

THE RESTORATIONS OF THE PARISH CHURCH (ST. NICHOLAS) STEVENAGE,

1841-42, 1913-14, 1923-25, 1926-27.

1841-42. Notes on the Restoration Works, commenced in 1841, are recorded on pp. 76-7 of Nicholas Cholwell's Memo Book (lvii.), a copy of these notes was recently published in the Church Magazine, December, 1932, and is here reprinted.

Nicholas Cholwell's Memorandum Book, lvii.

Page 76, 1841. 314 Parish Church sittings for a population of 1850 were considered insufficient—so funds were raised and the following works commenced in June, 1841:—

1. "An addition was made to the Church by building a Transept on the South side.
2. The whole of the old pews were removed, and new ones erected on a uniform plan. By these means **320 (?)** additional sittings were gained. The cost of this part of the work was about £500.

At the same time, the entire roof of the Church was coloured to resemble oak. The ceiling of the Chancel, which was plain and unsightly plaster, was taken down, and renewed with transverse beams, etc., supported by angels and painted in Fresco. The cost of this was £34.

The East Window was removed, which had been erected about 50 years before, and was a plain Grecian window with a semi-circular head, and the present window of Tudor Gothic was inserted; the whole cost being £45. It is built of Roman Cement covered with Portland Cement.

The floor of that portion of the Church and Chancel which extends from the Pulpit to the steps of the Communion precincts, was lowered nearly a foot so as to bring the Church to one level.

The old Screens were also lowered two feet to the present, and apparently original position.

A new vestry was also constructed out of one of the side Screens.

Page 77. Upon removing the plaster on the N. and S. sides of the E. end of the Chancel the two windows were discovered, concealed by

brick and plaster, but with the Mullions and Tracery nearly perfect; and under that on the S. side, the remains of three Sedilia and a double Piscina appeared, with portions of the Mullions, etc., built into the wall.

These were restored upon the original plan. The ancient doorway also on the N. side was opened. These were all covered with plaster, and over that with a plain and heavy panneling of oak—which is said to have been done in the incumbency of Nicholas Cholwell, Archdeacon of Huntingdon (1738-1773).

The old and dilapidated rails before the Communion Table were replaced by the present Gothic rails.

The Baptistry was also altered. The wall under the Western Arch was thrown back into the Belfry and a Norman Doorway inserted.

The old Font which had been broken and deformed by plaster was repaired and placed where it now stands, under the arch, instead of projecting into the Church. The cost was—Font £2 10s., N. Door £2 18s.

1842. In May the stained glass was put into the East Window; this was the gift of Mr. George Smyth, of Stevenage, and was executed by Mr. Wailes, of Newcastle, at a cost of £120."

1913-14. In the August Magazine of 1913, the Rev. J. W. E. Moloney wrote—

"Sir Charles A. Nicholson, Bart., has been chosen as the Architect for the restoration of our old Church. He is second to none in his knowledge and experience of old buildings, and the Authorities of Lincoln have entrusted to him the care of their magnificent Cathedral.

Everyone will welcome the news that S. Nicholas Church has been confided to such competent hands. He came to Stevenage on July 24th, to make his first inspection of the Church."

Gallery Screen 18

1913-14 cont.

Sir Charles Nicholson wrote a report, dated 25th August, 1913, accompanied by two plans, A and B (v. Church Record lxxix.)

About one quarter of this report deals with the architecture of the Church, and by the kind permission of Sir Charles Nicholson, is now published below, as it does not appear that it has ever been put into print, and in time it will be an historical authority.

By the courtesy of the Manager of "Sport and General Press Agency," and of the Editor of the "Lincolnshire Echo," a portrait of Sir Charles A. Nicholson, Bart., is reproduced.

"2, NEW SQUARE,

25th August, 1913.

LINCOLNS INN.

REPORT ON STEVENAGE CHURCH.

by

SIR CHARLES A. NICHOLSON, Bart.

The oldest part of the building is the Norman Base of the West Tower. The columns of the Nave stand upon square plinths which are probably of the Norman period; if this is the case, the original church most likely consisted of a nave with narrow aisles, a small chancel, possibly apsidal, and a west tower.

The chancel was enlarged early in the 14th century, and now consists of three bays with a two-bayed chapel on each side.

At the same period, the aisles of the nave were widened and in the fifteenth century the four arches on each side of the nave with the clerestory windows were rebuilt in the style of the period and the top story of the tower with its timber spire were added.

At the same time the church was re-roofed and embattled. The south porch may be partly of the 14th century, but has been much modernised.

Considerable repairs were carried out in the 17th and 18th centuries when the bells were recast and portions of the roof renewed, and the whole building underwent a drastic "restoration" some seventy years ago when most of the window traceries were renewed, the East window was inserted and the South Transept was added. The outside of the church was cemented over and the interior rearranged in accordance with the taste of the day. Minor alterations have been effected in more recent years but these are of no interest, artistic or otherwise.

In spite of the vicissitudes it has undergone, the church retains much that is of value in its furniture and accessories. Considerable portions of the Norman front are intact, the chapels retain their old piscinae, and the piscina and "

"sedilia in the chancel are no doubt a fairly accurate modern copy of the former 14th century ones, moreover the whole of the ancient screens remain, though in a somewhat mutilated state, and in two cases removed from their proper places. There are also six fine turn-up stalls and the portions of the carved desk fronts of these are worked up into the present chancel screen. There is an old oak desk end in the Tower, which also contains a good old wooden staircase with Jacobean handrail. The carpentry supporting the spire is substantial and interesting and the roofs are of fairly good design and workmanship, those over the nave and south aisle being ancient.

The fabric generally may be said to be in fairly good condition structurally. There are no signs of settlement except in the modern transept, and the roofs are in the main sound. The bell frame is in good order and the same with certain reservations may be said of the spire; the bulk of the battlements are secure but the vestry chimney is unsafe. The Church is however damp, especially in the North Aisle, and the wood floors under the pews are rotten. The lead roofs are in fair condition.

In restoring a building like this, the first care must be taken to make it watertight and to arrest any decay that may be found to be going on. How far one is justified in attempting to restore the exterior walls to their ancient condition is a matter on which two opinions are possible, but there can be no doubt of the desirability of restoring the ancient furniture to its proper use, and fortunately this would be by no means a difficult or costly task."

CHARLES A. NICHOLSON.

The first contract accepted for restoration works amounted to £2,200, and in July, 1914, work was commenced, but in June, 1915, further work was suspended on account of the war, meanwhile the following works had been carried out at a cost of £2,471:—

Tower Arch opened.
New S. Aisle built.
Chancel Flat Ceiling removed.
Chancel Screens replaced.
Deal pews removed and chairs provided pro.
Three blocked Windows opened. [tem.
Roof repaired.
New Floor, wooden blocks on concrete.
Chancel Floor lowered.
Organ moved;—this organ was obtained in 1885 for £400, from Forster & Andrews, Hull.
New Heating Apparatus in new Chamber.
Oak Doors in place of deal.

*for 3 of them to front front
43"*

£2471

1923-25.

At the request of the Church Council Sir Charles Nicholson wrote:—

Dear Canon Morgan Smith,

"After my inspection of the Church yesterday, I have to report as follows:—

With the exception of the asphalt roof of the south aisle, the work which was done in 1914-15 seems to me to have stood well. This work was however only partial, as the tower repairs were not undertaken, and only those parts of the external facings which were then dangerous, were dealt with. The repair of the tower would be a rather considerable piece of work, and this cannot very well be done piecemeal, because scaffolding, which is a considerable item, would be necessary in any case, and therefore it would be bad economy to incur this outlay for a scheme of partial repair. The body of the Church is however easily accessible, without expensive scaffolding, and any work that is necessary here, can be done piecemeal without extravagance.

Taking this work first. The battlements of the clerestory require attention. These battlements are on the old masonry and were roughly repaired and coated with Roman cement about 70 or 80 years ago.

With regard to the buttresses on the north side, the upper slopes of these were protected with tiling in 1915, and I think it would be wise to apply the same treatment to the lower slopes.

EAST WALL.—The buttresses and wall surface were not touched in 1915, but the battlements above the East window were then re-plastered. The buttresses on the wall ought to be dealt with at some early date, but the matter is not very urgent, and no doubt the proper course to adopt would be to re-face the work here with flint on stone like the adjoining walls, and to put a new East window. This would be a piece of restoration work which would effect a great improvement in the Church, but it is not so important as the repair of the tower.

The repair of the tower would cost at least £1,000, and a scaffolding would be necessary for the whole height of the tower and at least 30 feet of the spire.

The question of the access to the roofs should also be considered. I should advise fixing three short ladders on the roofs of the south porch and the north and south aisles.

The south porch could be reached from a movable ladder which would be short enough to be easily portable. There would then be no risk of boys climbing on the roof.

16/8/1922. CHARLES A. NICHOLSON."

In the Magazine (Nov., 1922) it is noted:—

"The firm that was responsible for the asphaltting of the roof has more than made good all the defects, without further charge, and it is due to Messrs. Faldo to say that they deserve the highest credit for the ready and efficient way in which the work has been executed."

Restoration of Churches Committee.—On 13th March, 1923, Mr. Henry Lowry, H. Sec. P.C.C., convened the first meeting of the newly appointed Restoration of Churches Committee; Mr. Thos. W. Seager Berry was appointed Chairman, a position he continued to hold until his death on June 16th, 1932.

On 24th April, 1923, Sir Charles Nicholson signed a Report on the Restoration works then needed; this report with a subsequent letter dated 10/10/1923, may be found amongst the Church Records, in the red file box lxxix.

Mr. Seager Berry's Reports on the Restoration works done during 1924-25 are recorded on pp. 18 and 38 of the Minute book of the A.P.C.M.

From these reports it is learnt that the timbers of the roof of the Nave of S. Nicholas Church were dealt with and the supports of the roof made secure at a cost of £200. £200

Sir Charles inspected the Clerestory Battlements on 12th July, 1924, and it was decided that the battlements be taken down to the string course and be rebuilt in flint work and cement, which corresponds to the battlements rebuilt, and those built on the Church addition for the Organ, at the recent restoration.

Mr. Seager Berry wrote on 31st Dec., 1926: "At the end of 1925 the restoration work had comprised at S. Nicholas Church, the renewal of Roof Timbers (£200), the rebuilding of the clerestory battlements, and the restoration of the east wall and the rebuilding of its buttresses, and considerable work of restoration at Holy Trinity Church (about (£150)). The cost of this work, including 40 guineas Architect's fees, was £1,440, and was carried out by Messrs. W. Austin & Sons very satisfactorily. Sir Charles said that it was as fine "flint work" as he had ever seen in his life. HTC
£150
£1440

Funds had been subscribed by 60 or 70 donors, assisted by £99 received from the 1912-14 Restoration Fund, and part shares of £300 promised by the St. Albans Diocesan Board of Finance, £100 promised by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and £100 promised by the Church Building Society; these promises were for all the works included in the Architect's Report of 24th August, 1923. 300
100
100
500

Church Restoration Endowment Policy.—

Mr. T. Seager Berry initiated a scheme of a 25-year endowment policy to provide funds for the future restoration of Stevenage Churches, it was decided to allot the Church Collections on S. Nicholas Day year by year for the payment of premiums.

In 1926 a Policy was taken out by the P.C.C. for £1,000, payable on the 23rd March, 1951, with the Ecclesiastical Insurance Co., Ltd., at an annual premium of £25 14s. 2d. Mr. Seager Berry hoped that a new similar fund would be started in 1951.

1215
1926-27. During January, 1926, Mr. W. H. Shrouder did some restoration works inside the tower at a cost of £115.

In July, 1926, tenders were called for external restoration of the tower, and the contract was given to Mr. W. H. Shrouder. The stone work of the Tower was found, in many cases, to have perished, and the top of the west wall of the Tower, to be seriously defective. What seemed to be stone work of the three windows under the string course was partly stone much decayed, and partly built up of tiles or bricks or both, and plastered over; the windows were subsequently restored entirely in stone.

The following extracts are taken from Mr. Seager Berry's Report for 1927:—

During the year "the Tower restoration has been completed. This work has been extensive and has included stripping off the plaster from the walls, raking out and repointing the flint work, rebuilding the battlements and string courses and renewing practically the whole of the stone work, including that of the three large windows, and very considerable work of repair to the Tower Buttresses. The total cost of the work was £1,358.

In addition, the Committee have undertaken the strengthening and repair of the bell frame, which has been carried out by Messrs. Day and Son, of Eye, Suffolk, who were selected by Sir Charles Nicholson.

The work mentioned in Sir Charles Nicholson's Report of the 24th April, 1923, has now been done, except rebuilding the battlements on the north and south aisles and some repair of the buttresses on those sides of the Church, estimated to cost £215. . . .

Sir Charles Nicholson has been in constant touch with the work throughout, and we should like once again to express our appreciation of the great kindness and courtesy he has always

shown in dealing with any matter on which the Committee have asked for guidance."

The following letter was received from the Architect:—

Dear Mr. Seager Berry,

"I had a thorough inspection of the Tower and consider the work quite sound and satisfactory. I could find no hollow spaces behind the pointing, which I think is done as nearly as possible in accordance with the old work as was recommended in my report.

Mr. Shrouder's explanation of the extras appear to me justifiable.

I think he and Mr. Dunn between them have given you an excellent job.

Yours sincerely,

CHARLES A. NICHOLSON."

A Fete was held on June 20th, 1928, at Whitney Wood, to provide funds to clear off the debt, and £240 was realised, the total expenditure of restoration works since 1924 amounted to £3,015. 3.015

At the A.P.C.M. of January, 1933, Mr. H. W. Brown reported that the amount at credit of "The Stevenage Church Building and Restoration Fund" stood at £105 14s. in Barclays Bank, Stevenage.

Future Projects.

In 1926 Sir Charles Nicholson prepared a scheme for re-seating the Parish Church with oaken seats, but it was not proceeded with.

On 1st June, 1931, the P.C.C. decided to ask Sir Charles Nicholson for a report and estimate to comprise all works required on the S. Aisle roofs and the Transept.

Sir Charles Nicholson prepared a scheme for a copper roof over the south aisles and for dismantling the remaining south end of the transept at an estimated cost of £1,085 (lxxxv.); this project has not yet been considered, as the roof is watertight for the time being; the plan and estimate is in No. (1) steel cupboard, and a copy is with the Churchwarden, Mr. L. C. Blow.

For the last 20 years the necessity of building a new Vestry has been recognised, but this must wait until "times are better."

Illustrations.—Pridmore's Drawings of Stevenage mentioned in list lvii.a 51, printed in this report, now in the possession of Lady Dimsdale, contain various sketches of the Church.

There are also various plans and pictures of the Church, framed and hung up in the building, a list of them may be found in this report.

April, 1933.