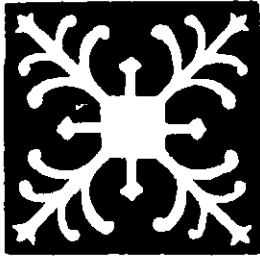
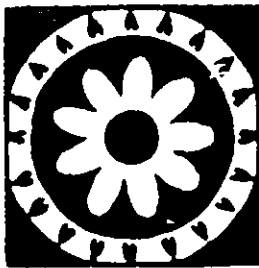


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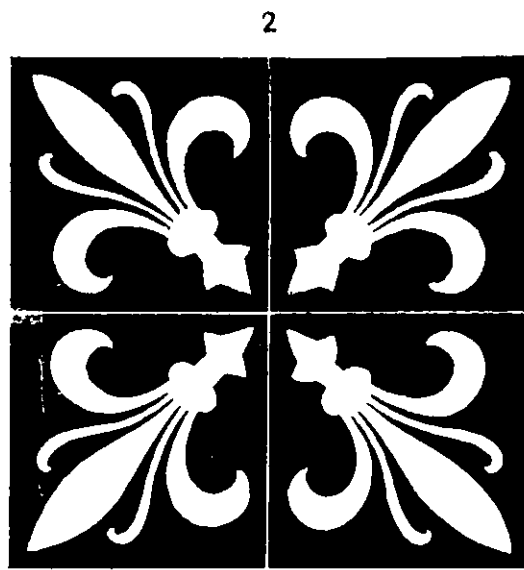
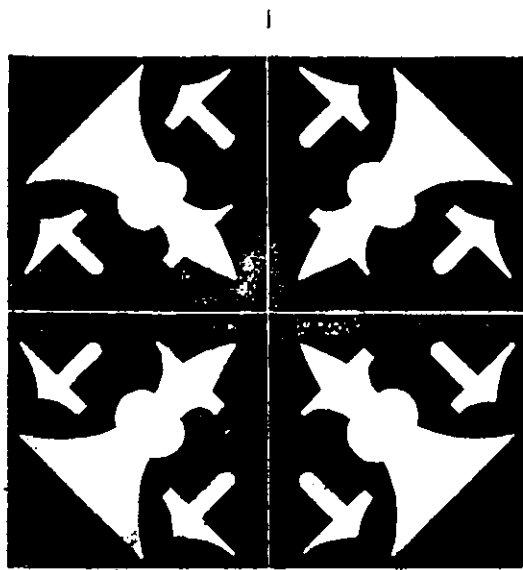
H. GOSSELIN, DEL.

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FOURTEENTH CENTURY TILES.

From St. Leonard's Church.

BENGEO.

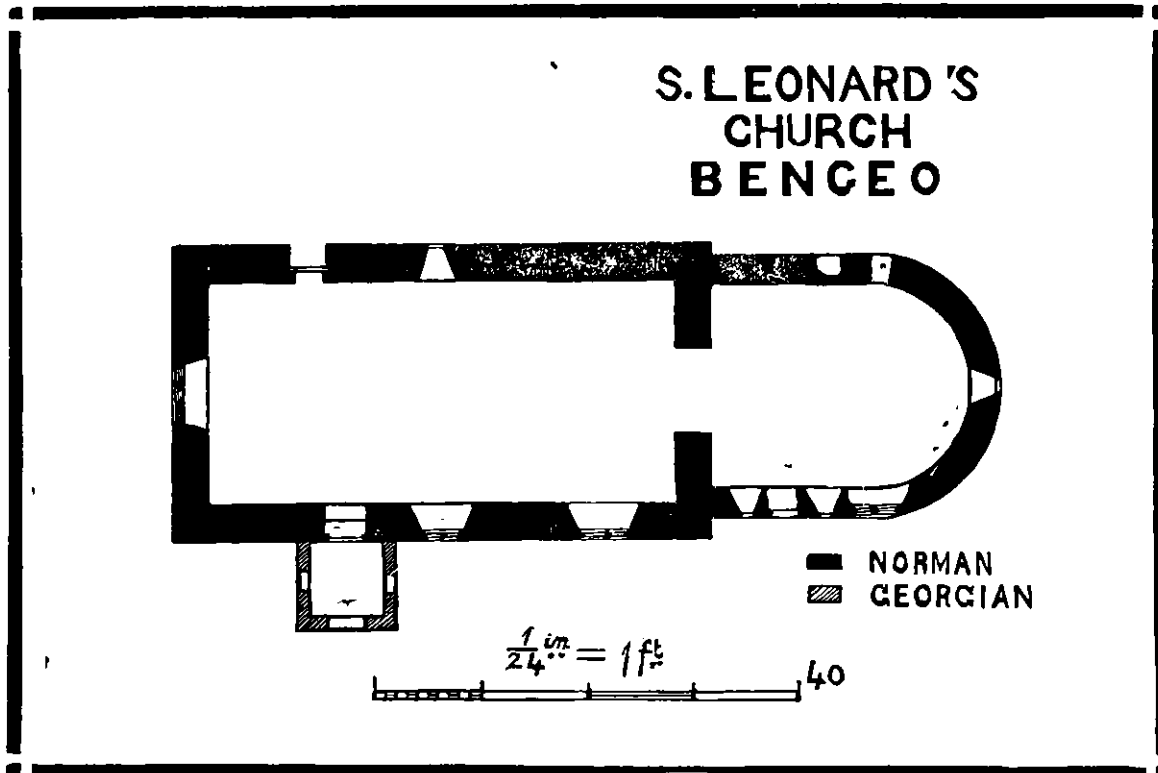


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FOURTEENTH CENTURY TILES.

From St Leonard's Church.

BENGEO



St. Leonard's Church, Bengeo.

BY GERARD GOSSELIN, Esq.

In September, 1886, the St. Albans Archæological Society visited Bengeo, and inspected the ancient parish church dedicated to St. Leonard, which stands half-way up the spur of the hill dividing the rivers Lea and Bean on the south from the river Rib on the north. The view over this well-watered valley towards the south-west has been spoiled by the most unpicturesque collection of buildings that ever it entered the heart of man to set up, but it must have been singularly beautiful some 800 years ago, when most likely the church was dedicated.

St. Leonard's is a good example of the smaller churches of the Norman Period; the very simple ground plan (with the exception of the red brick porch added to the south door) remains exactly as the Normans left it. The building consists of a nave 51 feet 5 inches long by 28 feet 4 inches wide, and a chancel with a semi-circular apse, the former 24 feet 9 inches wide and extending 15 feet from the eastern face of the low and narrow chancel arch to the springing of the apse, the latter being struck with a radius of about 12 feet 4 inches; all these are outside measurements; the walls of the nave are about 3 feet 6 inches thick, those of the chancel and apse are about 2 feet 9 inches; they are built of rough flint work in courses of about 9 to 12 inches high—the mortar is poor and friable.

The oldest work in the building and that from which its age may approximately be determined, is the south door, the internal arches of the north and east windows, the chancel arch and the external masonry of the round-headed window (at present blocked up) on the north side of the altar.

Some of this work is doubtless rude, the jointing of the masonry wide, and the tool marks rough; but whether this roughness, &c. represents the work of early men who did their best, or of later men who did not, and whether the stones were worked with the pick or with the hammer and chisel, I will not venture to say, for both these views have by learned archæologists been proved to me to demonstration.

The work of the chancel arch is singularly characteristic—the opening is low and narrow, not more than 7 feet 10 inches wide and 12 feet high in the clear; the piers, faced with soft stone, were so worked on the western angles as to show rough pillars and capitals, and the arch is ornamented with a simple half-round moulding—the jointing being about three-quarters-of-an-inch wide.

The chancel was in early days lighted by three narrow round-headed windows pierced in the walls of the apse; that looking north-east has long been closed up, although the Norman jambs and head can still be seen outside. The east window, while retaining the Norman stonework inside, appears on the exterior as a narrow square-headed light, in the deep lintel of which a lancet-shaped recess has been sunk about one-and-a-half inches.

The south-east window has been enlarged twice, and with reference to this window I cannot do better than quote from a report sent in 1883 to the Committee now repairing the church by my friend Mr. Micklethwaite, the architect under whose care the work of repair is being carried on:—He says, “We see there” (at Bengoe), “how the later men tried by a re-arrangement of the light to get over what they felt to be the defects of their church. They first tried to correct the too great separation of the chancel from the nave caused by the narrowness of the chancel arch. To enlarge the arch itself would have led to other alterations which either from their cost or for some other reasons they did not care to undertake; so they enlarged the window just south of the high altar, so as to throw a strong light upon it, and by so increasing its prominence to counteract the opposite effect of the narrow arch. The window seems to have been enlarged twice, as if it had been thought that the first improvement had not been carried far enough; and to increase the effect by making all the light come from one side, and thereby giving full force to the shadows, the windows on the north side were blocked up.” The difficulty of the narrow chancel arch was surmounted in a different manner in the most interesting old Church of Amwel Magna about two miles distant. There these aforesaid later men cut two rough openings from the nave into the chancel low down in the piers and north and south of the chancel arch, much

resembling port-holes or oven mouths, leaving as little as they dared of the jambs, and a most unpleasant appearance of insecurity. To the west of this twice-enlarged window there have been inserted at different periods two narrow-headed lights, one a simple lancet, the other square-headed. It is doubtful whether or not the Normans had windows here. Under the easternmost of these two windows is a small early English piscina—at one time it had a purbec marble bason, and the arch was decorated with a carved moulding, of which a small fragment has been found. The drain from this piscina has been lately discovered, and is found to consist of a sloping gutter, half-round in section and worked in stone.

Between these windows a doorway was made in comparatively recent times, and the mass of masonry over it was supported by thoroughly decayed oaken lintels. West of this door a hole extends nearly up to the wall of the nave, into which the door bar was thrust back when the door had to be opened.

It is wonderful what faith our ancestors had in the strength of their walls—where they wanted a hole there it had to be cut, and considering the class of mortar used and the dangerously disconnected state of the old chancel roof and its tie beams, it is fortunate that this long-suffering south wall is still standing; under the window of which, Mr. Micklethwaite writes, is a stone seat built in the wall, and just east of this are the remains of another piscina. The head stone of this which was found thrown in to fill up a hole in the wall, has now been replaced.

There are two or three other interesting points in the chancel to which I will now refer. One is the painting on the walls, most of it is still covered by sundry thick coats of plaster and whitewash, which has preserved it in the past, and now happily protects it from the bumps and dents which scaffold poles and boards delight to inflict, also from the penknives and umbrellas of the curious. Evidently the chancel has in olden times been thoroughly decorated; the ground work is a dull red divided out into quarries with broad white stripes and outlined in black. In some of the quarries are rough images, or rather shadows, of white lions passant—a very delicate looking sort of lion be it observed. On

the splays of one of the windows are delineated very faintly two ecclesiastics in their robes, on another is a wild-looking creeper of the maple genus.

The other point of interest consists of some curious holes in the north wall of the chancel; the eastern one, something like a low narrow doorway, is cut through the wall just at the spring of the apse. About a yard west of it is a second, which does not go through the wall—simply a recess—they are about 4 feet 6 inches high and 20 inches wide, the recess being of varying depth, about 18 inches. They are roughly rectangular, and are plastered with clay, which has been whitewashed. Level with their tops and east and west of them are two smaller holes of about 1 foot cube.

These holes were recently found when removing a plaster coat from the wall; they were filled with stones and clay. One of these stones, it is worth mentioning, is a portion of a small bason about 9 inches in diameter. In an interesting paper which was read by Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite before the Royal Archæological Institute, on December 2nd, 1886, and published in the "Archæological Journal," in which will also be found a good illustration of these curious holes, is explained their probable use. The paper is too long for me to reproduce here, but the following extract will be of interest:—

"It seems that a little wooden hut has been built at some time against the wall of the church. The smaller holes give its length from east to west—about eight feet inside—and perhaps also its greatest height, about six feet. But this last and the width from north to south are uncertain, for there is nothing to show what was the shape of the roof, and if there were ever any foundations they are not to be found now. The walls were probably of stud and clay dawbing, and the roof thatch. The place can hardly have been other than an anker's den. And it must surely have been one of the least commodious. It is remarkable that so few such have been identified, for the number of ankers in England must at one time have been considerable. . . . The entrance to his cell had no door, but it may have been blocked, and a squint or loop towards the altar formed in the blocking. If it were open, a curtain must have been hung across it, perhaps a black cloth with a white cross like that ordered in the *Riwle* to be put to the 'parlour window.'

“The recess in the church wall west of the doorway is the anker’s seat and perhaps his sleeping place. And his bones may lie below; for it seems to have been a custom for ankers to prepare their own graves within their cells.

“We find nothing to tell us his date. It may have been any time from the twelfth century to the sixteenth. But the rudeness of the work is, I think, a sign of early date. If it had been of the fourteenth or fifteenth century, I should have expected the opening through the wall at the least to have been formed with regular masonry.”

Since this paper was read, we have discovered, while carefully repairing the perpendicular window south of the altar, the splay of the original Norman south-east window of the chancel. This splay is of almost identical work with that of the Anchorite’s cell, *i.e.*, a rough plastering of clay whitewashed over. One cannot but think that the preparation of his grave was a most suitable occupation for the inhabitant of this most unsanitary place of abode. In the nave, as yet, we have found no trace of the side altars, which were probably placed north and south of the chancel arch; but on the western face of the south pier are the traces of a once beautiful fresco. There is a woodcut of it in Cussan’s “History of Hertfordshire,” but since that was published, in 1876, the fresco was almost washed out by a shower of rain during some repairs to the nave roof.

As to the position of the original windows of the nave we have at present no evidence to go on, except in the case of one in the centre of the north wall. Of this on the outside there may be the quoins and head, but it is impossible to speak with certainty, as the plaster has not been touched, and only a round-headed wooden frame is visible. But on the inside we still have left the Norman arch and jambs. On the south, two windows have been inserted at different periods, and the west wall still rejoices in possessing a perpendicular window of three lights, which we may hope will someday be fitted with painted glass.

The north door has had a troubled existence. There remains very little work from which to judge of its date. Only a few quoins and the skewback of the interior jambs being left.

In Dr. Hughson's description of London, published in 1805, there is a print of the church taken from the north-east. This shows that the north door was then evidently used. About forty or fifty years ago it was deemed necessary and advisable to build a vestry outside this door, which was then considerably narrowed with brickwork. Nine years since it was found still more advisable to pull down this modern building in order to prevent its utter collapse, and then the north doorway was blocked up with flints. The south doorway, the only one through which admission to the church can be obtained, is a strong piece of Norman masonry. On the interior it shows a high round-headed arch, while on the exterior there is a very heavy stone lintel, perhaps an insertion of later date, supported on the original stone pillars and capitals. This door is quaint.

Of the history of the church little is known, and of its founder nothing. To Cussan's "History of Hertfordshire" I must refer those who wish for further information on this head.

In 1657 Lady Fanshawe in her memoirs mentions that she buried, in this church, Henry, one of her children (she had fourteen), but the times were troublous, and perhaps on that account no memorial stone was placed over him. At all events no trace of one is now to be found. An old service of communion plate was presented by this lady to the church, as we learn from the following inscription on the chalice :—

An Fanshawe Bengeo Church.

Clutterbuck in his history of the county mentions this church, and describes it as having a square embattled tower. He evidently built that "tower in the air," and it has consequently disappeared. Much might be added to these rough notes, but enough has been written to show that this long neglected building ought to be better known by those who profess to care for and understand our early parish churches.

With this paper is published a view of the church reproduced from a water coloured sketch made in 1812 by Josuè Gosselin of Guernsey, a ground plan and illustrations of some fourteenth century tiles which were found in the church.