

Notes on the Church of S. Helen, and Ecclesiastical History  
of Wheatthampstead.

BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS, M.A.

The following paper was read by the Rev. Canon Davys on the occasion of the above excursion:—

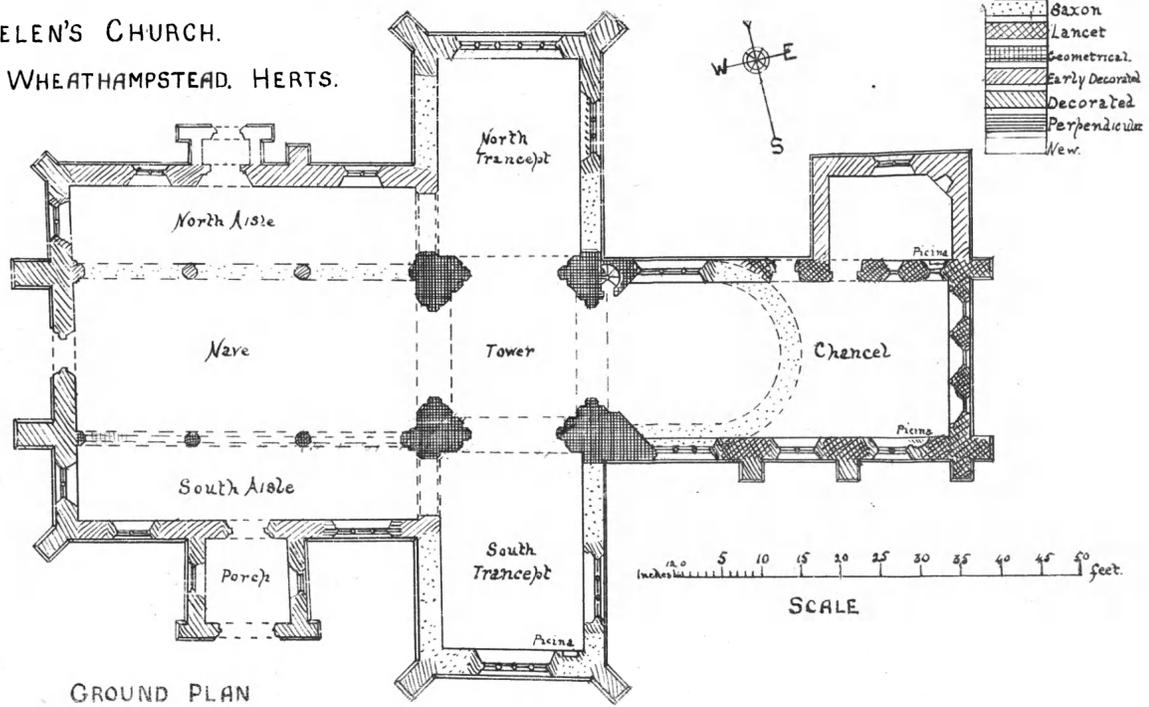
It would seem almost a work of supererogation to read before the members of the St. Albans Architectural Society a paper on a Church with which most of us are well acquainted. Already some notices of parts of the building and their history have appeared in our transactions,\* but I have been reminded that no general paper on the history of the whole structure has yet appeared there. Some 25 years ago, as far as I can remember, I read before this Society at St. Albans—our noble president, Lord Verulam, being in the chair—a paper on the Church, as far as I knew about it, before its restoration, but during that great undertaking, many additional facts were brought to light. It has appeared advisable, therefore, that some more connected account than we at present possess, should find its place among the records of our Society of a Church second to few in interest in this county. In such a history, some things will have to be repeated which have been spoken of before; but others will be new, especially to those of our members who have joined our Society within the last few years, while the promised presence of some members of the London and Middlesex Architectural Society amongst us to-day will make such a paper useful in introducing them to one of the best architectural subjects which we have to show.

At the outset, I may venture to say that, despite the recent view argued by Mr. Cussans in his valuable history, I still adhere to the old view, that Wheatthampstead means in its etymology the Wheat-homestead, the “Locus Frumentarius,” from which Abbot John Bostock of St. Albans is said, in the records of that Monastery, to have come, and that the view, that it is rather Wethampstead, a place in the Marshes, or under a lake, is untenable, unless we can bring evidence to show that its inhabitants 1,000 years ago were “lake dwellers,” or that some of its earliest buildings were erected under water.

\* See Transactions of the years 1885 and 1888.



S. HELEN'S CHURCH.  
WHEATHAMPSTEAD, HERTS.



GROUND PLAN

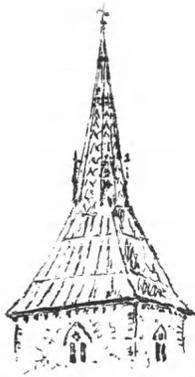
I was told when first I came here, thirty years ago, by the gentleman who was then the Rector's churchwarden, the late Mr. James Mardell, whose father was for many years the tenant of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster's farm at Wheathampstead Bury, that it was a tradition of that estate that it was formerly the one on which the bread for the Royal table was grown in King Edward the Confessor's time, and that that monarch gave the lands and Manor of Wheathampstead, with a beneficial interest in part of the tithes, to the Convent of Westminster, on his rebuilding the great Church there, as one of the most valuable offerings he had it in his power to bestow. This tradition is, I understand, largely confirmed by the history of the property in the Westminster Records. The Domesday Survey makes the Abbot of St. Peter at Westminster Lord of the Manor of Wheathampstead, or rather of the Manor of Wheathampstead with Harpenden, as it was then, and has so remained until present times; and among other particulars of the population and cultivation of the parish of Wheathampstead, the document states that it possessed a parish priest. The name of the parish priest of that date I am not able to quote, but a list of the Rectors here is given in Mr. Clutterbuck's "History of Hertfordshire," which has been enlarged and greatly perfected in the recent history of the county by Mr. Cussans. The list runs from John de Dyham, who was instituted, or rather collated, on January 4th, 1238, by the then Bishop of Lincoln, on the resignation of one Matthew.

I should also have been glad if we could trace the origin of the financial arrangements of the Rectory of Wheathampstead with Harpenden, the parishes having been united under one Rector till the separation into two distinct benefices in 1859. These were so remarkable as to merit now a word or two in passing, for the Rector, although always titular Rector, and having by custom the care of the Chancels, had always been a whole Vicar and half Rector, receiving, that is, the whole of the small or vicarial tithes, but having to share the great or rectorial tithes with Westminster Abbey. He has also had a small glebe, and a small manor, but Westminster has had considerably more land, and manorial privileges of greater extent. It has been said, and immemorial custom would seem to con-

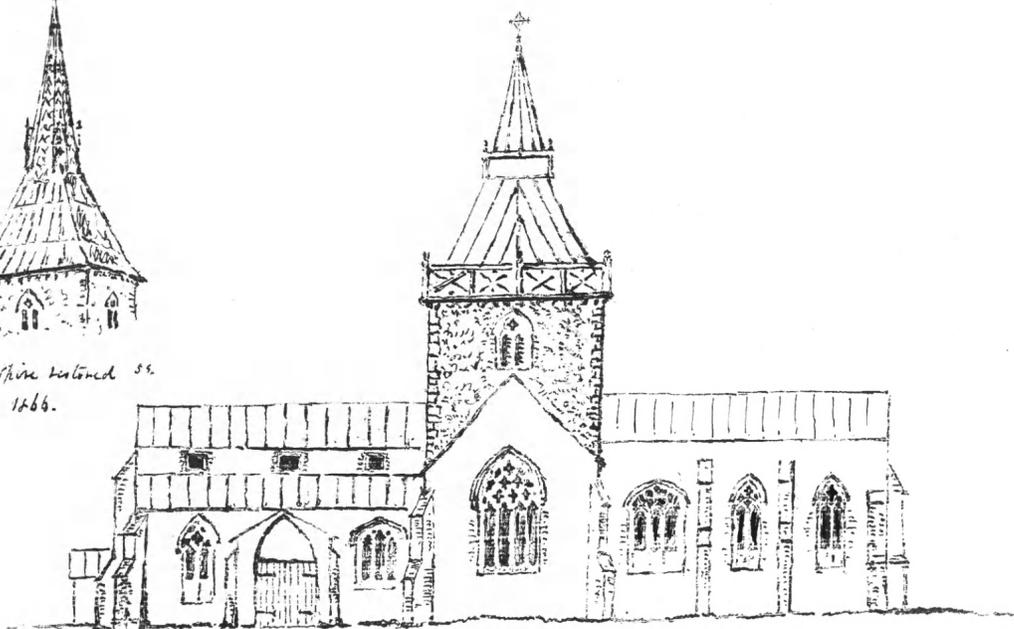
firm the tradition, that the arrangements which the present generation has seen have been those in use since Edward the Confessor's time, who in his anxiety to provide for the interests of Westminster Abbey did not forget the spiritual welfare of the parishes whence his gifts proceeded.

Another singular fact is the patronage of the Rectory. This appears to have been vested from the earliest times in the Bishop of the Diocese, which was then and till recently that of Lincoln, for in most cases where Abbeys held Church property they were the patrons of the benefices. It would seem, therefore, that while Edward the Confessor was solicitous to provide Westminster with a valuable pecuniary gift, he was not only anxious to provide a sufficiently endowed priest for the parish, but also to secure that he should be worthy of his hire by being a labourer approved by the Chief Overseer of the Diocese. The recent changes, caused in part by the re-arrangement of Dioceses, and the endeavour to equalise the value of episcopal patronage, may be thus explained. When the vast Diocese of Lincoln came to be sub-divided, this part of the county of Hertford became at first a part of the Diocese of Rochester, and the county of Leicester was added to the Diocese of Peterborough, and since the Bishop of Lincoln had some 90 livings in his patronage, and the Bishop of Peterborough only about nine, two of which were even then situated in the Diocese of Lincoln, a scheme of exchange and re-arrangement was prepared by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, one effect of which was to transfer the united Rectory of Wheathampstead with Harpenden to the patronage of the See of Peterborough. My father, who was then the Bishop of that See, had in consultation with his former college friend, Bishop Kay, of Lincoln, settled that this Rectory would bear division, and that as Harpenden was a rapidly growing place, it should be provided with a resident incumbent, and that that incumbent should be endowed with all the Rectorial property derived from Harpenden parish, which was accordingly done on the death of the Rev. Chancellor Pretyma, in 1859. The two incumbents appointed 30 years ago are still living, but the patronage of Harpenden was exchanged by the late Bishop Jeune, of Peterborough, with the Crown, for the Vicarage of Oundle,





St. Vincent's Church  
1866.



in Northamptonshire, it being naturally desired by that Prelate, as far as possible, to have his patronage situated within his own Diocese, so that Harpenden is now a benefice in the gift of the Lord Chancellor; but no exchange has yet been made of the patronage of Wheathampstead, though I have often hoped that it might in due time be restored to the gift of the Bishop in whose Diocese it is situated, who would now be the Bishop of St. Albans.

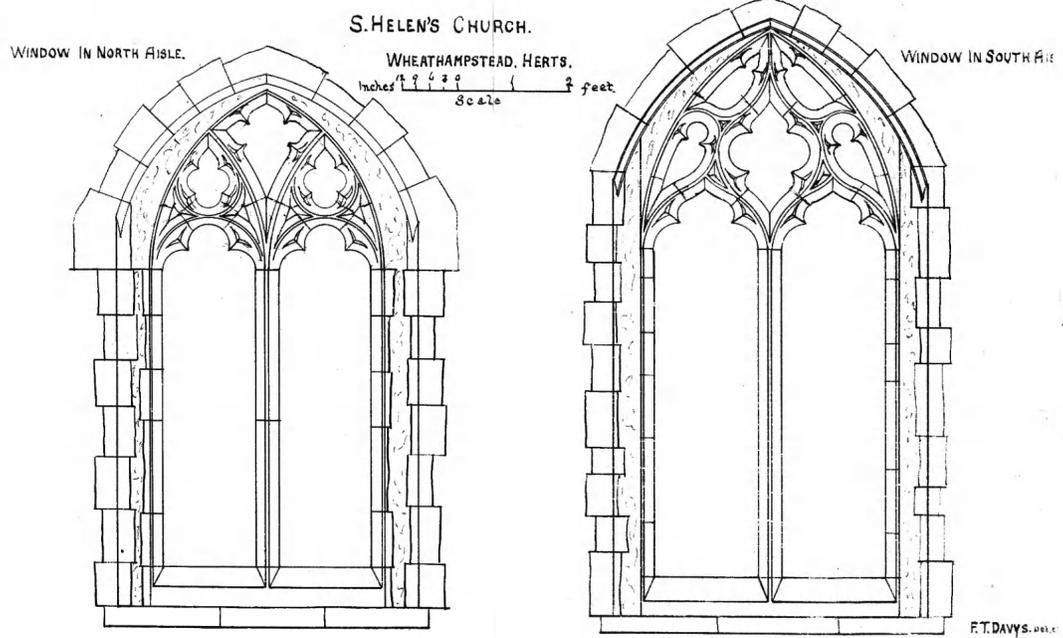
I have troubled you with these passages of ancient and modern local Church history, as the time may come when, recent transactions being forgotten, they may be valuable; but we must now come to the Church in which so many Rectors have officiated, and trace its history so far as we can. The endowments may date, as I have suggested, from Edward the Confessor's time, but there was, in all probability, a Church and a parish priest here before that King's reign. A tradition I have referred to in some previous notes on portions of this Church, leads us to suppose that King John, from the top of the Church tower here, reviewed his troops as they crossed the Lea in two divisions to fight with the followers of the Barons. The tower on which the King stood was the predecessor of the present tower, and the foundations of the eastern apse of the chancel to which it belonged were discovered, as I pointed out last year, when we were making a tunnel under the chancel floor for the trackers of our divided organ. We get thus the eastern termination of a Saxon Church. We have long seen and noted with much interest the rough arch at the end of the south transept, which, if the late Dean Stanley's suggestion, "that it is bad enough for Edward the Confessor's work," be accepted, as we have always considered that it ought to be, we get the southern termination of the same ancient Church, which is thus seen to be a cross Church with a central tower, eastern apse, and transepts of considerable length. Whether the transepts here had altars in apsidal projections or simply placed along the eastern walls we cannot now determine, but I incline to the latter arrangement as no signs of apsidal chapels were found when the walls were laid bare during the recent restorations. I must not, however, pass from this interesting question of the southern limits of the Saxon Church without mentioning that Mr. John

Oldrid Scott has suggested that the rough doorway we see might be "too bad" even for Edward the Confessor or those before him, and that it might be simply a "workman's arch" roughly constructed to give easier access to the interior while some later works were proceeding, and put in simply for convenience and meant to be filled up afterwards. I cannot quite follow this theory however, for I cannot remember to have seen other authentic examples of the kind, although I am told they are not uncommon.

Proceeding, however, to what we know to be Saxon foundations we have found that the present north wall of the chancel still rests on them, and we shall find as we might expect from coeval examples that the first change in the Saxon plan would be the enlargement and improvement of the chancel. This was done by throwing down the eastern apse, and extending and carrying out square the eastern sacarium, and widening the structure towards the south. The earlier tower being still standing, a wide splay had to be made to bring the new wall up to the older tower. No record exists, as far as I can learn, when this great change which led to the re-construction of the whole building was accomplished, but the fact that the known list of Rectors begins with John de Dyham in 1238, as with a name which marks a special period in the ecclesiastical history of the parish, together with the accordance of the details of the new work with other examples of the graceful lancet style then prevalent, would lead to the conclusion that to this Rector we must attribute the commencement of the work which now so largely surrounds us.

The incumbencies of Simon de Jarwell and Richard de Wic bring us down to 1278, when a remarkable Rector succeeded in the person of John de Leycester. With this ecclesiastic we reach the domain of history, for it is recorded that he claimed and was allowed those manorial rights which his predecessors and successors have enjoyed, in opposition probably to the encroachment upon them of the claims of the Abbot of Westminster. Mr. Cussans considers that this *John de Leycester*, or *Lea Castle*, was what the late Bishop Wilberforce used to humorously describe as a "squarson," a combination of squire and parson, and that while holding the rectory he chiefly resided at the castle, to





the site of which, now occupied by a venerable farmhouse, I shall hope shortly to conduct you. But John de Leycester was not only a good example of the Church militant, he was also an excellent man of business in the more ordinary works of his calling, for we find from records at Lincoln that in the month of May in the year 1290 he obtained the means of finishing the works, which had probably been proceeding here, in the completion of the tower which we now see. He did this by securing an indulgence from Bishop Oliver Sutton of Lincoln, in the behalf of all those who should aid in the completion of the campanile at Wheathampstead. We thus get a valuable fixed date (hard to obtain in the case of parish churches) from which we may calculate the ages of the work here before and after this time.

With this guide before us we may well examine the structure as we see it now. To aid us in this I place a plan before you showing the different architectural periods of construction, as far as we are able to trace them.\* First we shall see the lines of the original Saxon Church, extended by the new chancel and surmounted by the tower of 1290. We have good reason for supposing that the transepts of the Saxon Church were left unaltered as to plan during these alterations, and that the north wall of the Saxon nave was left standing for a time, the south aisle with its piers and arches taking precedence of the other aisle and its arches to the north. The present windows of the south aisle, one Perpendicular and two Decorated,† would thus be insertions in an Early English wall, while to the Decorated period also we must assign the south porch. The north aisle contains its original windows of early Decorated work‡ and a "founder's arch" of the same period. But the most prominent features of the present Church are of that period when the Decorated style was at its best, and at this time the *Macri* family appear to have been resident at *Macri End* House, and to the skill and care of some members of this most ecclesiastically-minded family we may well attribute works, of which the most beautiful are to be found in their own chantry. The general character of the Church has indeed been so changed by insertions of rich Decorated work in the transepts, and walls of the chancel, as to make a super-

\* See Illustration.

† See Illustration.

‡ See Illustration.

ficial observer attribute the structure generally to that period instead of to the earlier date to which I have referred. As regards details of windows, few churches in the county have so much to show from the exquisite mouldings of the eastern and north-eastern lancets, down to the late Decorated work of the eastern window of the Brocket Chapel, with its remarkably beautiful tracery, repeated in form in the north window of the chancel, though that was probably the first in construction.\* The font, the high altar piscina, on both of which the leopard's head of the Macri's is apparently to be traced, as it more distinctly can be seen in the north transept reredos†, and the glass of the window above it, doubtless formed part of works done with the help of this generous and important family.

I am able in publishing this paper to add some illustrations, by my son's pencil, of the valuable "Decorated" window tracery, which this Church possesses. The richest, and probably the latest, example is that to which I have just referred. This was the altar window of the "Brockett" transept, and space is left for a rich reredos, now destroyed, though marks of its canopy-work can indistinctly be traced. Beside it, in the adjoining wall of the south transept, is a remarkably ornamented piscina.

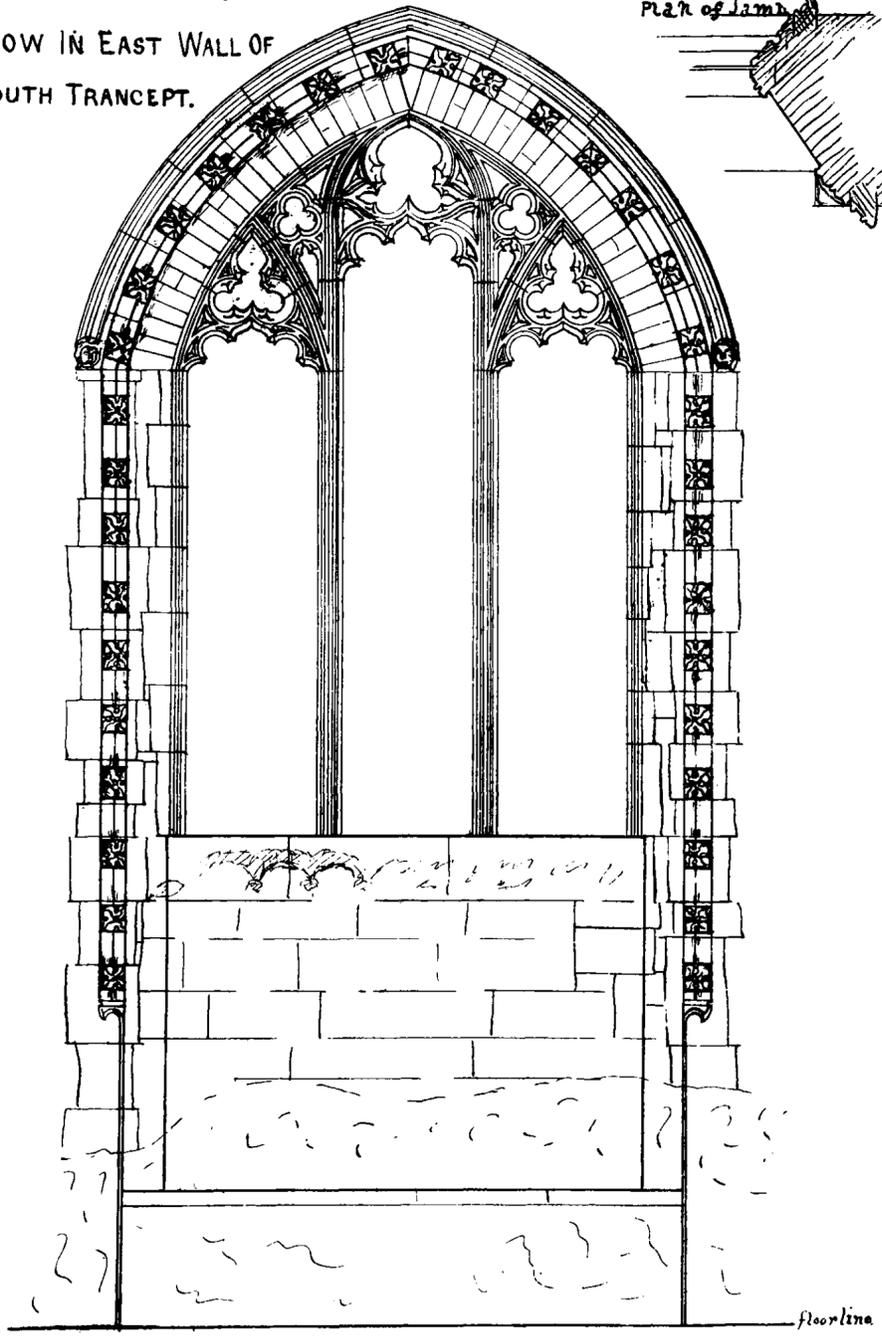
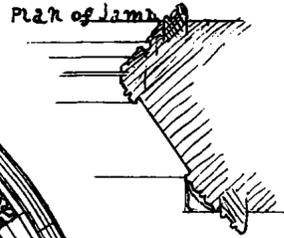
I think the fact of the Macri Leopard's head having been discovered in the vaulting boss of the exquisite piscina at the high altar, leads to the conclusion that the window, in the jamb of which it is so skilfully arranged, is a "Macri" window, and that its two companions in the south wall were their work.

We illustrate two of these remarkable windows in detail, the easternmost drawn from the interior, to show the arrangement of the piscina, credence, and sedilia‡; the westernmost drawn from the outside, to show the licescope§ below it. It will be observed that the westernmost window contains a Cross in its upper tracery; and in the openings here we found some stained glass, which I hope soon to be able to restore and replace,—among the fragments being the figure of the pelican feeding her young with blood from her own breast, a Christian symbol in which the Macri family may have delighted even before the time of their celebrated

\* See Illustration. † See Illustration in Transactions of 1885.

‡ See Illustration. § See Illustration.

S. HELEN'S CHURCH  
WHEATHAMPSTEAD HERTS  
WINDOW IN EAST WALL OF  
SOUTH TRANCEPT.



inches 12 9 6 3 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 feet  
SCALE



Abbot. I have heard it remarked that the Cruciform arrangement of the tracery seen here, and which is uncommon, may have been used to mark a "dedication" of the beautiful work seen in its connection.

Time fails me to speak of monuments and other works here, those of the Brockett family engaged our attention last year, while our priceless brasses of the father and mother of Abbot John, the Heyworths, and others, are well known. I must, however, before I conclude, say a word as to the condition in which we found the Church in 1859, which will be perhaps best explained by a drawing copied from a series made under the direction of Mr. Browning, before that careful and conservative architect touched the Church.\* My late friend and myself had for our object the exact repair and reproduction of every feature of the ancient structure, as far as we could discover it, and we had but little recourse to the spirit of invention, for the good spirit of the original architects could, notwithstanding nearly every stage of material decay, be traced. Some things, however, were lost, the nave and chancel roofs hopelessly, the leaden spire partially, the north porch entirely, save its inner door; the western window, a poor "Perpendicular" insertion, was found to be worked on the old "Decorated" stones turned round, which showed us that, while adopting a well-known form of tracery in our new window, we were happily reproducing that which had been there before. In the north porch we copied the outer door from a Northamptonshire example, which seemed appropriate. With these exceptions we had all the ancient models before us, many of which were capable of repair and preservation. With regard to the spire, our greatest anxiety, the Corbel table below, and the leaden slope from it, and a large part of the upper octagonal portion remained, the balustrading over the *Edward I. Bucklehead Corbel table of John de Leycestre*, was the work of a village carpenter, the square above was found to be not of much greater antiquity; and so, by a careful study of mortices and the remains of the ancient timbering, we were able to construct the spire which we now see, and which, in the late learned Professor Willis' view, to whom our models were submitted, was the proper reproduction of that which had been before.

\* See Illustration.

Our window tracery also engaged our anxious attention. The eastern window of the south transept was fortunately fairly perfect, and could be repaired as it stood. The same was the case with the eastern window of the north transept; and generally with the windows of the north and south nave aisles, but the three fine windows on the south side of the chancel had so terribly perished on the outside that we were obliged to take them out, lay them on their backs on the grass, and carefully piece on new mouldings, &c., where the old had been destroyed; this was an expensive and anxious process, but we are rewarded by the assurance that we have some two-thirds of the old work of our windows *in situ*, with all its authority, instead of modern copies of no antiquarian value. The great reticulated windows at the north and south ends of the transepts had to be similarly treated, but that to the north had been so grievously broken, both inside and out, by a settlement of apparently early date, that its tracery had to be almost entirely renewed, and the wall which contained it to be re-built.

With regard to internal fittings, but few traces were left, but just enough to help us. From beneath some high pews the original pattern of the nave seats was discovered; beneath the west gallery fragments of the chancel stalls were found. With these helps and some valuable suggestions from the stalls in the ancient Collegiate Church at Irthlingborough, Northamptonshire, the present chancel was arranged. Work brought from the chapel at Lamer, when removed by Sir Benet Garrard a century before, and some other renaissance work from the gallery and other parts, was arranged into suitable seats, low screen-work, and fittings in the transepts; the pulpit of similar character being re-constructed upon a stone basement. Our stained glass, with the exception of that in the tracery of the eastern window of the north transept, is of necessity new. The eastern triplet was filled in 1866 with the present very effective glass by the late Mr. Hughes, of the well-known firm of Ward and Hughes, of Fryth Street, London, through the liberality of Mrs. Drake Garrard, of Lamer. The same artist also re-arranged and restored, as far as practicable, the ancient fragments in the tracery of the north transept eastern window, filling the lights at the same time with very simple but beautiful quarries and

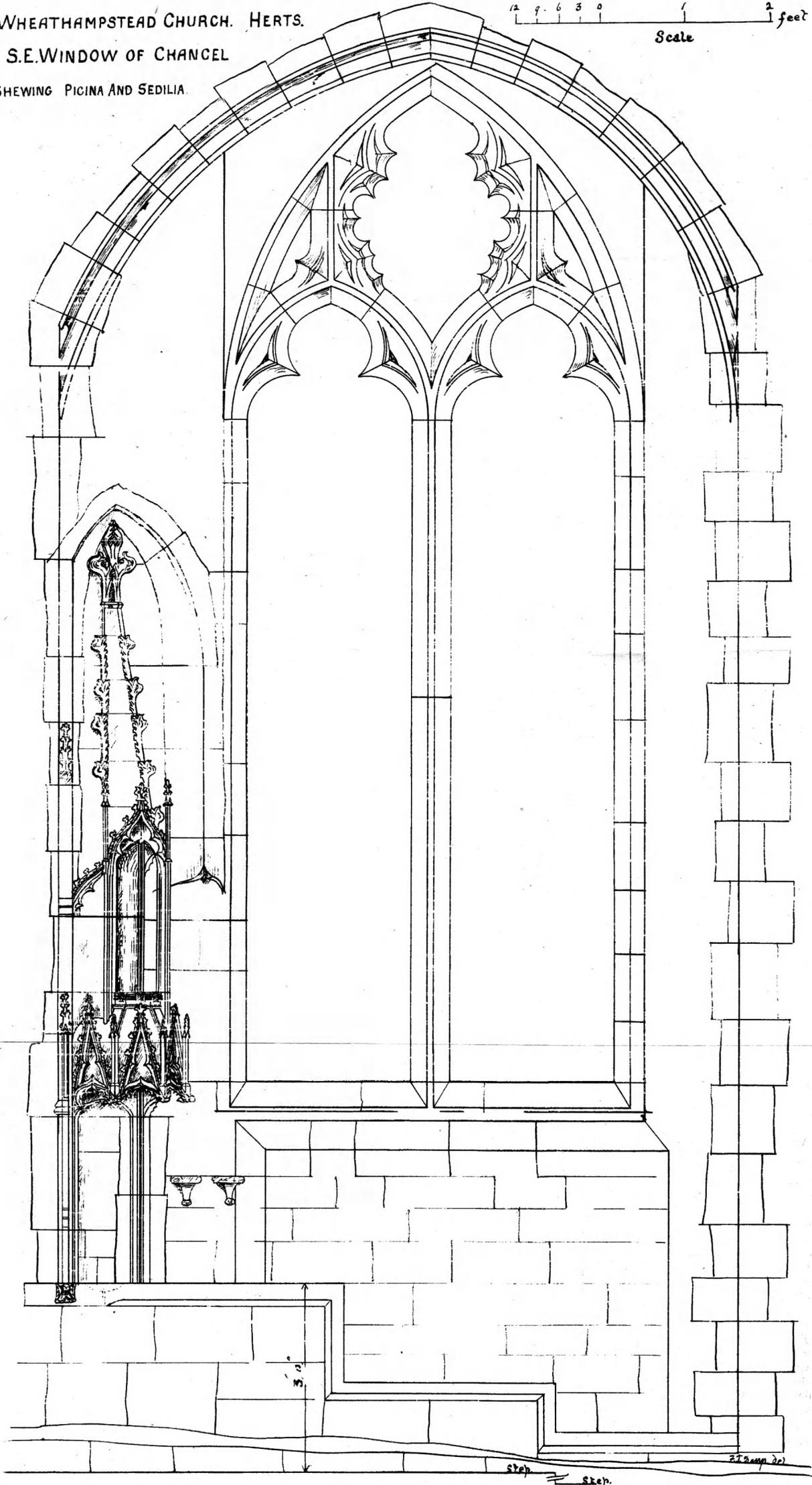


WHEATHAMPSTEAD CHURCH. HERTS.

S.E. WINDOW OF CHANCEL

SHEWING PICINA AND SEDILIA.

12 9 6 3 0 1 2 feet  
Scale



bordering. The larger windows in the north and south transepts are also from the studio of Messrs. Ward and Hughes; that on the south being the first, and presented by their family as a memorial to the late Chancellor and Mrs. Pretyman, and containing, by desire, in its lights the history of Joseph. The glass in the northern window was recently given by Mrs. Drake Garrard as a memorial to her good husband: it is a window of unusual size, and appropriately treats with much breadth the great subject of our Lord's Resurrection. The west window of the nave, and a window in the south aisle are the work of Messrs. Heaton, Butler, and Baines, of London, and are memorial windows to members of the family of Fenwick, late of High Firs in this parish. The last addition to our stained glass was the filling the beautiful south sanctuary window, of which the large drawing is given.\* Great pains have been taken by Mr. Curtis, the present principal artist of the firm of Ward and Hughes, with this window, which was presented by Mrs. House, of Wheathampstead Grove, as a memorial to her late husband and the various members of the House family who rest near it in the churchyard. This window seems to demand here a few words of description, for it is a careful endeavour to reproduce ancient colour and arrangement in the representations of the Miracles of the multiplying of the loaves and the turning of water into wine, while making the pictorial teaching perfectly legible and plain to the observer, a duty not always sufficiently present, as I think, to the minds of ecclesiastical artists. The Consecration of the loaves by our Saviour aptly fills the beautifully double-cusped tracery of the window, while the lights contain, under canopies, four groups, the two highest representing the Distribution by the Apostles, and the Collection of the fragments, each explained by a text below; those underneath having reference to the Miracle at Cana in Galilee, and each telling their story. The canopies here were suggested by a beautiful fragment in the north transept, and the bordering by some remains of glass in windows in the neighbourhood believed to have been the work of Abbot John of Wheathampstead. I am here mixing modern with ancient history, but I have felt that no description of our Church would be complete without it. Besides our windows, the only

\* See Illustration.

colour we have ventured upon is our chancel roof, our eastern wall, and our organ, all the work of the late Mr. Lee, formerly of Lutterworth, and subsequently of the firm of Best and Lee, Manchester. The south block of the organ, however, having been added after the lamented death of this talented artist, was admirably copied from the work on the other side by an artist of Wheathampstead, Mr. George Clark, by whom also the interesting picture, hung now in the south transept, was restored through the liberality of the late Mrs. Olive.

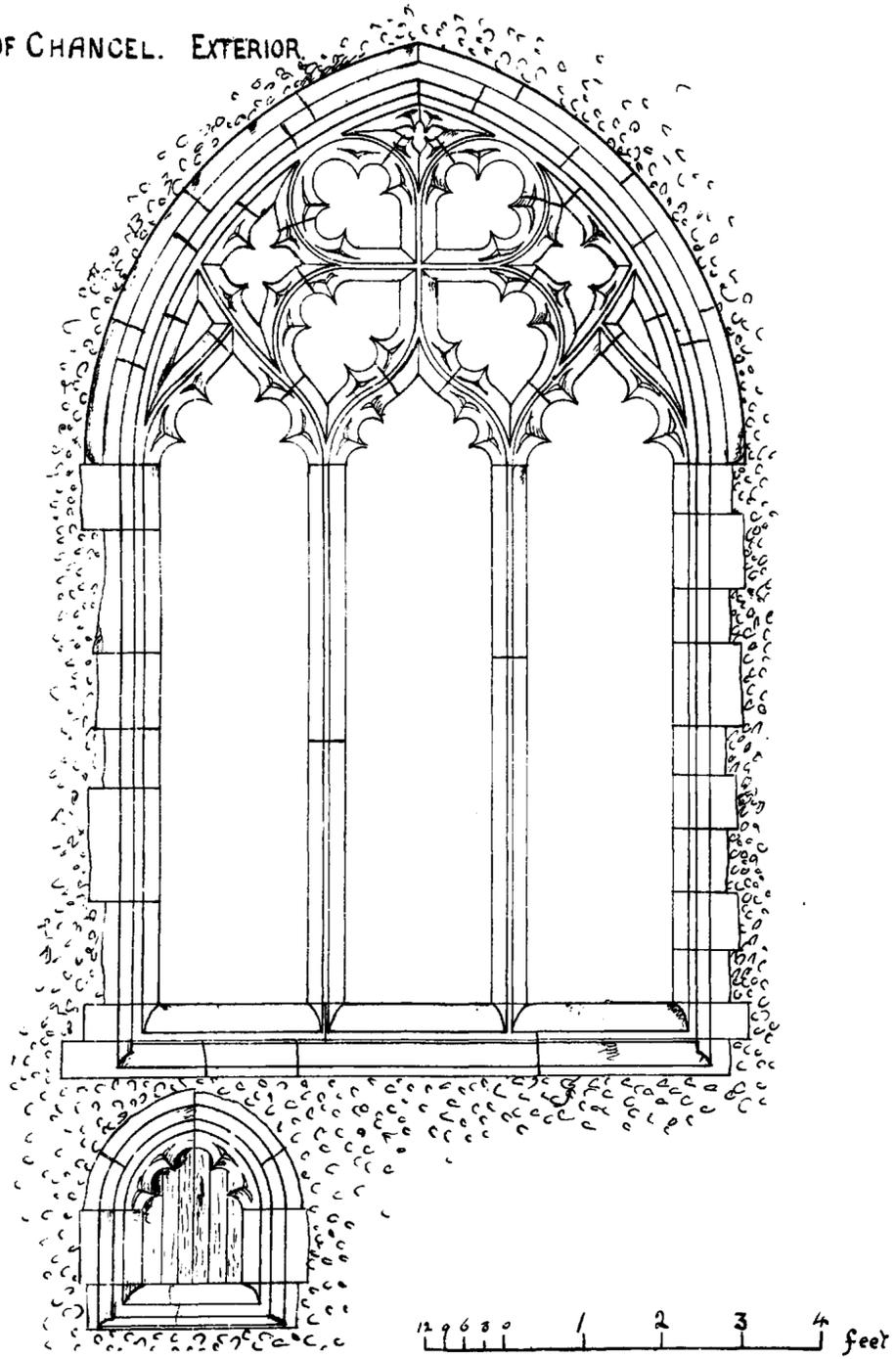
And now I must thank you for having accepted what I can only call a rough sketch of a large subject, for we have quite enough in the history of this ancient Church and ecclesiastical parish to fill a volume. This sketch, however, may be not without some use in recording facts, which, when the present generation has passed away, may be forgotten, unless the *vox scripta* helps them to be remembered.

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S. HELEN'S CHURCH. WHEATHAMPSTEAD.

WINDOW IN SOUTH WALL

OF CHANCEL. EXTERIOR.



F.T. Davys. del.