
Notes on St. Ippolyts Church and Parish, Herts.

BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS.

The History of this Church and Parish is one of considerable interest. The Parish originally was included within the boundaries of the very extensive parish of Hitchin, and the Abbess of Elnestow or Elstow in the county of Bedford was Patron and Rector of both Churches before the Dissolution of the Monasteries.

After the Dissolution of Elstow, King Henry VIII. granted the Rectories and patronage of the Vicarages of both Hitchin and St. Ippolyts to the Master, Fellows, and Scholars of his newly-founded College of Trinity in Cambridge, with whom they still remain. We find also that on March 15th, 1685, the Vicarage was, on the petition of the Authorities of Trinity College to the Bishop of Lincoln, the then Diocesan, united with the neighbouring Vicarage of Great Wymondley, a union which still continues.

This Parish is called by its present name from the Patron Saint of its Church, St. Hippolytus. Authorities differ as to the individuality of the Saint. Norden, followed by Sir H. Chauncy, makes him to have been a great authority about horses, so much so that after his death and burial beneath the High Altar of this Church, those passing by the neighbouring high road were accustomed to bring their horses to his shrine to be tamed, or cured of any malady which they might have contracted, by the aid of a Priest kept constantly in attendance here. In reference to which story we can only add that such assistance, so near a great high way, must have proved very useful in those days, and would have been highly serviceable to the horses of not a few of us in more recent times.

Other authorities however, will not bestow their faith on this tradition. Salmon makes St. Hippolytus to have been a follower of Origen, and a Bishop who was martyred in the reign of Alexander Severus, and later writers seem to acquiesce in this view.

The former view as to the Saint here however seems more in accordance with the special and remarkable circumstances of such an uncommon dedication in the locality in which we find it, and there for the present I must leave the matter.

The site of the present Church is a fine one, placed as it is on the brow of a hill overlooking an extensive range of fine Hertfordshire scenery.

A Church must have occupied this site at a very early period, for we have traces here of, I think, pre-Norman work in the remains of a very ancient window on the south side of the nave, and in an angle of Roman bricks still visible between the east end of the present south aisle and the chancel. That Church was probably much

like examples still to be traced at Sandridge and S. Michaels, S. Albans, and would have consisted of a rectangular nave, lighted by windows placed high in the walls, such as we now see, and probably an Apsidal Chancel.* There is a strong probability too, that some parts of the wonderfully massive tower, with its curiously cut western arch, are coeval with this ancient work. The time came however when this Church needed enlargement, and this appears to have been accomplished by inserting about the end of the thirteenth century, pairs of pointed arches in the north and south walls of the older Church, and throwing out aisles.

We are all familiar with the transformation which the Norman nave of the Church of S. Albans underwent at the hands of the early English Architects, and with the remarkable pier at which this change is suspended.

Something of the same process seems to have been carried out here; the great thickness of the ancient walls being left in the piers we now see, though lightened and enriched by the details of the Pointed period. I would ask you to note the delicacy of the labels, and the remarkable Corbel heads which receive the arch mouldings. The Font appears to belong to the same period as these nave arcades, and is an excellent example of a font of that date.

The windows of the south aisle are, with a poor exception, Decorated; that at the east end being a very beautiful two-light deeply-recessed example. Beneath this was an altar, and we have its piscina on the south side. Near this is a remarkable effigy of a priest fully habited, under a rich sepulchral arch. No one seems to know, as far as I can gather, who this Ecclesiastic—evidently a man of much importance—can be.

The north aisle, both as to its present walls and windows, brings us to Perpendicular work; and we have here a fine Perpendicular porch of stone, through which, if the story of St. Hippolytus, to which I have alluded, be credited, the horses were led from the north street of the village to his shrine.

The porch on the south side—for this Church is rich in porches—is apparently of the same date; but here we

* An Apsidal Chancel, of great interest, still remains at the neighbouring Church of Great Wymondley; this, I unfortunately have not been able to visit at present.

have an interesting example of the employment of wood in its construction and ornamentation.

We have again a rood-screen of oak work of the same period, or I should rather say, the lower portion of it, for the existing door-way into the Rood gallery, shows that it must have risen higher than we now see.

I have already alluded to the massive tower at the west end of this Church, its details as we now see them are of Perpendicular date, but I think we must regard them as insertions in, or additions to, an earlier fabric

This Church was re-opened after a restoration on February 21st, 1878. From the account of the works, which has been kindly given me by the present Vicar, I have learnt that the north and south arcades were so much out of the perpendicular, that they had to be rebuilt—stone for stone. This was so carefully done—the very early window also being exactly replaced—that, if I had not been told, I should not have found it out.

The Architect employed did well also in copying, as I understand, the east window of the Church from that at Minsden Chapel in this neighbourhood, now destroyed—while the side windows are restorations of what were here before. A remarkable tie beam crosses this chancel, dividing the roof between the Sacrarium and the chancel; and we have below a good piscina. On the north wall is a brass, dated at 1599, and a new one reminds us of the sad loss of Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert Amos, in the illfated steamship London, on January 11th, 1866.

The roof of the nave, with its balustered tie-beams, is remarkable; it is not a restoration, I understand, of the old roof found hidden by a ceiling, which was but poor in its details.

And now, after a survey of the points of interest here which I have endeavoured to indicate, we must return to our carriages, finding, I trust, our horses vigorous for the further labours of the day by their visit to the Church of St. Hippolytus.