

**S<sup>t</sup> LAURENCE CHURCH AYOT** N  
W → E  
S  
**GROUND PLAN**

SCALE FOR PLAN 0 1 2 3 4 5 10 15 20 25 30 FEET

SCALE FOR DETAILS 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 FEET

J. Akerman, Photo-lith London

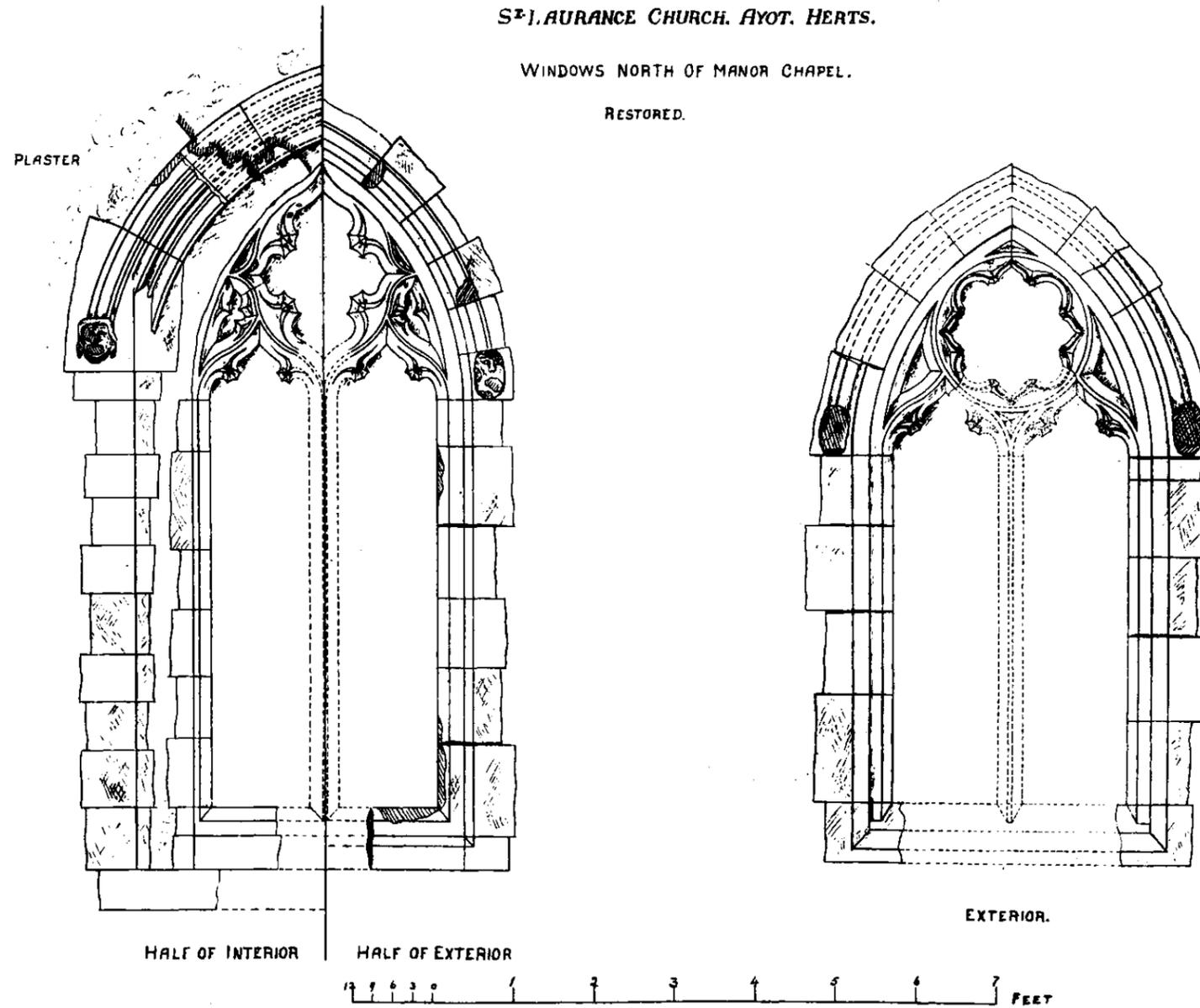
F. T. DAVYS. del.



S<sup>t</sup>. LAURANCE CHURCH. AYOT. HERTS.

WINDOWS NORTH OF MANOR CHAPEL.

RESTORED.



J Akerman, Photo lith London

T. DAVYS. *From the* 21 Dec

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Notes on the Medieval Church of Ayot S. Lawrence,  
Hertfordshire.

BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS.

As far back as the year 1882, among the pleasant excursions made by the Members of the S. Albans Architectural Society, a visit was paid to the picturesque ruins of this once beautiful Church; I then read some notes on its history, and we examined together the plan, and details, of what had been one of the most interesting Ecclesiastical Structures in our county. It has

since seemed desirable that those notes should take a more permanent form, and be published with some details, and a plan of the building, in our Transactions. This seemed good, because though several notices of the Church are found in county histories and elsewhere, they vary in some matters from an exact account, while all such histories deal more with the family records of the Parish, than the Architectural History of the Church. My object then, in re-editing these notes for our Transactions, will be to give, as nearly as possible, the history of a Church second to none in the interest of its manorial connexions or architectural merits.

Sir Henry Chauncey, in a History of Hertfordshire which has been supplemented by two others since his time,\* attributes the foundation of this Church to a very remarkable man, Radhere, first a Court Jester in the time of King Henry I., afterwards the celebrated Ecclesiastic, who founded the Priory and Hospital of S. Bartholomew in Smithfield, and died as its first Prior. It would indeed be most interesting, if at a time when the noble Church of S. Bartholomew itself is awaking the care and zeal of the antiquarian, and the ecclesiologist, we could find authority for this suggestion; but unfortunately the authority is wanting, and the able historian would appear to be in error.† Were it, however, possible to support the conclusion, we should look in vain at Ayot for any remains of a church so ancient as the period would infer.

We first touch ground in the Manorial History of this Parish in Domesday Book, where we find the name of one Geoffrey de Magnaville as holding "Aiete" of the Abbot of Westminster. Before this time we gather that Alwin, a thane of King Edward the Confessor, held the Manor, and could sell it. We also hear that the Abbot of Westminster induced King Edward to grant him this Manor; and it probably passed to that Abbey at the

\* Those of Mr. Clutterbuck and Mr Cussans.

† From a number of the "Antiquarian Itinerary," which has a frontispiece of the ruins of this Church, dated 1815, I extract the following—"Chauncey states, but erroneously, that the Manor was granted to Radhere . . . to whom it never belonged: this appears to have arisen from the circumstance of Canons in Shenley, which anciently formed part of the possessions of S. Bartholomew's, having been granted out along with this manor by Henry the Eighth to Nicholas Bristowe and others."

same time as the neighbouring Royal Manor of Wheat-hampstead, which has been the property of Westminster Abbey till taken over within the last few years by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. But while the latter Manor continued the property of the Abbots of Westminster, the Manor of Ayot appears to have passed out of their hands, for we find one "William de Ayett" holding it under the Abbots of S. Albans and the Earls of Hereford in the reign of *Edward the First*. This William de Ayett married Lettice, daughter of Sir Robert de Keynes, of Dodford, in the County of Northampton, and in 1305, we find that she presented to this Rectory as the widow of William. Their son was "Lawrence de Ayett," who succeeded to the tenancy of this Manor, and died in 1350; his son and next heir being a clerk outlawed for felony.\* These names and dates are very important in our study of this Church, because its early and late *Decorated* portions must have been built during this period. The arch leading from the south or Parochial Chancel, to the north or Manorial Chancel, would appear from its details to be of the period of Edward the First, or the time of William de Ayett; while the noble windows of this same Manorial Chancel are later, and would date during the occupation of Lawrence de Ayett, or possibly that of his mother. This family, we have seen, held this Manor under the Abbots of S. Albans; and as the Abbots who ruled over the monastery during their occupation were great builders, what could be more likely than that architects and masons from S. Albans might have been sent to assist in the works proceeding at this Church? I think that there can be little doubt on this matter; for if we examine the beautiful remnants of the east window of the Manorial Chancel, we shall find its *jamb*s ornamented with small niches corresponding with those which are so remarkable in the window jamb of Abbot Hugh de Eversden's noble Lady Chapel at S. Albans. This Abbot ruled from 1308 to 1326, when Lettice, the widow of William de Ayett, having presented to the Rectory in 1305, was probably living at the Manor House, and might have been employing and solacing the days of her widowhood, and her son's minority, in the work of erecting this splendid structure near her husband's grave.

\* See Clutterbuck's History of Hertfordshire.

The rules of Abbot Richard de Wallingford and of Michael de Mentmore, bringing us down to 1350, when Lawrence de Ayett died, so that we may well believe that this family, when proprietors, provided the means for the beautiful *Decorated* work we see here, while they went to S. Albans for architectural advice and assistance to carry it out. We have illustrated restorations of the two beautiful side windows of the Manorial Chancel; would that sufficient had been left to have reproduced that over its eastern altar, for a more striking composition has seldom been designed. As it is, the *jamb* mouldings and niches are of singular beauty, while beneath the mantel of ivy which covers it, a lovely foliated *corbel*, of most unusual arrangement, receives the inner *Hood moulding* on the north side. The whole of these windows belong to a phase of the *Decorated* period of especial richness, of which, though examples are rare, we find several in this neighbourhood; for the arrangement of *double cusping* is here introduced, which is seen in the beautiful eastern window of the Brockett Transeptal Chapel at Wheathampstead, and another remarkable instance in the south aisle of S. Paul's Walden.

It may be well to mention here the singularly fine western arch of the Manorial Chancel; it belongs to an earlier time than the rest of the work, and may mark the date at which the Abbots of S. Albans became interested in the Manor, for it would do credit to even Abbot John de Cella's artists. The arch section is peculiar, and may have been suggested by the material, Totternhoe *Clunch*, employed; the *inner* members are plain and massive, while as we reach those *nearer* the *Hood*, we have rolls and hollows of great richness, the final *Hood* moulding terminating in a draped figure, which exceeds most of our English mediæval examples in delicacy of design and execution. The *caps* on which the arch rests form in their *abaci* a triple group of rectangles, if I may so describe their very peculiar plan, rich conventional foliage and carving supports these *abaci*, while the *shaft*, a single one below, is semi-circular. I have endeavoured to describe this arch particularly, because I cannot call to mind any similar example. This is the only portion of the existing Church which appears to belong to the *Lancet* period. The arches from the Parochial Nave into its destroyed Chancel, and that between the Chancel of

the Manor and the Parochial Chancel, of which the *pier* sections will be found on the plan now published, are *early Decorated*, and especially noteworthy for the small engaged shafts with which they are ornamented. The termination of the *Label* by a simple *roll* on the manorial side of the arch between the Chancels should also be observed. To complete our survey of the *Decorated* portions here, we must examine the western door, which is finely moulded, and enriched with festooned *ball-flower* ornament; and also the south-west window of the Parochial Nave, which has an internal *label* curiously finished with a head cut in the thickness of the *hood-mould*.

Between the Manorial Chancel and its vestibule there was a *rood-screen*, doubtless of wood, the staircase to which is still represented by a hollow in the wall on the north side; this was inserted much to the injury of the beautiful Early English capitals to which I have before alluded, which were ruthlessly injured to receive it. There was also a screen between the Parochial Nave and its Chancel, the stone basement of which can still be traced; on this was apparently a super-structure of wood, the groove to receive which is visible in the southern pier of the Chancel arch. The Church, completed in the features described in the *Decorated* period, received some alterations and additions in the succeeding *Perpendicular* style. At that time Sir Thomas Barr was the manorial tenant; he died at Christmas in the year 1421, and these works were probably carried out during his lifetime. The "Perpendicular" portion chiefly consists of what at one time must have been a very stately Tower, placed at the west end of the Manorial Aisle: it had a staircase at its south-west angle, the turret of which probably rose above the parapet, like many examples in Dorsetshire and Somersetshire, and of which some are to be seen in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire; this composition must have grouped well with the western door and window of the Parochial Nave, and have assisted to form a very beautiful West Front. The Belfrey windows have in two of the Tower faces the original tracery nearly perfect; it is exceedingly effective, and remarkable from having circular *framed* quartrefoils in the head, instead of the straight-sided ones common at this period. Below on the north side there still remains a massive and well-

moulded *Perpendicular* window, with a doorway, probably placed in this unusual position to give convenient access from the Manor House to the Manorial Chapel. Beneath this window is the monument, sadly mutilated now, of the probable builder of this Tower, Sir Thomas Barr, and his wife. Arches, with piers richly moulded, open on the east side of the Tower into the Manorial Chapel, and on the south into the Parochial Nave. In the vestibule between the Tower and Manorial Chancel, the Antechapel, as it were, of the Manor, is a *Perpendicular* window, which is the counterpart of that on the north side of the Tower, and was probably worked and inserted at the same time. The mediæval history of this Church ends here; but I find from Sir Henry Chauncey that the Parish Chancel was rebuilt by Henry Sykes, D.D., the Rector, in 1694.

The whole of this beautiful and most remarkable structure was abandoned, when the new church was built and consecrated in 1779. It was intended at the time that it should have been levelled with the ground, but that sacrilege was prevented, and the remains, which we see, thus spared for our admiration by the then Diocesan Bishop Thurlow of Lincoln.

At the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry the Eighth, this Manor, still one of the numerous Manors of S. Albans, was granted to Nicholas Bristow, the King's Clerk of the Jewels. A monument, of apparently Elizabethan date, preserved within the Tower, and affixed to its west wall, is believed to be that erected to this Nicholas Bristow and his family. The Ground Plan now published will show the very remarkable features to which I have alluded in this description. The Parish Church and Manorial Chapel will be seen in parallel arrangement, and the various arches, windows and doorways, with enlarged mouldings given in several important instances, will be observed. Fortunately all the mediæval walls remain; but Dr. Sykes' Chancel, which can probably well be spared, judging from the character of most of the ecclesiastical buildings of his date, has wholly disappeared. It might have been possible a century ago to have repaired and re-roofed this beautiful structure; but decay has now gone so far as to render this impossible. We have details here, many of them alas! fast crumbling, which may well be com-

mended to the student as models of Architectural taste; a Manorial Chapel, too, which might well be copied when a structure of this character is required. But as we turn from the contemplation of so much beauty in such decay, we may be permitted some share in the feelings of Sir Walter Scott's supposed visitor to Melrose, expressed in the reflection—

Was never scene so sad and fair !

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