

Conventual Church of S. Mary and S. Helen, Elstow.
Read at the Excursion 18th August, 1897,

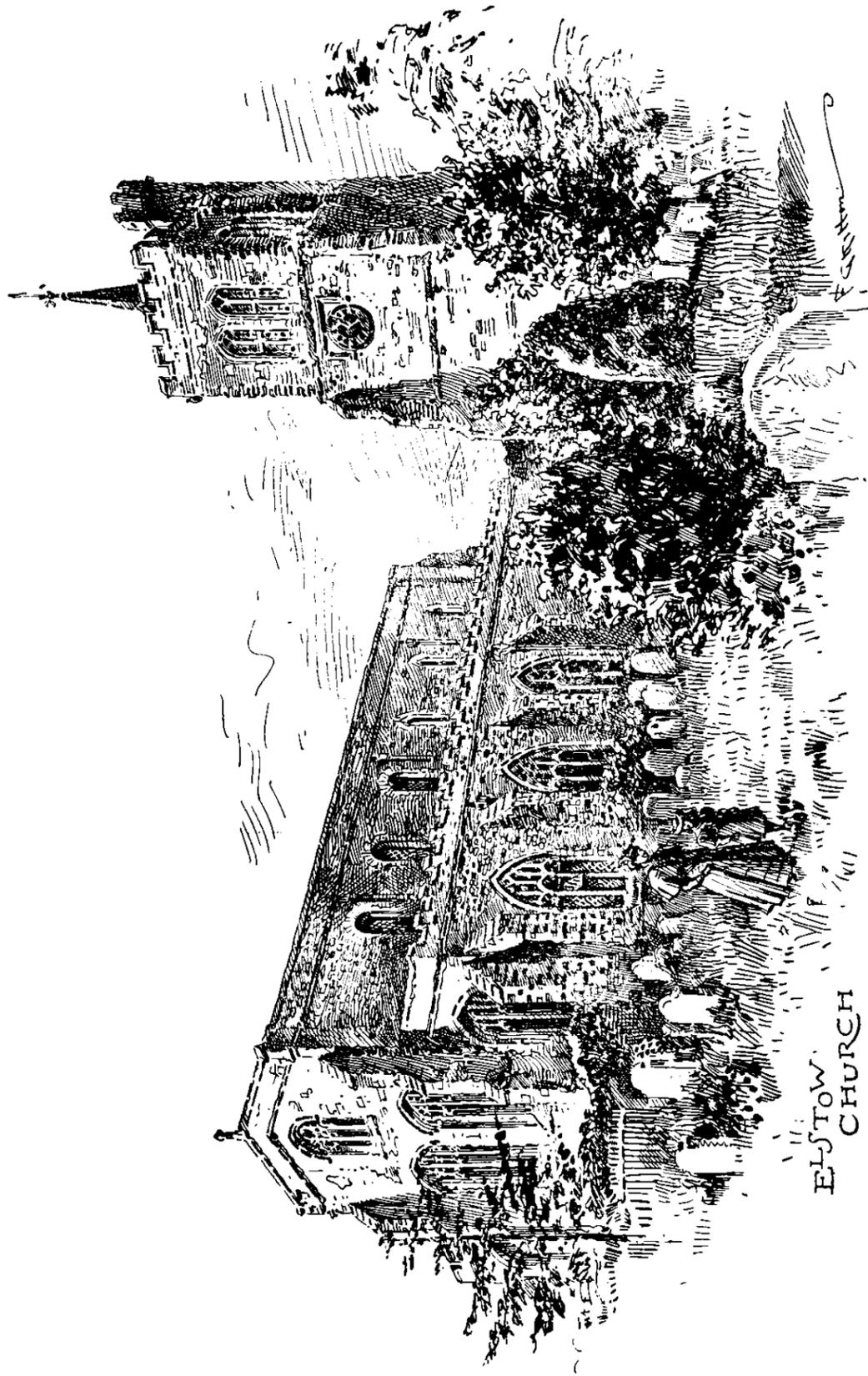
BY THE REV. CANON DAVYS, M.A.

We are visiting to-day a place of no common interest. It is not indeed situated within the county of Hertford, to which some would desire to confine the researches of this Society, but while, not far from our borders, it forms a subject respecting which no members of a Society like our own can afford to be ignorant.* The historical interest of the place is two-fold; the antiquarian will remember that it is one of the most valuable relics of a Royal Foundation for ladies, assuming the rule of S. Benedict, and will note every fragment of a Church and its surroundings, bearing on the history of so interesting an establishment, while some will view Elstow with another though later interest, as the home of the pious mechanic, who has left to the Christian world, in the "Pilgrim's Progress," an allegory which no less an authority than the late Lord Macaulay has declared to be a masterpiece. We saw in passing the cottage in which John Bunyan lived, much altered indeed, but containing the beam, I am told, from which chips have been dispersed throughout the world, as sacred relics in many lands. We have seen the green (now through the late drought all too yellow) on which as a youth the unconverted man sported, and where he believed his conversion to have taken place. We are near the tower where he rang the bells, till a serious dread of them seems to have possessed him. For we are told that he loved in his youth of all things best dancing and ringing. The first he discontinued after marriage, and if church ringers then were what unhappily some of us can remember such to have been before the late reform in our belfrys began, it is easy to understand why a religiously-minded man objected to their companionship. We too have lately crossed the river formerly spanned by an ancient bridge, on which stood a chapel, as we see to this day lower down the course of the Ouse at St. Ives, turned at Bedford into a house of detention, and familiarly believed, though the circumstances has since been doubted, as the place where the first inspiration of the Pilgrim's Progress seized Bunyan's mind when in brief captivity there, and which he describes thus:—"As I walked through the wilderness of this world I lighted on a certain place, where was a cave, and laid me down to sleep, and as I slept I dreamed a dream." Before leaving the thoughts of one whose name is inseparably connected with this place and neighbourhood, I may remind you that we possess in our own county, and in my own parish, a picture believed on the best authority to be an original likeness of John Bunyan. It was discovered by the late Rev. John Olive, in a very bad condition in a cottage in the village of Codicote. He purchased it, and had it carefully restored. This portrait has been seen on the occasion of one of our excursions by our Society in Wheathampstead House, while it was also carefully studied, I understand, by those who had charge of the erection of the monument which we hope to see at Bedford this afternoon. I may mention again that under the guidance of the late Dr. Griffith, some few years ago, our Society visited the remains of a cottage at Coleman Green, in the parish of Sandridge,

* I have since learnt, as connecting Elstow with Hertfordshire, that the *Rectorial* or "Great" Tithes of Hitchin, now the property of Trinity College, Cambridge, belonged to the Convent of Elstow till its dissolution, and formed part of the Endowments of Henry the Eighth's Royal Collegiate Foundation.

where it is generally believed Bunyan lodged and preached, for the labours of this good man, though far extended, took him generally to quiet places, though we may well hope that his efforts for good were treated with a more liberal toleration by those who must needs differ from his teaching, than the efforts of some others in Nonconforming history. For Bunyan appears to have had friends, and even admirers in the church, and to have been finally released from restraint by the aid of Thomas Barlow, afterwards Bishop of Lincoln.

I have touched on the life of this marvellous man, because it is impossible to visit this place without thinking of it, but beyond ringing in the detached campanile of this church, and occasionally worshipping within its walls, his history is unconnected with that more ancient history, in which an archæological and architectural society must find its chief interest. Let me then for a few minutes touch on this. The name Elstow, spelt Elnestow in the Doomsday survey, is a corruption of Helenstow, and the place is so named in consequence of the dedication of the conventual church to St. Helen, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, her name being associated in the dedication with the Holy Trinity and that of St. Mary. The Countess Judith, niece of William the Conqueror, and widow of Waltheof, Earl of Northumberland, Northampton and Huntingdon, here founded a conventual establishment for Benedictine Nuns. The days following that terrible Conquest were days of great church activity; the spoilers had seized great wealth and it has been regarded as a fact by high authority that many of their buildings were works of expiation. Those were troublous times; many fair lands were wasted by fire and sword, and refuges were frequently to be found alone in the houses of the religious. It might have been that there was some sanctuary here before, but the authentic history of the place begins with the foundation of Judith, who became its first abbess. We cannot view the interior of this stately fragment without being certain that we are within no ordinary church. There is a height and dignity about it which marks it as a remnant of a great Abbey church though one of but two stages, for we must observe that the triforium stage is absent. There can be little doubt too, that the easternmost bays are part of the structure of Judith, and that in accordance with the decorations of that date they were once richly coloured. It is stated by those who have studied the structure, and had some means of excavation, that the constructive nave extended one bay further eastward than we now see, and they believe that a central tower, transepts, apsidal choir, and lady chapel, completed the church in that direction. What we see now here of Norman work is suggestive of the usual Benedictine arrangement; for the ritual choir, as at St. Albans, would extend two bays into the constructive nave, and one more Westerly bay would be provided for a procession path. It often happened that this was as much as one generation of Abbey builders could accomplish, and if so much was done, the church was complete as far as its choral requirements went, and was structurally sufficiently supported to stand. This is about what has been accomplished at the new Truro Cathedral in our own times, though there the choir follows the more usual cathedral arrangement, and its fittings do not extend beyond the Eastern piers of the central tower, which they usually did in the Benedictine churches. If we are correct in our views here, we shall find the Western limb of the Norman church before us, while the rich Early English extension dating from, say, early in the reign of Edward I., would form a short nave. I put its conjectural date, for we have



ELSTOW
CHURCH

no documentary evidence I fear, during the reign of Edward I., for we find curious examples before us of the buckle ornament, which a great authority, the late Mr. Hartshorne, has regarded as a certain indication of the times of that King. These arches are a beautiful study, and their massive piers are well adapted to carry on the lines of their Norman and more Eastern predecessors. There is an elegance and peculiarity in the foliage arrangement here, which is suggestive of ladies device, it is seen in the junction of mouldings, on their springing from the caps, as at the Western portal. At this West front were apparently porches, something like, though much smaller than, those at St. Albans, for the arcading which appears to have enriched them is to be seen upon the adjoining buttress. One most beautiful and remarkable feature is that which is believed to have been the chapter-house, a vaulted building with central Purbeck shaft constructed very shortly after the Early English extension of the church. The vaulting is remarkable and the shaft is peculiarly beautiful. Here probably the ladies of the monastery sat with the Abbess in Council. Some writers speak of the usual cloister adjoining, but I confess I see no traces of it, or find head room for its construction, as the south windows of the nave are now; the cloister was the scriptorium of monks, but did nuns need such places of literary labour? I speak for inquiry and correction. From the chapter-house a covered way would doubtless lead to the domestic buildings of the nunnery, which must have occupied the site of the fine house which the receiver of the Abbey property at the Dissolution built out of its dishonoured stones. One relic of extraordinary interest and value, of a religious house of unusual fame, is the brass of one of its latest Abbesses, the Abbess Elizabeth Hervey. We see her in the robes of her office, and holding her pastoral staff; but one other example remains in brass, and one only of a Benedictine Abbess in stone. For a full description I must refer you to a most interesting paper by the late Mr. Bloxam published in the Bedford Architectural Society's Transactions, included in the reports and papers of the Associated Societies for the year 1863, and I also find in these reports a very valuable paper on the church of Elstow by George Hurst, Esq. We have these in our St. Albans Library, and I had them at hand in writing my paper. Mr. Hurst's paper was apparently read here in 1855, and its illustrations show the state of the church before its restoration in 1880, for we miss now a screen which appeared formerly to mark the limits of the ancient choir; the old pulpit, too, now consigned to a corner, there appears *in situ*. The restoration of 1880, under the care of T. J. Jackson, Esq., architect, of Bedford, appears, to have been very carefully done, and the present condition of the church bears witness to much reverent love. Would that more of it had existed at the time when it was wholly robbed of its many possessions, and not even a pittance left for the ministrations of religion within it. One remaining and unusual feature I must notice in the massive detached bell tower. It belongs chiefly to so late a period of architecture, that it has been supposed to have been erected after the dissolution of the Abbey with its old materials. It has been thought, however, to rest on the foundations of an older campanile of large proportions, which would account for the width of its base, and the contractions at its various stages. It must be, however, considered as a remarkable tower, for, except at Chichester, we have but few detached campaniles remaining out of a good many once provided at our cathedrals and large Abbey churches.