

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

S. Mary Abchurch with S. Lawrence Pountney

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1898, Vol. 21, 202-204

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S. MARY ABCHURCH WITH S. LAWRENCE POUNTNEY.

By E. GUY DAWBER.

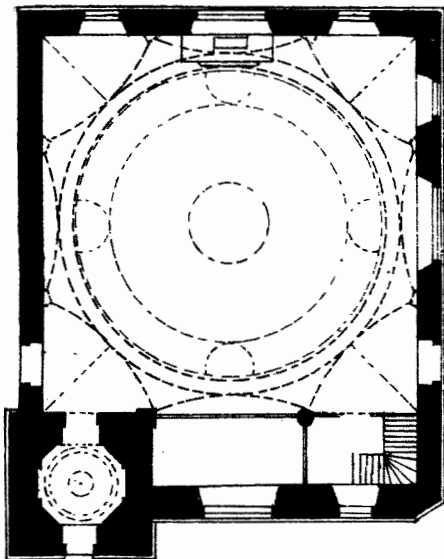
THIS church originally was in the gift of the Prior and Convent of S. Mary Overy, but from them it passed to the neighbouring College of Corpus Christi, founded in the Church of S. Lawrence Pountney. At the suppression of the monasteries it came to the Crown, and was given to Archbishop Parker, who gave it, in 1568, to Corpus Christi College at Cambridge. The original Church of S. Lawrence Pountney, or Poultney, which was consumed in the Great Fire, was not rebuilt, and was incorporated with the present one we see.

There is nothing of beauty or artistic interest in the exterior, if we except the tower, which can hardly be considered one of Wren's successes. It is of simple red brick, with stone dressings surmounted by a lead-covered spire 140 feet in height.

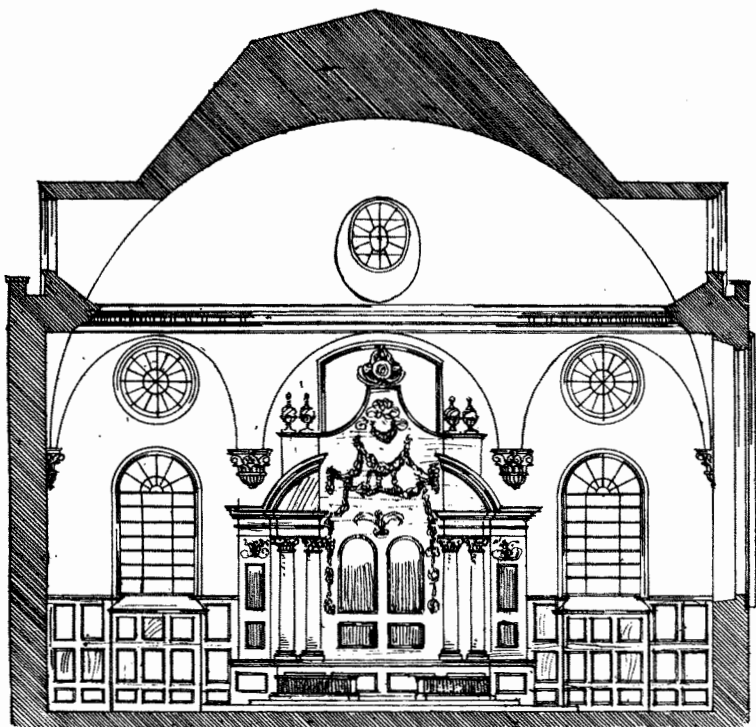
The interior, however, is strikingly beautiful, and the richness of the decorations combine to render it a very storehouse of seventeenth century Art. Here we see the work of three of the greatest artists of their day—Sir C. Wren, the architect, Sir James Thornhill, the painter, and Grinling Gibbons, the wood-carver; and the three, working together, have left us a standing monument to their ability.

Mr. Birch tells us, in his very beautiful work on the City Churches, that it receives its distinguishing title from its position on the ground rising very rapidly from the river, for in old records it is often met with as "Upchurch," which has been corrupted to "Abchurch."

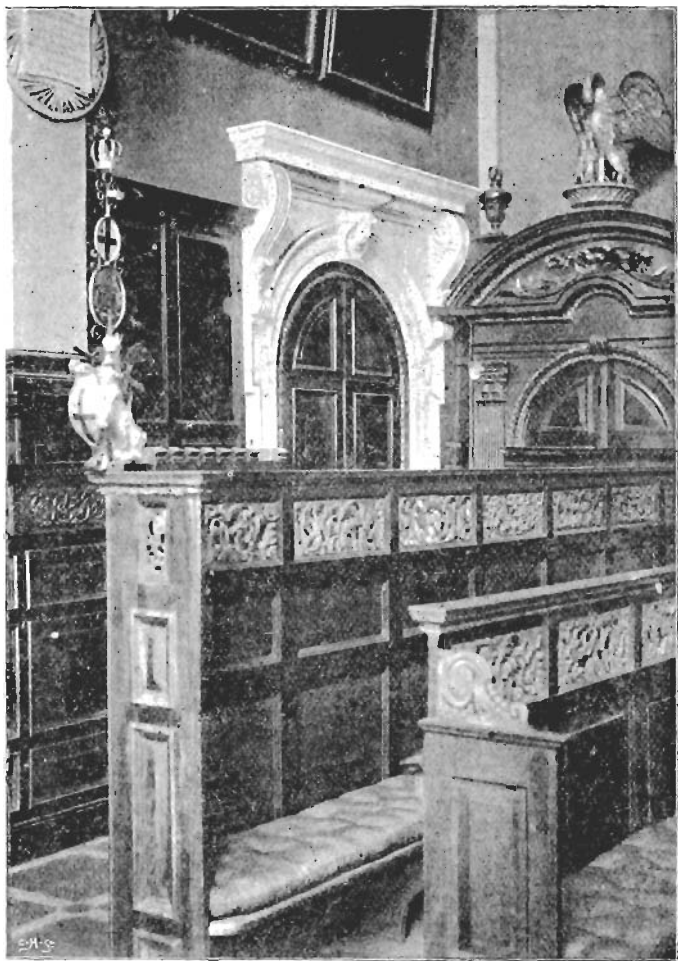
The plan, which is somewhat similar to S. Swithin's, is



PLAN OF ST. MARY ABCHURCH.



ST. MARY ABCHURCH—SECTION.



ST. MARY ABCHURCH. NORTH WEST CORNER.

most interesting, being almost a square of 65 feet by 60 feet, and without pillars, except for the one at the west end, set in line with the tower, which projects into the church at the north-west angle, and leaves the rest of the space free for the treatment of the dome, which covers the whole of the internal area.

This is carried by pendentives springing from Corinthian pilasters and corbels, from eight points in the circle. These pendentives are arched between each springing, to allow of the insertion of circular windows, and are groined back into the angles of the square. From the top of the arches there is a bold circular cantilever cornice, from which springs the great dome, pierced with oval lights on all four sides.

It is painted by Sir James Thornhill, and though the subjects are difficult to make out, yet the rich colouring makes a very beautiful and harmonious ceiling. The lower range between the openings are probably the Christian virtues and graces, with shells and heavy festoonings, treated in a decorative manner, and in the upper portion the Heavenly host adoring the name of Jehovah at the summit.

The east wall is filled with three windows, the centre one of which is covered by a lofty oak altar-piece. The south side has a similar arrangement, but here the central one is glazed and the south-western one formed into a door, which has a very beautiful carved oak case ; another being opposite, on the north side.

Across the west end, separating the vestry from the church and under the gallery, is a panelled oak screen, with another beautiful door-case, with an arched head, but more simple in treatment. The front of the gallery is a fine example of moulded and carved panel work ; and I should like to draw your particular attention to the very beautiful series of pierced and carved panels in the upper parts of the seats, which are of excellent beauty.

The seats in the body of the church and in the chancel have been cut down and made up out of the old material, but at the west end and along the north side the original

seating can be seen. The church is panelled all round to a height of eleven feet; and here it is well to emphasise the way in which Wren employed his materials to the best advantage. The oak is always English, well selected, for the seats and fittings; the plaster-work rich and varied, and crisply and vigorously modelled; and the carving always admirably executed and designed for the exact place it has to fill—notice the panels, etc.

The great feature is the eastern altar-piece, quite the glory of the church, and very magnificently carved and treated. All the beautiful festoon and wreath work is unquestionably from the hands of Grinling Gibbons, and as fine as anything he has ever executed; and Sir Jas. Thornhill was said to have himself painted the fruit and flowers after Nature—a very doubtful compliment to Gibbons!

The pulpit, with its sounding-board and original staircase, though similar in design to others of Wren's, yet merits the most careful attention, and the font cover in the little Baptistry under the gallery especially so. This has a carved octagonal base, upon which stands a four-sided pedestal, with niches on each side containing statuettes of the four Evangelists, crowned by a pyramidal roof, ending in a circular finial, which screws up and down as required. The sword and mace-bearers in wrought iron and the quaint alms-boxes should also be noticed.

The paving in the church is modern, but in the Baptistry you can see the original black and white marble so characteristic of Wren's work.

The church was finished in 1686.