

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FABRIC OF BUNBURY CHURCH

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The Vicar has asked me to produce the first of a series of proposed papers upon the parish of Bunbury and its church, which it is intended to issue at intervals. If the church fabric, its contents and its history are anything to count upon he will not fail of material as long as he remains with us. I do not know, but suggest that he asked me to try my hand first, because Bunbury church has had a share in my affections, even before the Vicar was born. This intriguing fabric, standing upon the breezy uplands of the Cheshire plain, was at one time the centre of an extensive parish which embraced twelve townships, some of which have now churches of their own. Its early history is confused by lack of documentary evidence, but Domesday Book informs us that there was a priest at Bunbury at the time the survey was made in 1086. A priest normally indicated a church or chapel although no such building is mentioned. After William and his fifty thousand thieves had over-run this country, and when things had once more settled down to feudal control, sometime during the twelfth century the church was rebuilt, but of its size we know nothing but something of its style from various carved stones which have been extracted at one time or another from its walls. These now lie within the church or in the vicarage garden, showing chevron carvings with the abacus and cappings for a well decorated doorway. By the reign of Richard I. (1182-98) the advowson was vested in the manorial lord. It became divided between the co-heirs of Humphrey de Bunbury and St. Pierre who exercised the alternate right of presentation. In 1304 Urian St. Pierre presented; in 1338 David de Bunbury. It is probable that until the fourteenth century the Norman fabric remained unaltered, but in that century David de Bunbury exchanged or sold the patronage of the church to Sir Hugh de Calveley, who obtained permission to make the church, collegiate which necessitated the rebuilding of the fabric with an entirely new plan. At the Dissolution Randle Holme tells us that the college consisted of a Master, a sub-master, five chaplains and two chantors with two choristers. The last Rector of Bunbury became the first warden named William Walsham, whose time extended from 1360 to 1389, he would be a witness of the important changes which took place in the status of his church. In his will he directed that 20 marks should be given towards the repair of the chancel at Bunbury. A slightly earlier will, that of William Ketell 1361, left instructions that he was to be buried in the churchyard of Bunbury, leaving four shillings to the fabric and twelpence for the chaplain to pray for His soul. This denotes that at the time Bunbury was a fully qualified parish church with the rights of burial and that it had a chaplain as well as a rector.

The rebuilding set in motion by Calveley was of some magnificence, and the plan of the church. as then laid out has with a few exceptions remained down to the present day. Of this fourteenth century building there remain the chancel with its arch, a treasury to the north; and the tower and wall to the west, so that at both ends the church remains as then built. The building measures a hundred and sixty feet odd in length of which the chancel takes fifty-three in three bays, the walls being 32 inches in thickness. The tower is erected within the nave and the aisles embrace it; it stands upon strong piers having continuous wave mouldings without cappings. This is an unusual feature in the county, but is found of the same date at St. Peter's, Chester, and of fifteenth century date at Brereton. The tower is about twenty-seven feet six

inches square, the walls sixty-nine inches in thickness. The western facade has a well moulded doorway placed under a three-light window with reticulated tracery. The ringers chamber is lit by a single trefoiled headed window upon three sides. The belfry windows have four lights which were made in 1675 at a cost of nineteen pounds, when the belfry was extensively altered and repaired. The parish were particularly proud of their bells and wished their sound to travel to the confines of the townships whenever possible. The tower or steeple is nearly seventy feet in height, completed with Cheshire battlements, the pinnacles. are not connected however, being set back at an angle.

Both in mouldings and tracery the remains of the fourteenth century suggest a date not later than the middle of the century, but we know that Sir Hugh, already an old man, did not begin his rebuilding before 1386, and as he died in 1394 the work would not have proceeded far at the time of his decease. His alabaster tomb with its seven foot effigy still stands in the centre of the chancel, a production of the Chellaston quarries of Derbyshire, placed there probably by his friend Sir Robert Knolles in 1399. Sir Hugh's work was no alteration of a building already in existence, for the existing work both east and west is homogeneous, the material from one quarry, there are no apparent earlier remains in the fabric; besides a small country village would have no use for so large a building. It may be likened to the church at Nantwich erected about the same time, but in the case of the latter church built at the cost of a powerful and wealthy gild belonging to the town. Sir Hugh's benefaction did not permit of so great or ornate a building, but was sufficient for his purse and the salvation of his soul, about which he evidently had some doubt owing to what had taken place during his adventurous career.

After its completion it so remained until the close of the fifteenth or early sixteenth century when two important undertakings were in hand, the first private, the second parochial. Sir Rafe Egerton began a three bay chapel to the south of the chancel. He had been knighted for bravery by his Sovereign at Touronne during the French wars, he was also presented to the manor of Ridley, held recently by Sir William Stanley of Holt, deceased by order of his king for being too wealthy and wielding too much power. As chapels were the fashion Sir Rafe set about perpetuating his line under the patronage of God, and a splendid job his master-mason made of it; unfortunately unfinished at his death, his will was proved 1528. The tracery is finely proportioned, without cusping in the Cheshire mode, and when finished according to his desires must have been both handsome and fine, enclosed by stone screens which retain some traces of their former colouring. Two chantry priests were appointed and he ordered a chantry house to be built for them, of stone with a Welsh slate roof containing two large rooms, one to eat and drink in, the other a buttery and kitchen, and a chimney with three or four fires and a draught. It is doubtful if Sir Rafe's wishes were entirely completed as his endowment was too near the Suppression followed by the dissolving of all chantries, for the times were out of joint, under England's most rapacious and greedy dynasty the Welsh Tudors.

The parish undertaking was the remodelling of the nave and aisles to newer ideas of spaciousness and light, for by the fifteenth century stained glass had become quite a craze. Again this new work was incomplete at the Suppression lacking a clerestory and roof. The arcades are elegant, similar to Mold which was being rebuilt at the same time and suffered the same fate. The arcades were heightened, but the

important change was in the windowing from three to four lights and almost continuous. The south aisle was the first to be taken in hand, the fourteenth century walling left to the level of the new window cills, the aisle reconstructed in eight bays, the porch occupying the fifth from the west. Above the line of the cills all is new, the old buttressing removed as it no longer fitted into the new scheme, the foundations of these are said to be beneath the soil. The windows have stepped cills within and without in addition to a string course, the jambs and arches have hollows, the windows completed by almost semi-circular heads. The battlemented parapet was renewed in 1861. The fourteenth century porch was remodelled, raised to the level of the apex of the original gable, completed with a horizontal battlemented parapet; the front was widened by placing buttresses east and west in alignment with its south face, the earlier doorway being left.

The north aisle was rebuilt from the ground, the earlier masonry used as a foundation bedded in loose earth. It is of eight bays of excellent design, with continuous windowing broken only by the buttressing. The heads of the windows are segments of circles, the hood moulding ridging the space from buttress to buttress, a delightful conception to be seen at Malpas which this aisle closely resembles. The windows have hood moulding inside sometimes continuous. The parapet is unique in Cheshire, it was there when Glynne visited the church in 1842; inside it is dated 1840 but has been much renewed. At the west end is a stair turret to the roof, the walls but four inches in thickness. The nave is of six bays, the arcading tall and slender, which combined with the continuous windowing makes a lantern of the church, so far unspoilt by modern glass. The label stops of the arcade within the north aisle are angels playing musical instruments.

The college and its chantries were dissolved by Edward VI., the money going to the king's coffers. The various priests being pensioned off. In 1548 the commissioners found Bunbury robbed of its endowments and with no means to provide a minister. They appointed Thomas Hall one of the brethren of the late college as vicar at 20 marks a year and Robert Galkine as curate at 10 marks; later the site of the college was sold by Thomas Colley to Richard Colley for £400 and resold the same year (1581) to Thomas Egerton and his wife Elizabeth for £700. In the meanwhile (1575) Thomas Aldersey of London, haberdasher, the younger son of John Aldersey of Spurstow bought the rectory, church and tythes from queen Elizabeth, built a school and maintained the minister from his own purse. Upon the uncompleted nave was placed a low timber clerestory topped by a camber roof covered with lead and so remained for the next three hundred years. The chancel roof had earlier been lowered, the east gable left standing as was the eastern gable of the nave. The glory had not quite departed from the church for in 1601 Sir George Beeston of Armada fame was buried at the age of ninety-nine. The wardens accounts from about 1650 for the next hundred years give a good description of what happened to the fabric and interesting reading they make. Galleries were erected round the church, the western one handsomely carved and of a date during James I. reign. In 1754 a plaster ceiling was placed over the nave and two years later the fine brass candelabra was purchased for thirty pounds and hung up. In 1757 a great storm of wind destroyed the chancel gable and the antiquary Cole saw the stones still lying in the yard where they fell.

Nothing drastic happened to the church until the eighteen sixties when a deplorable restoration did its best to ruin the church; this included a new clerestory and a thrusting pitch-pine roof, both out of keeping with the building, the destruction of the galleries, pews and stallwork, including the screenwork inclosing the two chantry chapels. Fine wall-paintings were found to be immediately destroyed by hacking the plaster from the walls and the whitewash from the mouldings leaving the worst treatment of masonry I have ever beheld. In the early nineteenth century the window casements were framed in iron to the detriment of the stonework and the destruction of the remains of medieval coloured glass, it also assured that the tracery and mullions were blown out when the land mine damaged the church in 1940. There is still much left, a Holy Table of 1659, a font of 1663, a coat of arms of 1660 repainted in 1730, and lovely Communion rails 1717; portions of the chantry screens exist which some day may be replaced. There is indeed the nucleus of a wonderful church partially wrecked by enemy bombs, but worthy of a careful reparation to give to future generations something to protect and be proud of from the ravages of man and time.

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