the same manner as we should write the date of the year of our visit here, 85,) the MCCC. to denote the century, is written above in smaller letters—evidently a later insertion. This is evidence that the inscription was incised before the end of the 14th century. The style of the inscriptions, according to the high authority I have quoted, is consistent with the supposition that they are contemporaneous with the events. There is the highest probability that they are so; and I believe their significance is local. We learn that in 1349-50 the rector and patron of this church, Abbot Symon de Byrchester (with 26 of his monks) fell a victim to the first pestilence. This fact may account for the inscription. The local significance of the second inscription is more to our purpose. The Chroniclers agree in their accounts of the terrific gale which commenced about *vespers* on 15th January, S. Maur's day (not S. Maurice's) A.D. 1361-2. †Adam Muremuth (dean of S. Paul's 1320-80,) tell us that it demolished "many houses, towers, steeples, and other strong edifices." The annals of Bermondsey state that it was most destructive in the eastern parts of England. Stowe, that it lasted five days. ‡From Blomefield's History of Norfolk we learn, that it blew down the spire of Norwich Cathedral. My conjecture is that the inscription commemorates a catastrophe which occurred

\*The whole line, with the contractions written out, reads *MC ter X penta miseranda ferox violenta*. The word *pestilentia*, written above it, is a later gloss.

†See note at end of this paper.

‡Blomefield's Hist. Norfolk—Ed. Chadwick, 1739, vol. II. p. 487.

here at Ashwell. If the south-western gale brought down a mass of masonry (say a spire), from the top of the tower, the debris would fall on the western part of the nave with destructive effect, and the shattered arches would require to be reconstructed. The hypothesis supplies us with a reasonable account of the presence of this early perpendicular work in the situation in which we observe it.

We may suppose that the walls of the *Baptistry* (which serve as buttresses to the tower), received their panelling at the time of this reconstruction; also that the tower arch was then remodded. The west window in the tower, which has shafts in the jambs, must belong to the *Decorated* work. Its tracery is puzzling. The *Baptistry* may have been partitioned off by a screen; its font is sculptured with symbols of the *Passion*. The grotesque sculptures which terminate the *hood* mouldings of the nave arcades, are worth observing. The one which is not grotesque (nearest to the chancel), may be intended for the B. Virgin; there is a star over the forehead. In the opposite aisle was the *Lady Chapel*; for John Bill (to whom I have before referred), directed in his will that he should be "buried in the church of Ashwell before the ymage of *our Lady*, on the south part." At the east end of the south aisle you will see the mutilated base of the *niche*, which contained that image, also an *aumbrey* opposite, and in the east wall the panelling for the *reredos*. Mr. Cussans informs us that the chapel was enclosed by screens which have been removed to the western ends of the aisles. The Tudor windows on the south side suit the date of John Bill's bequests, and are likely to have been his gifts. He was a benefactor (as we have seen) to the *guild* of S. John the Baptist, whose chapel may have been in this aisle, but we find no *piscina*. A chapel was situated at the east end of the north aisle, where the *piscina* exists. Behind the organ we shall see a fine *altar tomb* (Perpendicular) which is assigned on the authority of Weever to John Hinxworth. I believe the name should read \*John Harrison (of Hinxworth). It is dated by the epitaph (which no longer exists), 1462. The words—*Bursa non strictus hoc templo gessit amicus*

\*The epitaph gives it—"Johannes, Henrici dictus proles." The last three words are a latinizing of Harryson or Herryson. A John Herryson (probably a member of his family,) was vicar here, 1460—1473.

(The latinity of which is peculiar,) are thought by Mr. Cussans to imply that he was the founder of a chantry here. There can be no doubt he was a benefactor to the church, and it is likely that all the *Perpendicular* windows in that north aisle are due to him. The east window, however, has good *Decorated* tracery, and appears to be the only unaltered one in the church.

We observe that the clerestory has been *Perpendicularized* as well as the aisles: also the exterior of the fine south porch, the entrance arch and the excellent vaulting are earlier. The *parvise* has two stories. The north porch was perhaps added in \*Henry VIII's reign.

The interesting *Perpendicular* features of the spacious chancel, its eastern *niches* and canopied *sedilia* deserve a close inspection. The windows may have been inserted in the period when Edmund Kyrton was Abbot of Westminster (1440—1462). A portion of the chancel screen now decorates the front of the organ: the *Rood-loft*, which was above it, has its position marked by the abutments against that wall of the chancel.

For some interesting inscriptions, now no longer remaining, and records of some distinguished vicars, I must refer you to the pages of the county historians.

\*Some repairs to the church were effected in this reign, for the "Certificate of Commissioners for making inventories of church goods," states:—"The inhabitants of Ashwell about VIII years past did sell II crosses, a senser and a challise of silver from their church, and bestowed the same as they say uppon the reparacions of the said church."—See "Cussans" Church Goods in Herts.

---

#### Note.

The following is Adam Muremuth's description of the storm alluded to above.

"A.D. 1362, et regis Anglorum, Edwardi III. 36, 15<sup>o</sup> die Januar., circa horam vesperarum, ventus vehemens, notus, Australis, Africus, tanta rabie erupit, quod flatu suc domos altos, edificia sublimia, turres, campanilia, arbores, alia quoque durabilia et fortia violenter prostravit, pariter et impegit; sic quod residua quæ extant sunt adhuc deteriora. De quo quidem metricus sic ait.

*C ter erant mille decies sex unus et ille,  
Luce tua, Maure, vehemens fuit impetus auræ.*

Alius sic—

*Ecce flat hoc anno Maurus in orbe tonans.*

---

Adam Muremuth—Annal. Continuatio Nic. Trivet-Oxon, 1722, p. 115.