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## The Churches of Sodbury, Gloucestershire

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## THE CHURCHES OF SODBURY, CO. GLOUCESTER.

BY T. S. POPE, ARCHITECT, BRISTOL.

WHEN I was asked some little time ago by Canon Nash to write a short description of Chipping Sodbury Church for the meeting of this Society I readily consented to do so, remembering, as I well do, the state of the church before its restoration, and fully recognising how well and faithfully that work has been executed, so that this church now remains a thing of beauty, and its history is as clearly to be read now, perhaps more clearly, than before it was restored. Upon thinking over the subject it occurred to me that, perhaps, it would be as well to give a description of the three Sodbury churches—all three being typical churches, but, alas! one of them, Little Sodbury, has, so far as the ancient church is concerned, very nearly disappeared, some small portions only remaining. The names of the villages very well indicate the the history of these churches.

First, OLD SODBURY. The old Norman church, without doubt the first of the three built, was useful as a watch tower, overlooking all the flat country below, and keeping guard over its subordinates.

Secondly, CHIPPING, or Market, SODBURY, formerly a thriving little town in the vale, where a colony of weavers seem early to have settled, and a flourishing market to have been established; and,

Thirdly, LITTLE SODBURY. The little parochial church was situated close to the old manor house, but scarcely any portion of it now remains.

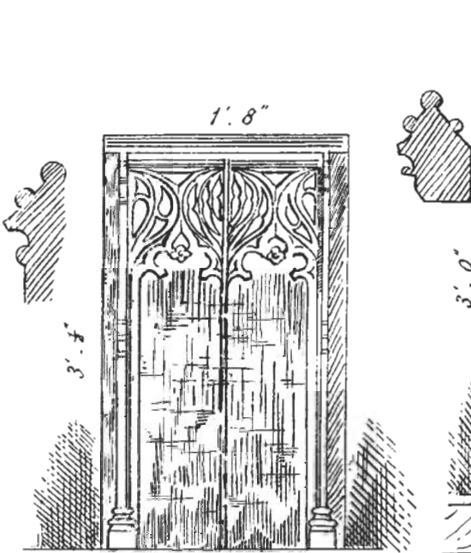
The country in this neighbourhood seems in those early times to have been for the most part wild forest land. Horewood Gate Farm still testifies to the vicinity of Horewood Forest, and the old oak seats and panelling, formerly in all the churches, shew how plentiful that timber was in the neighbourhood; the large commons,

still undrained, give some slight idea of the general appearance of the country at the period to which I advert.

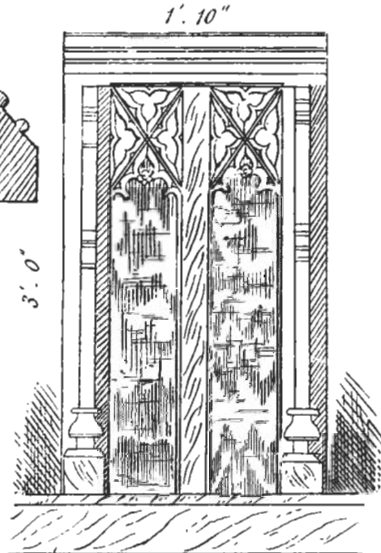
*Old Sodbury Church* is evidently Norman in plan, with a very long chancel, north and south transepts, nave with aisles having Transition Norman arcades, the capital of each pillar being, I believe, different in design. I may mention here that the whole of the church, with the exception of the tower, has been rebuilt upon the old foundations at a quite recent date.

Although we may deplore the destruction of ancient work by rebuilding of such a church as this, we cannot but approve of the effect of the arrangements carried out by the architect. We must not forget that ancient churches were built primarily for the glory and worship of God, and that the plan and arrangements were adapted to the ritual appointed for the carrying out that worship in the most reverent and dignified manner. Every true churchman and archaeologist cannot but deplore the reckless destruction which, through ignorance, has in too many instances been committed, and is still being committed, under the misappropriated term "Restoration."

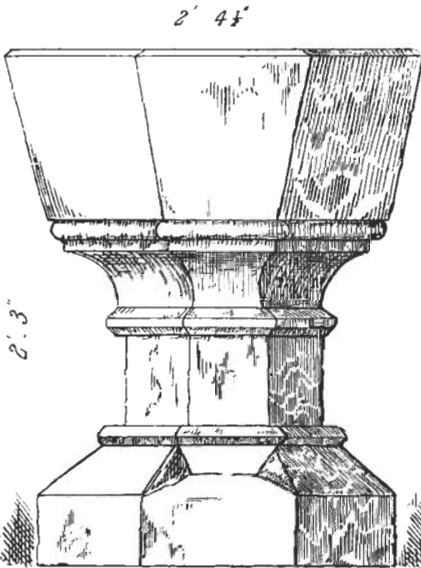
The original plan of this church, which was erected in the first quarter of the 13th century, consisted of a chancel, which has been lengthened by 8ft., the chancel arch having been carried further westward to that extent in the recent alterations, north and south transepts, formerly chapels, separated from the church by Early English arches of about 8 ft. wide, and walls reaching to the nave, which is long, and has north and south aisles, rather narrow, with Transition Norman arcades, the capitals of the columns being all different in design as stated above. The tower is at the west end of the nave, and it is original. There is no indication that there was ever a central tower, nor is there any tradition that such a tower ever existed. The church of Tormarton, the adjoining parish, which is of the same character, has also an early western tower, and a western porch with a chamber over it, now removed. At Old Sodbury also is a good south porch with a fine internal late Norman doorway, fortunately but little injured by the recent "restoration." The tower also remains almost untouched—a little low village tower with very thick walls having



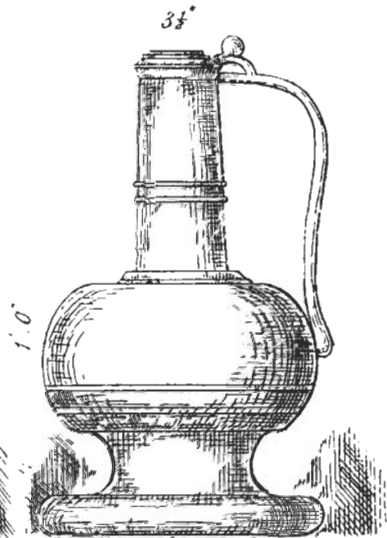
Old Oak Bench Ends  
Old Sodbury Church.  
Fig. 1.



Old Oak Benches  
Old Sodbury Church.  
Fig. 2.



Font Chipping Sodbury Church.  
Fig. 3.



Pewter Ewer found in digging.  
Chipping Sodbury Church.  
Fig. 4.

not much architectural detail, but very good and simple in its way. There are two Early English windows, one at the west end of each aisle, also some very pretty decorated windows in the chancel, as pretty as any in this neighbourhood.

The north transept contains two tombs in arched recesses of the Decorated period containing effigies of Knights in armour. One of them is carved in oak similar to an effigy in the church of Chew Magna. This effigy is said to be that of Philip le Gros, and the effigy in the other recess is stated to represent his son. This latter effigy has been much mutilated, but it has a very good pointed shield. The font is octagonal, with quartrefoil panels and good mouldings, and, apparently, of the 15th century, being the usual type of that period.<sup>1</sup> It has been scraped all over, but I am told it is the original one. This church, before its alteration, contained many valuable remains of wood-work in its ancient seating (See *Plate III. figs. 1 and 2, Pl. IV. fig. 4*); we must all regret they were not preserved. The linen pattern is one of the best I have ever seen. When we consider the troublous times during which this church was built, and also the condition of the country, with Berkeley Castle not far away, Yate Court, another fortified house of the Berkeleys, very near, and the hills not over-peopled even now, we can quite understand the object of this church having small windows and openings and a low strong western tower to render it capable of defence.

The view also from this place of the line of church towers, which follow the ancient road from Bristol into the hill country, is, in this part of the county, very remarkable. Iron Aeton almost like a castle; Yate, more modern in appearance—twin sister to Westerleigh and Chipping Sodbury. Then Old Sodbury, and, farther on, Tormarton—all, excepting Yate, seeming to have been built more for use than beauty. The ancient inn at the bottom of Old Sodbury Hill also appears to be a relic of the same period.

*Chipping Sodbury Church* was no doubt erected in the 13th century, when the country was becoming somewhat more settled and money more plentiful, the market probably contributing

<sup>1</sup> It is well figured in Paley's *Fonts*, and consequently is not new.

much to the prosperity of the town. Judging from the remains on the eastern side of the chancel arch, the chancel, as first built, was smaller, and not so high as the present one. The old builders almost invariably commenced their churches at the east end, so that the offices of religion might be celebrated with becoming decency and reverence as soon as possible. But we do not find here any remains of the early side chapels into which the present arcades must once have opened, although we find, apparently, 13th century capitals used as corbels for the 15th century roof in the north aisle. The present side chapels were no doubt, built in the 15th century, the southern one near the close of that century ; still, we should expect to find some indication at least of the earlier work. The present chancel arch is, I think, the oldest existing portion of the church, and has a very pretty arch supported on corbels (*Plate IV., fig. 3*). Remains of 15th century decoration in colours were found on the walls. The table courses of the former roof appear on the eastern side, and clearly shew there was formerly a smaller chancel, perhaps without side chapels, and that the present chancel was built upon a larger scale with the intention of having two side chapels opening into it. Just at that period Lady chapels came into use. The eastern side of the bay of the first pier of the north aisle is clearly of 14th century work, and seems to have been built with the idea of completing the church upon a grander scale, but something must have prevented this being carried out, perhaps the Black Death, which ravaged the country about this period. The arrangement of the north-east arch as a flying buttress to the chancel clearly proves its having been built to resist the thrust of the chancel arches. The seat-like base to this pier is, probably, placed for the purpose of securing a broader foundation. As the town prospered, first the north aisle in the early part of the 15th century, and then the south aisle and porch in the latter part of the same century were erected. A stone pulpit of 15th century work is placed on the west side of the first pier of the north aisle above-mentioned. It has a stone seat at its base, and at the back of the pulpit is a small circular-headed opening of much later construction. It has at the back of it this inscription : "Tobias Davis his charge." Preaching

had at that time become popular among the lower classes, and it may have been placed in this position for acoustic reasons. There is a beautiful incised slab in the north chapel, which probably commemorates some Flemish merchant who had settled here. The tower appears to be of about the same date as the south aisle, and it is worthy of remark that the builders here and at Yate have taken the precaution, in order to prevent danger to the nave by the settlement of the tower, to omit all bonding of the nave walls with those of the tower. The screens between the chancel and side chapels and the nave and aisles were of different heights, as appears from the steps and the cills of the doors remaining in the walls in the north aisle. A portion of an old oak screen still remains, I think, in the south aisle. The north chapel would seem to have belonged to the gild of cloth-workers, and they would have had images of the patron saints of their craft on their own chapel. Probably the doorway now leading into the vestry formerly led into a chantry chapel<sup>1</sup> behind the tomb in the north chancel chapel, which, I imagine, was the work of the cloth-workers who then abounded in this part of Gloucestershire. The north door of the church is of 14th century work, and probably on the rebuilding a century or more later this door was rebuilt into it.

The font also is an early one of elegant design (See *Plate IV. fig. 3*). The old pewter bottle (*fig. 4*) in the same Plate is an elegant and interesting object. It was dug up in forming the chamber for the heating apparatus, and bears on it the date 1670. Whether the groining of the tower is original or not I am uncertain, except as to the springers of the ribs, which are so.

The tower, in its simple details and good proportions, is a noble one, and must have been of great service in those days when most of the houses were built of timber, and so liable to fire and floods, the latter not unusual in the lands bordering on the Severn, the

<sup>1</sup> This was the only chantry in Sodbury. It was called the Brotherhood or Gild of Chipping Sodbury, and was founded by Thomas Hampton and others in the time of King Henry VI. for two priests to celebrate at the altar of St. Mary within the chapel or church of the said Chipping Sodbury, praying for the good estate of the said King, and, after his death, for his soul, the founder's souls and all christian souls (See ante Vol. VIII., p. 277).—ED.

truth is the mediæval builder always built with a purpose, and not for mere prettiness as is too often done now. The remains of the churchyard cross are in the garden of the Roman Catholic Priest, who most courteously shewed them to the Society.

The ancient altar slab measuring 7 ft. 10 ins. by 2 ft. 10 ins., with four of the dedication crosses still remaining, the fifth being obliterated, lies under the altar, having in the year 1745 been appropriated as a gravestone by a certain James Hardwyk.

*Little Sodbury Church.* Nearly every portion of this building has been removed, which we regret the more as it must have formed, with the old manor house, a most picturesque group. I cannot remember it, although I must have seen it many times. Mr. Hasluck informs me the present church is an exact copy of the old one, with this difference, the old one had flat roofs covered with lead, old oak seats, of which part have been used up, so far as the linen pattern panels are concerned. The destruction of the old Elizabethan family pew of the manor house at the east end of the aisle we much regret, and how quaint these old woodworks were we all know. A small portion of the tower still remains, with a Holy Water Stoup in the wall.

The church is dedicated to S. Adelina, a very unusual name, of whom Father Grant, S.J., has kindly given me the following information :—

“S. Adelina appears to be the diminutive of S. Adela, probably the same as is honoured in Belgium, Jany. 8th, by the Benedictine nuns of Messiene, near Ypres, which monastery she had founded.”

The old steps remain leading from manor house to church. You will notice the connection with the low countries in S. Adela. It is the cloth trade again.