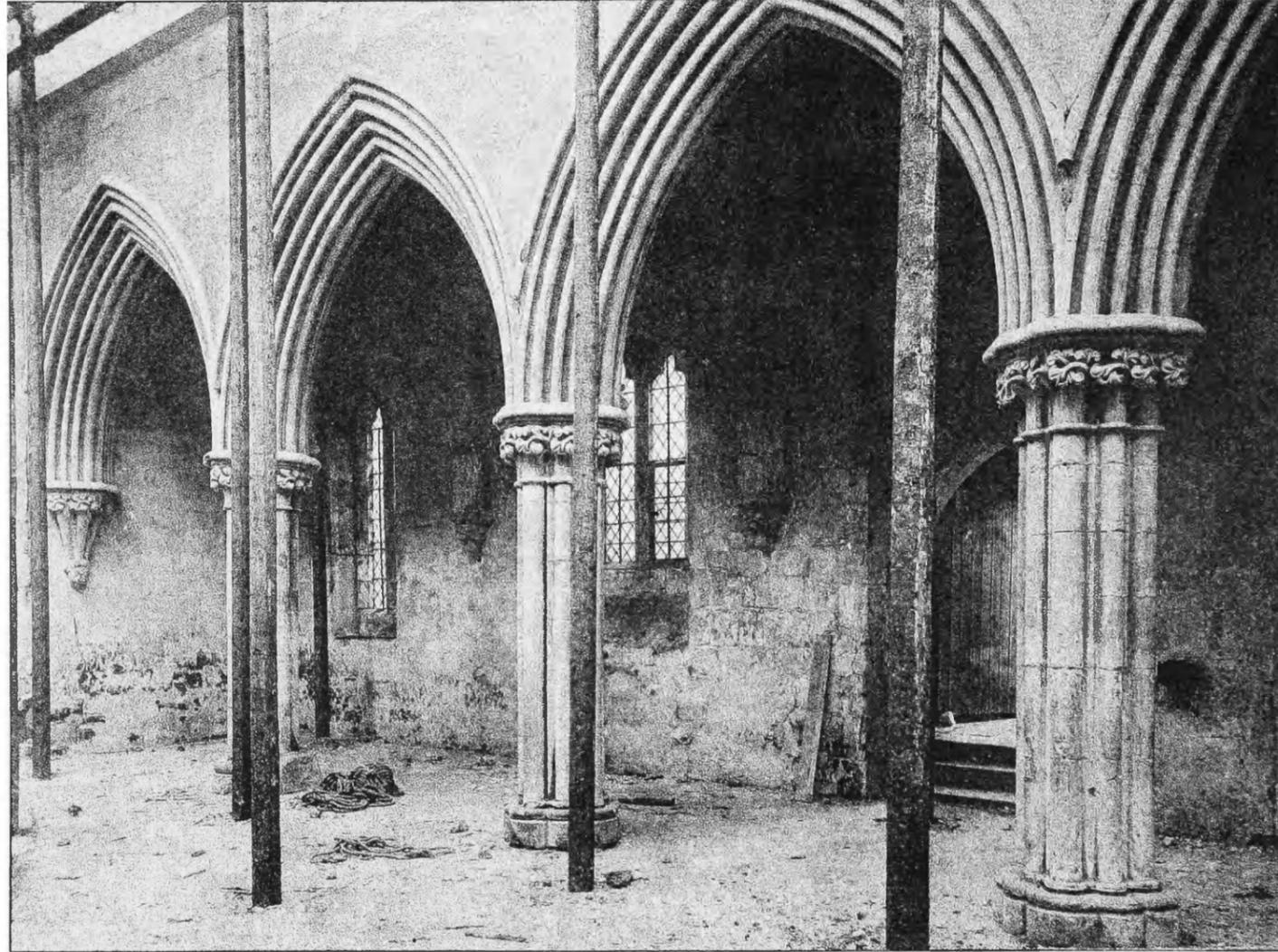


St. Mary's, Eaton Bray.

BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS, M.A.

Placed in a vale of singular beauty, reminding us from some aspects of a fertile plain in France, stands hidden among poplars, and in a kind of islet of rural foliage, one of the most beautiful examples to be found in our country of the best periods of the architecture of England. Few would look for such a church in such a now apparently depressed and straggling village, and the surprise is the greater, therefore, when such hidden beauties are discovered. But, alas, the structure upon which a wealth of skill and an abundance of money must have been spent in days gone by, is now but scarcely distinguishable from a ruin. We approach it, and we see, to our sorrow, the northern walls of an interesting chapel, and a remarkable aisle, only sustained by shores of timber, while the western tower, in which the remains of some of the finest blocks that the neighbouring stone mines of Totternhoe could produce are still visible, has had its western face removed to prevent a collapse, which it was feared might overwhelm the congregation. We have heard of late years very much said for and against the restoration of churches; those of us who have been engaged in such undertakings have had a storm of criticism to meet from objectors both in and out of the architectural profession, but I think that even the committee of the "Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments," who seem at times, and doubtless justly, to consider "restoration" only another name for destruction, I think that even that committee would be satisfied that here at least a "restoration" is imperatively demanded, a restoration, however, which must be conducted in the most conservative spirit, and with the tenderest care. For we have here an "ancient monument," which illustrates, in a remarkable manner, two of our chief architectural styles—the Early English and the Perpendicular—and the Early English work is of strange beauty and remarkable variety. The northern arcade of five deeply-moulded arches, rising from clustered columns of beautifully-engaged shafts, eight in number, and terminating with capitals of the richest foliage of that period, is, as far as



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EATON BRAY CHURCH, BEDS.
NORTH AISLE ARCADE.

I know, unsurpassed by the work in any country church in England, and we must go to Salisbury, Ely, and Lincoln to see anything on a more richly devised plan. The southern arcade is plainer, with piers of a simple octagonal form, and it reminds us of the work in the beautiful church at Flamstead, which we have visited and illustrated in our transactions. The grand corbels of foliage on which the arcade terminates, east and west, are worthy of Ely, and the later designers probably did not wish them to be unworthy of their noble companion on the north-west.

It would appear that the earliest and finest work which we have here is on the northern side, and that the church was originally designed for a northern aisle only, but that the design very shortly received the addition of a south aisle, side chapels, and north and south porches. Of course, the attention of all visitors to the church is first engrossed by the northern arcade, but on close examination it seems to stand alone as a portion of the first design, a design of extraordinary ambition, reminding one of John de Cella's projects at St. Albans, and who might well have had a contemporary rival in the architect of Eaton Bray. For if we examine the north face of this arcade we shall observe from the springers that a vaulted aisle of remarkable richness formed part of the first architect's intentions, an aisle apparently soon superseded by a plainer and more economical structure, on the wall of which corbels were placed to carry half arches, to take, in the manner of flying buttresses, as at Luton church, the northern thrust of the original arcade. I am interested in a window in this the comparatively new north aisle wall, it may give the key, if proved to be original, to the history of this part of the structure; it is, as you will observe, square-headed with two lights, having very early Decorated heads, and externally surrounded by mouldings which we should take to be Decorated (the next window to it is simply a make-up imitation), but if we can go by this window we could assert that the north wall is nearly a century later than the north arcade, and was then put up by an architect gifted less with artistic genius than with business capacity.

The church thus completed, say about the year 1300, would consist of new north and south aisles, developing

into chapels towards the east, north and south porches, with a western tower and chancel, in fact, with the ground plan as we now see it. But a clerestory of late Decorated work was soon added, and what was at first a high-pitched roof was probably brought down to much about its present level.

No pains or expense seem to have been spared upon the furniture of the church, if we only judge from the ironwork of the south door; this marvellous example of the skill of a mediæval smith has companions believed to have been by the same hand at Turvey and Leighton Buzzard, at which town the artist is believed to have resided.

The Perpendicular period came in its order, and brought with it the usual changes in the church, the chancel, again lately restored by the present rectorial impropriators and patrons of the living—the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge—was then remodelled, some former Early English details being worked up, as seen in the piscina shafts at the high altar, but the grandest of the reconstructions is to be seen, where we should indeed naturally look for it, in the Manorial Chapel in the south aisle, there one of the most beautiful reredos arrangements of the period is before us, which we see now furnished with an altar again, and used as a morning chapel. An arrangement of the same kind appears to have been attempted in the now ruined chapel on the north side. These were neither of them, I consider, Lady Chapels,—the high altar, as in the Cistercian Abbeys and all other churches dedicated like them to St. Mary, taking the place of the usual Lady Altar.

I have thus briefly gone over the chief architectural features of this remarkable church, as we now see them, but I have been favoured by the vicar with a sight of the report upon its present sad condition by Mr. Edis, the architect who has been consulted, as to its restoration, and I observe in this document some most interesting historical allusions which I shall venture to make use of, as they appear to throw important light upon the architectural periods of the structure. I find that the Manor was originally granted by King John to Adolphus de Braci, and I feel no hesitation in referring to the time of this fortunate courtier the right royal work of the

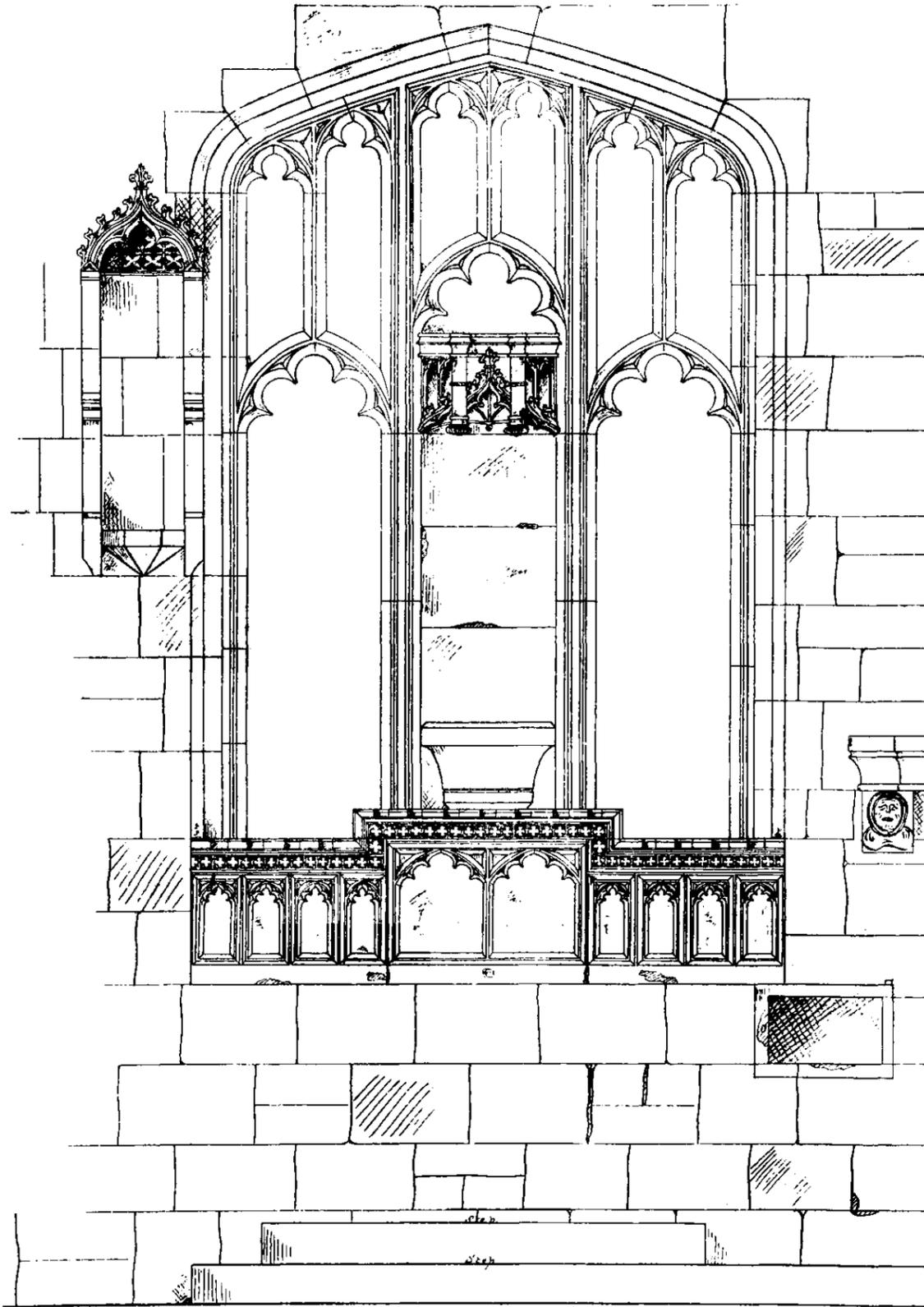
northern arcade. He and his family could easily obtain the best architectural advice from Dunstable and St. Albans, at which latter Abbey the grand conceptions of John de Cella were at this time taking form, and we have therefore a valuable date, say from 1205 to 1210, at which to place this magnificent example of the lancet period. In 1273 this Manor passed to the family of Zouch, and I have no doubt that soon after this time the work which we should refer to the geometrical or very early decorated period was undertaken. Unable either from want of funds, or want of zeal, to complete the church as the de Bracis had begun it, we find the economical expedients to which I have drawn attention in the north aisle wall resorted to. To the times of the family who were lords not only of the Manor but of the neighbouring castle, we must also refer the addition of the later decorated Clerestory and the lowering of the roof pitch, for they appear to have been in possession of the Manor till 1471, when Katherine, widow of William Lord Zouch died, seized of it. It will later appear to have been forfeited by attainder and granted in 1513 to Sir Reginald Bray, who belonged to a family of consequence in the county for many years, ranging from 1289 to the end of the 16th century. One member of it, Reginald Bray, was knight of the Shire in 1312, and another, Edmund de Bray, minister of Henry VII. There is a very fine brass with an altar tomb below it now in the chancel in memory of Jane, wife of Edward Lord Bray, dated 1558. A very interesting relic, looking like a chimney piece, was seen by my colleague, Mr. Fowler, some few years ago in the Vestry, and was probably brought from the castle; it was covered with heraldic carvings and the likeness of an embattled gateway—probably representing Eaton Bray Castle. This has been since removed by a faculty obtained by Lord Bray in the time of the last vicar. The parish appears to have been well known as Eaton Bray in the reign of Edward VI. To the Bray family then, during the earliest portion of their occupation, we must refer the Perpendicular work in this church. The Manorial Altar, erected probably about the time when Abbot Ramridge ruled at St. Albans, and so nearly cœval with his own magnificent monumental shrine, is a noteworthy memorial of the work of that elaborate period, while

the side window, debased in its architectural character, would bring us down to the date of the chancel brass and the days of Queen Elizabeth. I have spoken longer than I intended, but I have done my best to condense into the shortest possible form my notes on this most interesting church, and I can only hope that the visit of our society here to-day will not be without its value in causing its beauties to be better known, and its present deplorable condition to be so reported upon, to awake the sympathy and generosity of all those who are interested in the careful preservation of the magnificent works of our mediæval forefathers.

NOTE.—*Mr. S. Flint Clarkson, who described the neighbourhood and the church at Berkhamstead S. Mary (Northchurch), in course of the Excursion in August, 1892, has been unable as yet to put together his notes in the form of a paper for the Transactions; but the Secretaries understand that he will do so in time for next year's issue.*

EATON-BRAY CHURCH, BEDFORDSHIRE.

REREDOS IN SOUTH AISLE.



Inches 12 9 6 3 0 1 2 3 4 5 feet
Scale

F. Trevor Davys. mens. et del.

