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## Britford Church

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## BRITFORD CHURCH.<sup>1</sup>

By the REV. A. P. MORRES, M.A.

The Church was restored to its present form in 1873, under G. E. Street, R.A., who was most careful in preserving the few remaining indications of what the original Church had been before the alterations carried out by one of the Earls of Radnor during the last century (c. 1764). It was at that period that the massive tower and west front probably assumed their present appearance.

To begin with the nave. In 1873 the last century porch at the west end was removed, and the present one built in the south wall of the nave, in doing which *an old round-headed arch* of a very early period was discovered, which was not known to exist before, and is presumably of the same date, whatever that may be, of the *two other round arches in the north and south walls of the nave*, which form the especial features of interest in the Church. These two arches were opened out for the first time in 1872, when they were found to be perfect, the only part of them before visible being their exterior surface in the outer wall of the Church. From that appearance they are quoted in Bloxam's Book of Architecture as *Saxon*. Since they have been opened they have been generally held to be *Roman*; an opinion endorsed by the late G. E. Street, and also by Mr. Roach Smith, of Strood, who told me he considered them to be *Roman "in situ,"* and mentioned that in the South of France he knew of an arch in a church (undoubtedly of Roman origin) which was precisely similar to that discovered at the porch entrance. Without venturing to give any personal opinion on the matter I would mention that the theory of their being Roman is corroborated by four Roman coins of Constantine having been found in the *debris* of the Church during the restoration; also, in the fact that the late Vicar had a Roman brick in his possession with "AUG. LEG. II" inscribed on it in raised characters, which was found in the precincts of the Church. This, I unfortunately, cannot now trace, though I can vouch for the accuracy of the statement. Mr. Street also pointed out that in the arch in the south wall of the nave the upper stone on the top of the upright jambs has a niche cut in it, which seems to hold the jambs in their places, which to his mind at once proved that it was not Saxon work. There has been much discussion *as to the date of the carved work* on the arch in the north wall, which seems evidently unfinished, and also as to the purpose of the projecting stones at the bottom, and towards the top of the spring of the arch. I would also

<sup>1</sup> Read before the the Members of the Institute at Britford, Aug. 4th 1887.

point out the fact that the stones of the two arches in the south wall are partly *held in their place by iron pins* run through them. The moulding also running down the side of the porch arch terminates in a very unusual rounded curve at the bottom.

Before leaving the nave I would point out that the centre window in the south wall was found intact, hidden by plaster internally, and by a buttress built against it externally; only the mullion and sill are new. This gave the exact pattern for the other side windows of the nave.

The west window is altogether new, from a design by Mr. Street; no trace of the old one having been left. I might here mention that the original designs of the new windows for the nave and chancel were Early English; but that they were altered, as more of the old landmarks were discovered, which accounts for the west window in the nave being of a somewhat earlier period than the side nave and chancel windows.

In the two transepts there are the remains of two piscinas, and a curious squint, or leper's window, in the west wall of the south transept. In the east wall of the north transept there were traces of a horizontal moulding some 4 or 5 ft. from the ground, and the outline of a large window, reaching nearly up to the wall plate.

It is only right to state that the window in the north transept was the design of another architect, put in long before the restoration in 1873, as a pattern for the other windows when the restoration should be carried out. But there is no authority at all for the design of it.

All the walls under the tower were profusely decorated, the prevailing colours of the ground work being pink and orange, but the original designs on them were not traceable.

The pulpit is, I believe, Jacobean, with emblematic designs on it, containing the *Tree of Life*, the *Dove and Olive Branch*, and cherub head with the *sword of the Spirit*, which latter panel once supported a large sounding board. There is a very old oak chest standing in the north transept, copiously bound with iron.

On coming to the chancel there are many points of interest. In the last century Church there were no windows visible at all, except a plain east window, and a small semi-circular window above a modern door on the south side. On removing the plaster all the recesses of the old windows were discovered. The splays and arches forming the heads of the windows being left entire and perfect, as now seen. The mullions and tracery of the windows being smashed up and built up with rubble in the spaces of the recesses, so that there was no trace at all of the windows in the exterior walls. Enough remains were found to give the exact thickness of the mullions (14 ins.), the width of the lights, and the tracery of the ogee cusps; so that they are all perfect restorations of the original windows; the only entirely new one being the middle one in the south wall, where the door of the last century Church was. In the recess of the eastern-most window in the north wall was found some of the tracery of the old east window, quite sufficient to enable Mr. Street to reproduce the exact form of the old one as it now stands. He found that this tracery belonged to the east window, and not to any of the side ones, from the extra thickness of the tracery and width of the lights. In the eastern-most window on the south side of the chancel was found the remains of an ancient piscina in the *side of the splay* and the old sedilia in Purbeck marble. This has been left exactly as found, saving

that stone sedilia were obliged to be inserted in lieu of the crumbling Purbeck. The remains of an ancient doorway may be seen in the south wall of the chancel, the window below which is considerably lower than the others—there having been a similar window opposite where the organ is now placed, with the new vestry behind it, and which before formed part of the last century mausoleum of the Earl of Radnor.

Ere leaving the windows in the chancel I would notice that some of the stones forming the sides of the splays seem themselves to have been the cusp-heads of some still more ancient windows—a point which I should be much pleased to have some satisfactory solution of—while the timbers of the chancel roof, which have been patched up and left as found under the old white-washed ceiling, were full of old mortice holes, having been apparently used in some more ancient roof also.

There are some of the old panels and finials of the chancel seats preserved, which formed supports in the last century Church to the Squire's square pew and his servants' pew. These have been restored to their original position where possible. On the finials of two of them are carved, what would seem to be, the arms of the Assheton family; consisting of a barrel representing a ton, and the foliage of the ash above it; but there are no records of the family having ever lived in the parish. Round them is a Latin inscription, beginning *Ad laudem et honorem Dei*, but the last two words of which have never yet been deciphered. I hope somebody present may be able possibly to do so. The other finials are copies of the old ones.

Inside the recess of one of the windows in the north wall of the chancel lies a diminutive figure of a boy in Purbeck marble, of the presumed date of 1330. It was found, together with a large stone cross, embedded in the wall of the south transept, when the workmen were enlarging the aperture to insert the new window. Mr. Street thought it to be the figure of some favourite page, and not an ecclesiastical figure. It bears a cup in the right hand (apparently not a chalice), and has a maniple running down the dress from the left arm, with a rich flowing pattern upon it, which is just traceable. It was once apparently out of doors, as the yellow moss on the carving at the feet can still be discerned, while there is a hole to drain off the water, which might have accumulated in the hollow just above the feet. The cross found has been placed on the exterior of the *south transept saddle stone* where the original cross had altogether decayed.

Inside the altar rail stands what is generally termed "the Duke of Buckingham's Tomb," beheaded by Richard III. in the Blue Boar Row, in Salisbury, in 1483. This seems doubtful. The brass plate above it was placed there some 50 years ago, or more, by Sir H. Hoare, who proved to his own satisfaction that it *was* the Duke's tomb, inasmuch as he declared that the figures on the side of the tomb gave the history of the sad story of the execution. When, however, the whitewash, where-with it was thickly encrusted, had been cleaned off by muriatic acid, the whole fabric of this idea fell to the ground—Mr. Street at once recognising that the figures on the tomb represented saints, which is in itself, I believe, a unique thing—as it is rare to find figures of this description in such a position. The eastern-most figure is that of S. Mary Magdalene holding the pot of ointment in the right hand, and her long hair in the left.

The next in order is that of St. George standing on the dragon ; the centre one that of St. Catherine holding the wheel ; the fourth apparently the Bishop of the day ; and the western-most one the figure of some female Saint leaning on a prayer-desk—an emblem which Mr. Street did not remember to have seen elsewhere. The only fact corroborating to some extent the idea that it is the Duke's tomb being that one of the coats of arms on the west end of the tomb, is that of the Staffords, while the Manor of Britford is said to have belonged to the Duke of Buckingham at that period.

It cannot, I believe, be said with any certainty what is the original history of the tomb—though some assert that it was brought here from an old Abbey on Milford Hill—and there is, I suppose, also considerable doubt as to whether the canopy above it ever had anything to do with the tomb itself.

The old altar stone of thick Purbeck marble, handsomely moulded at the edge, was found in the flooring of the chancel, forming part of the pavement. It had the five crosses upon it, but was broken into nine pieces, and also inscribed as a tomb-stone. It now lies embedded under the present altar table.

There is nothing I think especially worthy of notice in the exterior walls of the Church, which seem to have been considerably pulled about: What the appearance of the old tower was may be gathered from a small portion left under the modern string course on the south-east corner of the tower ; it apparently having been a rubble tower with stone quoins. The chancel walls are apparently the oldest, having only been newly pointed, while the old scaffold holes can still be traced in them, having been filled up with three larger stones than the rest. In the eastern-most corner of the top of the south wall of the chancel can be discerned a small piece of carving worked into the wall. The figure seems that of a kind of antelope, with its horn ending in a ear. This just shows that the old original Church may have been much richer in ornamentation than the present fabric. I would just mention that in putting in the new window in the chancel we found that most of the square ashlar stones, discernible in some part of the chancel walls, were in reality the tracery of the old windows turned inside out.

On the north side of the chancel is the mausoleum of the Earls of Radnor, which has been altered to its present appearance from the designs of Mr. Street. The pitch of it formerly was some foot higher than the pitch of the chancel roof, and the entrance used to be from the Church in the north transept. There are many bodies interred therein, which prevented its removal, which otherwise the present Earl would have given permission for. The entrance now is from the exterior on the north side of the tomb.

I trust I have not tired any from the length of this paper, and, besides wishing to hear the accurate date of the old arches, I should be much interested to know for certain the concluding words forming the inscription on the finials of the chancel seats ; and also the solution of the cusp-headed stones built into splays of the chancel windows.