

Report on All Saints October 1923

Authorised by the rev. R.U. POTTS

All Saints Birchington

All Saints: Of the seven ancient churches in the Isle of Thanet, that of Birchington has suffered most from the so-called restoration of the 19th century. The comparison of the Church as it is at present with the old pictures still preserved, shows to what extent dull and uninteresting modern work has been substituted for ancient work. The loss of the ancient roofs and the filling up of the chancel with steps, in addition to the drastic restoration and partial ----- has given the church a modern appearance which belies its older character. The severe 13th century arches upon either side of the chancel, the very graceful chancel arch and the 14th century arcades of the nave are features of great interest, and are very characteristic of ancient Kentish work.

The south-west corner of the nave shows the beginnings of a late 14th century tower in the same position as that of St Nicholas-at-Wade. This was never carried out and the old 13th century tower on the south side of the chancel still remains. There are many cases in Kent where the later builders substituted western towers for the earlier tower further east. In the case of Newington-on-the-Street and Harrietsham, the principal tower is now that at the west and the bases of the earlier towers on the north sides of the chancels still remain. At Birchington we have the reverse, the early tower further east still remains with the spire on the top of it, and the later tower at the west end was only prepared for, but never built.¹

The monuments in the north Chancel aisle (Quex Chapel) are of special interest, and the parish is much to be congratulated upon the recovery of the very interesting pieces of the old rood-screen, which

¹ It was not until 1933 that an article appeared in the Diocesan News, quoting from a transcript of the Contract for the building of the South Aisle and Tower. See in Church notes under CONTRACT. The text of this transcript has been studied carefully by experts in Canterbury and it is almost 100% certain that it is exactly what it says it is. Sadly, though, the original is completely lost. It was copied out into a book that had been in the possession of an official in Margate, but that too has now been lost or mislaid.

are characteristic English Kentish carving of the end of the 15th century and are of great delicacy and beauty. ²

There is much that might be done to the interior of the ancient church to very great advantage. At present it is far too closely seated. The passages are narrow; there is insufficient space for the ordinary needs of a large church, particularly in front of the chancel arch. It is difficult to advise any reduction of the sitting accommodation in view of the known circumstances. We have considered especially the question of providing more space in front of the screen and we do not see how it can be done unless it be thought worth while to remove two pews fixed on either side and substitute rows of chairs. In this way the total seating capacity of the church need not be reduced, but it would be possible to make more room for special occasions when more passage way and less seating is needed. We do not think there would be any advantage in moving the pulpit to the other side, and of course, any cutting or alteration of the stonework is out of the question.

With regard to the font, we agree that as far as baptisms are concerned, it would be more convenient if some of the seats were removed from the extreme west end of the south aisle and the font were placed there, but this again would involve loss of sittings and therefore we are compelled to advise that the font be left where it is for the present. ³

With regard to ventilation, the church is manifestly deficient in this, as it is in lighting. To pierce the east and west gables would be a costly matter and might not prove satisfactory. A better plan would be to provide two small dormer windows on the south side of the nave roof. This would give more light in the church and would provide ventilation where it could be more easily ventilated. The lighting of the church would be greatly helped if the walls were distempered white and inasmuch as the roofs are modern and all deal, we would suggest

² The two panels of the screen were discovered in a barn at the foot of the old churchyard in 1905 and reinstated by the Rev. H.A. Serres. They were fixed in front of the Victorian 'rood screen' of 1863 and remained like this until 1968. At this time the Victorian screen was removed and now adorns the dining room of 9 Park Lane, leaving the medieval rood screen panels in all their glory. Viewed from a slight distance, with half closed eyes, the impression of the figures in each of the panels (almost certainly of saints) can be detected and there are certainly traces of the old paint still visible.

³ The font was eventually moved to stand in front of the North door in 1990, after the removal of two short pews.

that a bold step should be taken of whitening them also, as has been done to very great effect at Dartford, where the problem was very similar. This, however, would require scaffolding which is expensive. The walls and aisle roofs could be distempered without recourse to scaffolding.

It is worth while to record the fact that we now know that the medieval builders used white in the first instance as the groundwork for all their colour schemes.

Although we understand that the north chancel aisle (Quex Chapel) is private property and not under the control of the Vicar and Churchwardens, we think we may be pardoned for suggesting that there might be no objection to the parish providing voluntary workers who might carry out the delicate work of cleaning the beautiful marble monuments. What is required for this is washing with a little Hudson's soap and water, and then carefully polishing with prepared beeswax and turpentine with a few drops of salad oil. It would also be a great advantage to remove the ivy from the outside of this part of the church.

We understand that it is proposed to build an addition to the Inn on or adjacent to the churchyard wall on the north side. We think that there need be no objection to this provided that the Commissary General be acquainted with what is proposed in order that he may safeguard the parish against any possible difficulty on the legal side, and that the work be done to the satisfaction of an architect approved by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Advisory Committee, any legal or professional fees being paid by the owner of the Inn. In the matter of the ventilation, the addition to the Inn and in other work required at the present time about the Church, we would suggest that the Vicar and Churchwardens should consult an architect who is accustomed to work of the kind, e.g. Mr W.H.R. Blacking who is working at St Lawrence's (Ramsgate) or Mr Gerald Cogswell, who is doing work at Minster as both are in the immediate neighbourhood, either of whom may be entirely relied upon.