

St. Mary's* Church, Hitchin.

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The Fabric of the Church.

In Bishop D'Alderby's Memoranda (now in the Bishop's Registry at Lincoln) mention is made of Hitchin Church as newly built. John de Alderby ruled the diocese, from 1300 to 1319, well, and was esteemed a saint; the note as to Hitchin is under 1302. The portions of the present church which existed then are the west tower and the ground-story arcades on the north and south of the nave. This appears to be the only contemporary mention of the church found as yet.

The tower is large in plan, with sturdy walls, 4ft. 6in. thick, and bold buttresses, 3ft. 3in. on the face and 7ft. 6in. projection. Its height is inconsiderable. Salmon made the best case he could for this, stating that "as the town stands in a bottom with Hills about it, if the Steeple had been high, it would not have been seen at a distance." The west doorway was good, with four columns in the jamb, carved capitals, and a richly moulded arch; possibly the profiles might be recovered; at present it is liberally patched, and ornamental features constructed, with cement. A window in the north wall, the tower arch, and the doorway enable us to date the tower in the first quarter of the 13th century, and to regard it as part of an earlier and, no doubt, smaller building than the present church; perhaps an aisleless building.

The nave arcades are probably the only remaining portions of the nave and chancel erected in the 13th century. The arcade is of pleasing, simple character. The extreme irregularity of the spacing of the piers on the north and south sides, although the piers and arches resemble each other so closely, should be noticed. Having the arcade, we know that the nave was aisled; the aisles very likely narrow in comparison with those now existing. The total width of nave and aisles as at present is only 6ft. 6in. less than at St. Albans Abbey. We may feel pretty sure that there was a chancel; possibly, of a little earlier date than the existing nave arcade—the nave of the original church being the last portion to be taken down.

* As to the change from the dedication to St. Andrew, see note on page 70.

The existing chancel, with aisles extending the whole length, having been added, as also the aisles of the nave, the porches, and the clerestories, the fabric had obtained its present form about the middle of the 15th century. The arcade on the south side of the chancel has arches of the same section, but piers of a different section, from those on the north side. The piers on the north have the lozenge shape very marked, being 2ft. 10in. from north to south, and 1ft. 11in. from east to west; on that side little face shafts support the hood moulds only, as at Lavenham and at Sherborne, for instance; not of course that the spirit of the majestic work at the Dorsetshire abbey and that of the work at Hitchin have much in common. There is a good illustration in this chancel of the long-striven-for fitting of arch moulds to caps; the arch mouldings in the chancel stand on the brims of the capitals, contrasting with the nave capitals where a space is left unoccupied.

The windows are of considerable size in themselves, and there is not very much wall between them. The strong desire to increase the number of windows is shown in both the aisles of the nave and those of the chancel. In the space occupied by the two easternmost bays of the nave arcade there are three large three-light windows in the aisle walls, north and south; and the spacing of the four bays of the chancel is quite disregarded in the aisles, where five windows, each of three lights, occupy a large portion of the length of the wall. The spacing of the roof in the north aisle follows the spacing of the windows, and consequently curious disregard of the arcade is shown in many ways.

The exterior of the church is necessarily much injured by the coating of stucco, which greatly increases, by its dull uniformity of colour and surface, the effect of monotony, which the form of the building, under any conditions of colour and surface, would bring about. Uniform length, width, and height—a low clerestory scarcely forcing itself into view over the tall and wide aisles; buttresses and windows of very similar forms throughout: these make the general effect poor in comparison with that of buildings of less size and pretension, possessing play of outline and greater variety of detail.

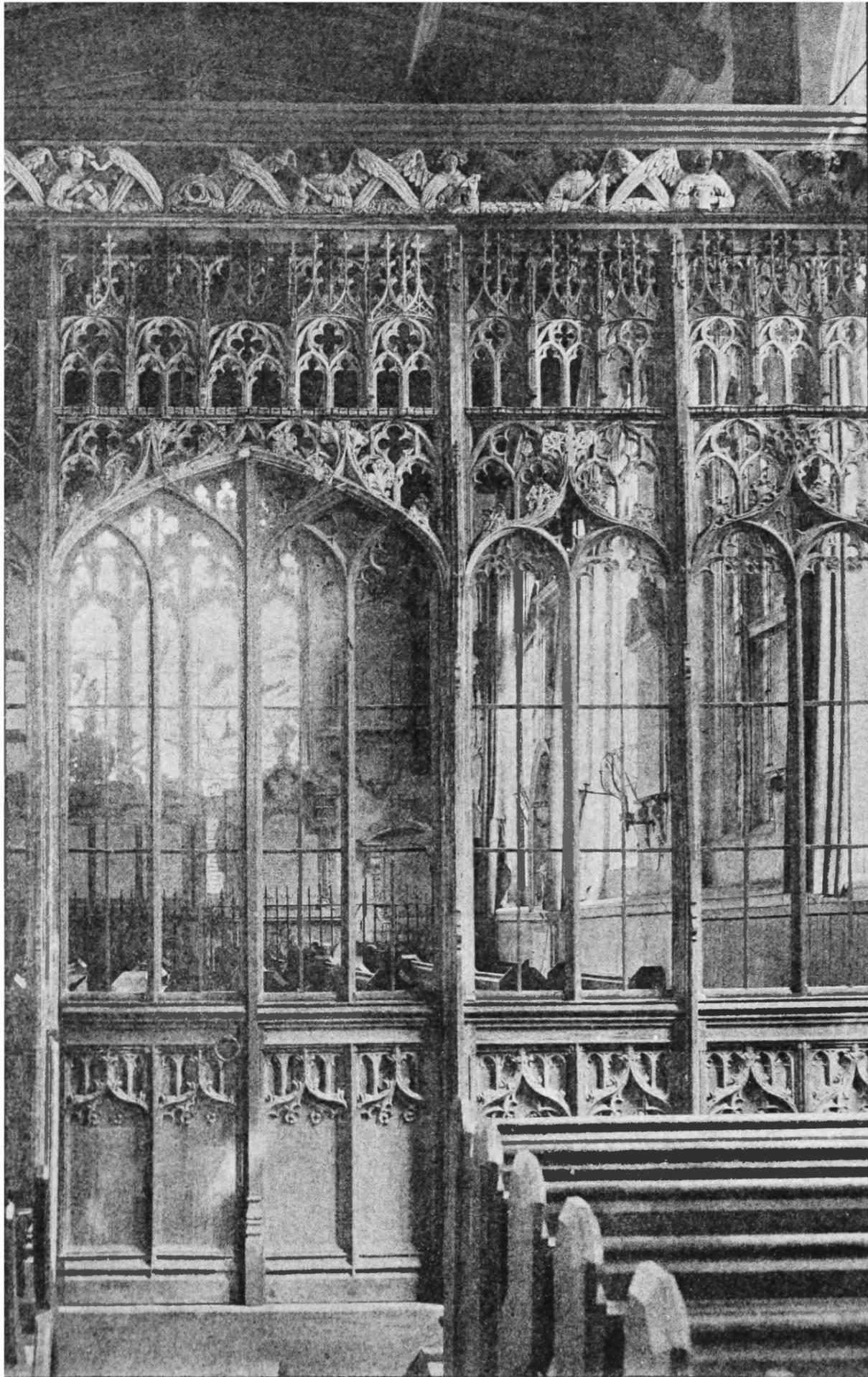
Roofs and Fittings of the Church.

A descriptive catalogue of the fittings would furnish texts for many little treatises, as the church is wonderfully rich in excellent examples.

Roofs.—The chancel roof is new internally ; but the hipped roof has been left above,—the roof which was put up by the Duke of Bedford in 1770, when he ceiled the church. He was the lessee of the Manor of the Rectory under Trinity College. The nave roof is mainly the old roof,—only one main beam was renewed. The ceiling and other parts seen from the floor of the church are new. The roof of the south aisle of the chancel is mainly new, but on the old lines, and with many old pieces reused. The aisles, especially the north aisles of the nave and chancel, have most noteworthy old work. The vigorous design of the five ornamented divisions, the eastern portion, of the north aisle of the nave, would be remarkable anywhere. For the carving and other decorations the roofs merit most careful study.

Screens.—Of the rood screen, and of the old screens which probably filled the easternmost arches of the chancel arcade, nothing remains, but there is still a large quantity of screen work in the church. The easternmost screen on the south side of the chancel had, apparently, canopy work on the chancel side, for there are columns with capitals and the backs to the panels are not finished as on the other side. The altar stood one bay from the east wall, and it has been suggested that the screen was the back of the sedilia. The screen at the east end of the south aisle of the nave does not surpass some of the other work in excellence of design,—some of the work in the chancel is perfect in its way,—but in size and sumptuousness it stands first. The arched forms are crocketed, there are canopies in the upper arcade, and the cornice has angels in a large hollow. An inspection of some illustrations of rood screens, which I have brought with me, from Norfolk, Suffolk, Somersetshire, &c., will bear out the statement that the Hitchin screens take a good place among the best that have been left to us.

[The accompanying illustrations of the screens at the ends of the north and south aisles have been reproduced by Messrs. Sprague & Co., from excellent photographs



ST MARY'S CHURCH, HITCHIN
SCREEN IN SOUTH AISLE OF NAVE.

THE PHOTOGRAPH BY SPRAGUE & CO LONDON

taken by Mr. T. B. Latchmore, photographer, of Blandstreet, Hitchin.]

Seats.—Two well-moulded seats, with buttressed and traceried fronts, remain intact, and are placed at the west of the chancel aisles. Canon Hensley has called my attention especially to these, as being two remaining out of a large number. Bits of others were in the church in his time.

Font.—The sculptures on the font have been rudely handled. These are twelve figures, one for each of the sides, placed between buttresses and under canopies. Now the drapery is their only charm, for the faces have been broken off, and the brackets under the springings of the canopies have also been destroyed. It is still an interesting example of 14th century work.

Pulpit.—The general form, traceried panels, and the mouldings of the oak pulpit are of much excellence. The small size seems the only defect of this elegant work, which was executed in the last half of the 14th century.

Brasses.—The 15th century furnished the best of the brasses; the earliest of them was laid on the floor, some time after the church had taken the general form which we see to-day. Many are said to have been stolen in 1827 during the alterations. Several are noteworthy:—1452: a merchant of the Staple of Calais, whose name has been cut from the brass, and whose wife's wish that the date of her death should appear also, was not attended to, blank spaces being left for day, month, and year. 1453-1474: the brass of John Sperehawk, D.D., Canon of Wells, Vicar of this church, is not now to be found. Complete accounts of it, and a wood-cut of the (headless) figure, however exist. After the fashion of his own and other times he was pleased with playing upon words, and had a hawk perched on a spear upon his brass. 1490: a man and wife in shrouds. 1498: James Hert, another Vicar of the church, was not satisfied without a display of hearts; one remains,—a pierced heart from which five drops of blood are issuing. There are others of less interest, and the matrices of several are to be seen in slabs.

Figures, on window sill in north aisle of the nave. Our Hon. Secretary, the Rev. H. Fowler, has devoted himself to the identification of the mailed figure, and will read a paper as to that effigy, which is one of the

rare treasures of the church. Mr. Fowler considers that it was probably Bernard de Baliol, who possessed the manor of *Hicche*, and died in the latter half of the 12th century.*

Epitaphs.—The Kendale slab in the chancel aisle (probably of 1330), upon which the little brass plate in memory of William Pulter (died 1549) has been fixed, has been moralized upon. [There was in 1535 when the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was prepared, a William Pulter, bailiff of Hitchin, who was entered as entitled to a fee of £2 by the year. This was probably the William Pulter whose relatives seem to have taken a lesson from the cuckoo.] The next slab westward commemorated a Pulter, but in 1756 John Ewerdin was named upon it, and in 1789 Elizabeth Ewerdin: an imitation, more than two centuries after, of the conduct of the Pulters towards Robert de Kendale. The Abbot (1481) inscription, not here now, which mentions gifts to the church; the Edward Docwra (died 1610) inscription on the north wall of the chancel aisle, which records that he lived in the Brotherhood house; the whimsical Kemp (1654) and Papworth (1707) inscriptions,—all deserve to be noted,—also the name of Chapman, apropos of George Chapman (died 1634), who was probably a native of Hitchin, and certainly lived here for a time in mature life. His house is said to have been on the west side at the north end of Tilehouse-street. Canon Hensley informs me that some buildings next to Mr. Francis Lucas's stable-yard are shown as having belonged to it.

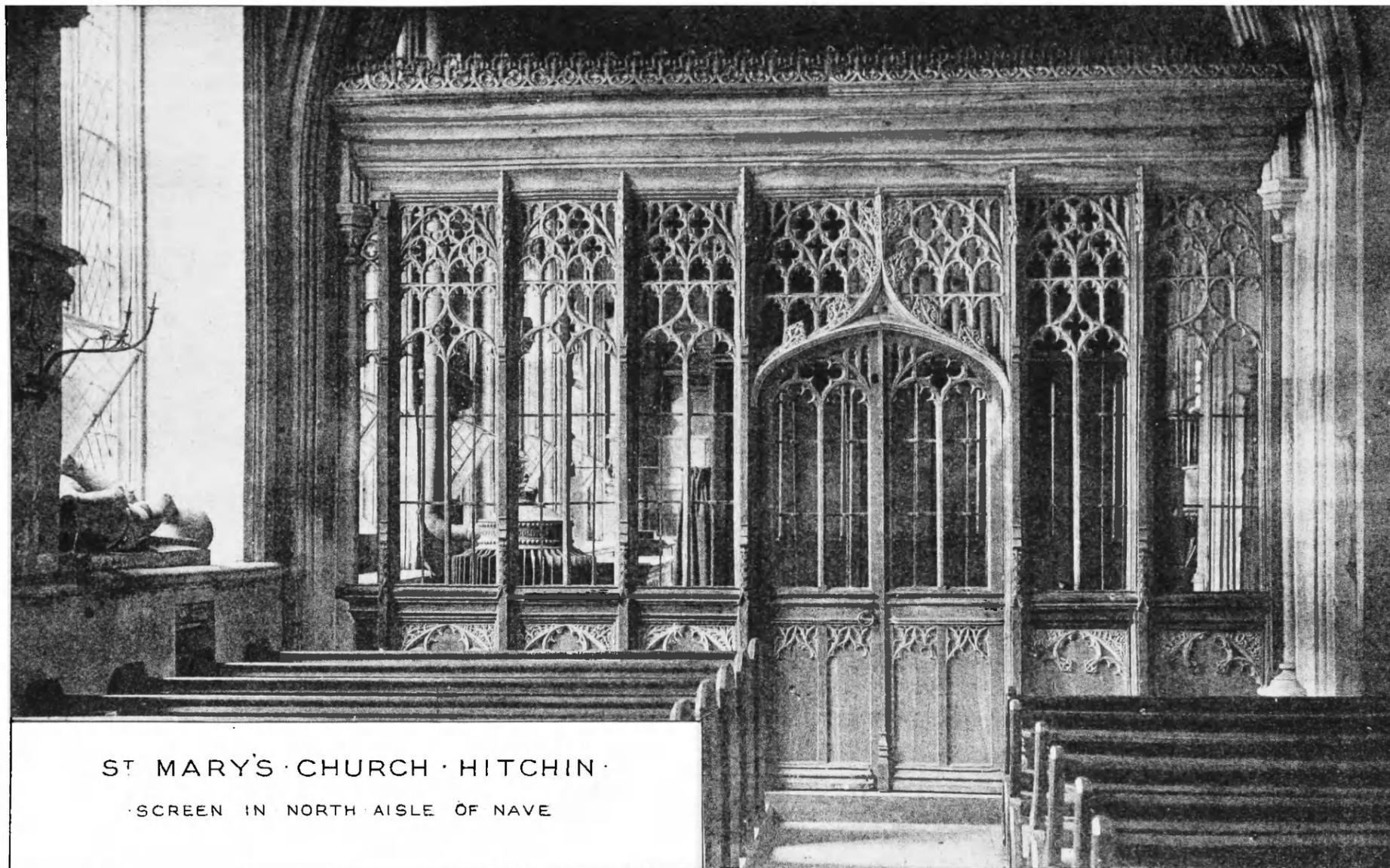
Old Glass.—Some fragments exist in the east window of the north aisle of the chancel. There are some small graceful heads. Salmon (1728) described several windows as existing in his time.

Rubens Painting; a large oil painting, representing the Adoration of the Magi, now placed over the north door of the nave, was given by John Radcliffe in 1774.

Recent Work at the Church.

Galleries were taken down, and other alterations made in 1827. Canon Hensley, who has been Vicar here for nearly thirty years, must look with much satisfaction upon the work which he has steadily promoted

* The paper was printed in the Society's Transactions for 1885, pp. 26—30.



ST MARY'S · CHURCH · HITCHIN ·

· SCREEN IN NORTH AISLE OF NAVE

1914 PHOTO. SPRAGUE & CO. LONDON

and seen carried out. Defective roofs, damp, damaged stonework, big and ugly pews have been dealt with. The first part was done in 1858, and other sections in 1860-61, 1863-65, and 1877-79; the whole involving an outlay of £6,500. About one-fourth of this amount was contributed by Trinity College, Cambridge,—the Master and Fellows being the patrons of the living,—for chancel roof, seats, screens, stonework of chancel piers and windows. “The chancel was repaired and beautified some time in the last century,” writes Sir Arthur Blomfield, the architect who designed and superintended the recent works in the chancel, “and a new roof and flat plaster ceiling were put. My work was altering the plaster ceiling and the treatment of roof which now appears, the restoration of the windows, and the new reredos.” The rest of the restoration was by Sir G. G. Scott (died 27th March, 1878), under whose care the church was gradually fitted with new oak benches, the stonework repaired, the tower thrown open and restored, and the roofs restored. Painted glass was put in the east and clerestory windows in 1879. The three windows at the west end and the St. Stephen window in the south aisle of the chancel were special gifts by members of the Hawkins family. Mr. E. J. Poynter, R.A. (“Israel in Egypt,” “Atalanta’s Race,” “Visit of Venus to Æsculapius,” &c.) designed the St. Stephen window. The organ, including the water bellows, &c., has cost about £1,500; and has also been treated as an independent matter. These large tasks having been accomplished, and accomplished so well—everything worth preserving having been kept and mended only when absolutely necessary, and new work added of a suitable kind;—it is quite possible that there may be little disposition to deal with the outside of the church, and with needs apparently not so pressing. All the stonework of the south porch—a two-storied vaulted structure of extreme beauty—is crumbling into shapelessness, even in its sheltered interior. The original forms have apparently been lost for a long time on the exterior, as some sixty years ago patching up with cement was undertaken with determination. Solid protection was obtained, but the spirit of the architecture disappeared in the process. The solidification at the west door probably took place at the same time,

certainly with the same result. A coat of stucco, applied smoothly, envelopes all the walls of the church and tower.

Note referred to on page 64.

Change of Dedication of the Church.

In the 12th century the church was described as "The Church of St. Andrew, of Hiche." The dedication is at present to St. Mary, but the date of, and reasons for, the change are not known. There was an important guild of St. Mary, which, some suppose, may have led to the change. Canon Hensley states that the "Fraternity or Guild called Our Lady Guild" is described in Chantry Certificates, Co. Hertford, Roll 20, No. 72,—as being "founded to find a priest for ever, by license of King Edward the 4th. . . . The said Fraternity is founded within the town of Hitchin, which is a great parish of people to the number of 1000 and above of houseling people. And also it is a great thoroughfare. And there is only the curate, besides this Fraternity priest."

A translation of the will made Feb. 19, 1457, by "Alice Pulter, of Hitchin, widow, in the diocese of Lincoln," has been published by Canon Hensley,—on account of the interesting references to the parish church in it. The change of dedication was made after 1457, for directions were given in the will as to burial in the chancel of the parish church of St. Andrew, of Hitchin: 40 shillings being left "to the High Altar of St. Andrew for tithes and offerings forgotten or withheld, and for my interment." Other bequests gave the names of parts of the church. A noble (6s. 8d.) was bequeathed "to the Altar of the B.V. Mary (for prayers for my soul) on the south part of the same church for necessary repairs for the same altar." The same sum (one noble) was bequeathed "to the Altar of the B.V. Mary and the Holy Trinity in the north part of the same church." Other parts of the church were also remembered in the will: "Item—I will that my Lady-cup of silver and gilt be put on sale, and that the money accruing to me be distributed in two parts, of which I desire that one part be disposed for one woven hanging to serve for the Chancel of the Church of St. Andrew, in Hitchin aforesaid, as long as it will last. And I will that the other part be disposed in making pictures upon the roof of the chancel aforesaid and upon the new roof of the new aisle in the church aforesaid." We are thus enabled to assign an approximate date to the aisle roofs from documentary evidence.

NOTE.—In the course of the Excursion of June 4th, 1885, Hitchin Church was visited by the Society. The papers on the church did not appear in the Society's Transactions for 1885, as the MS. was borrowed and mislaid by the borrower. (Note on page 25 of Transactions, 1885.) As the papers have since been printed, I make no objection to their being reprinted, although I should have preferred to have carefully revised the whole, at leisure, when the subject was still fresh in memory. S.F.C.