

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

**The Architecture of the Church of St. Michael, Ledbury**

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1920, Vol. 42, 63-68

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THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CHURCH OF  
ST. MICHAEL, LEDBURY.

By SPENCER H. BICKHAM.

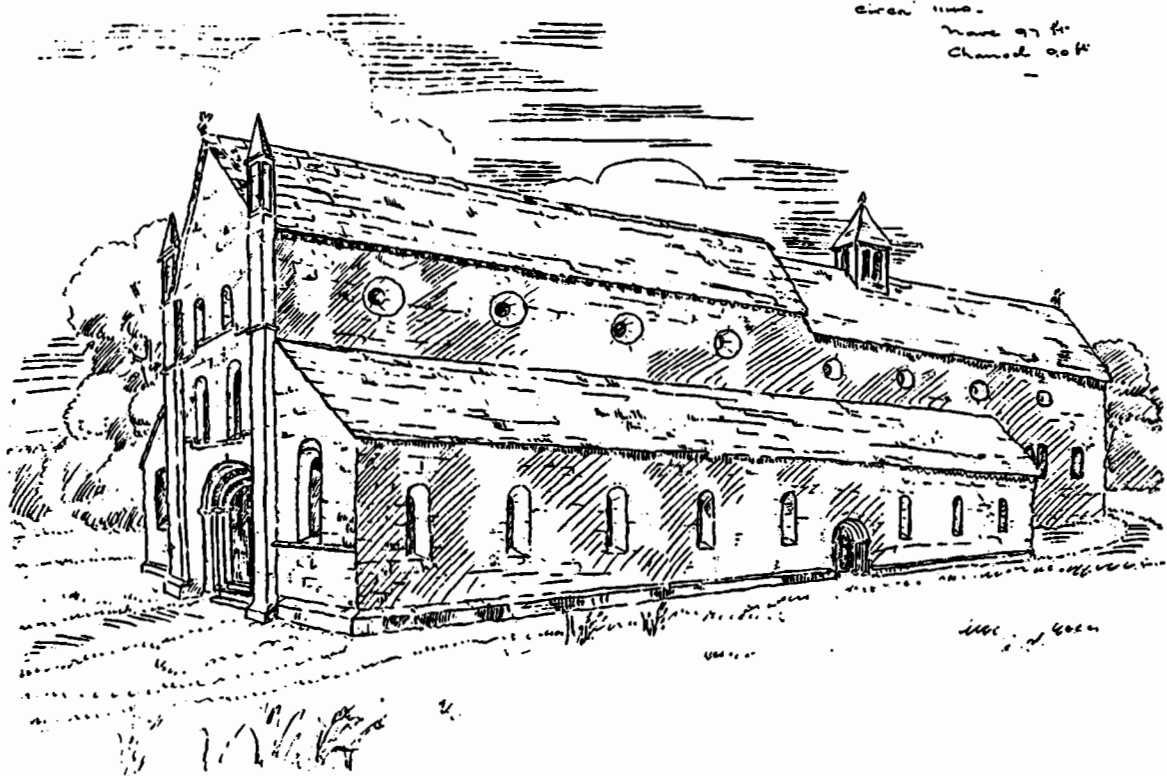
AT least three churches have existed on the site of the present one. There stood on a portion of the site of the present church, how far back I cannot tell but anterior to the advent of Norman architecture in this country, a church of which the only remains are a brick wall 5 feet in thickness now buried under the north pier arcade of the nave, the length being as great or nearly as great as the present nave. I have seen the wall and possess a plan of it.

At the time of the Conquest this had been replaced by a church of Norman architecture, the remains of which are to be found in the bases of round pillars in the north pier arcade—in a low respond near the pulpit showing both the termination of the pier arcade and of the probably groined roof of the aisle—in the jamb of an ancient door on the south side of the chancel; and it has been suggested that the square bases which support the circular pillars in the chancel belong to the same period.

In Domesday Book we read under Liedeberge (Ledbury) "of this manor the priest has  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hides. In the time of King Edward (Confessor) it was worth ten pounds, afterwards and now eight pounds. The priest's property is worth fifty pence." We are however, more immediately concerned with the present church.

Like so many other churches of early Norman architecture, this building of ante-conquest date was rebuilt apparently about 1140. The part now existent consists of the whole of the chancel and the west front of the nave. The north and south walls of the chancel

Sedbury Church  
 circa 1140.  
 nave 97 ft.  
 chancel 20 ft.



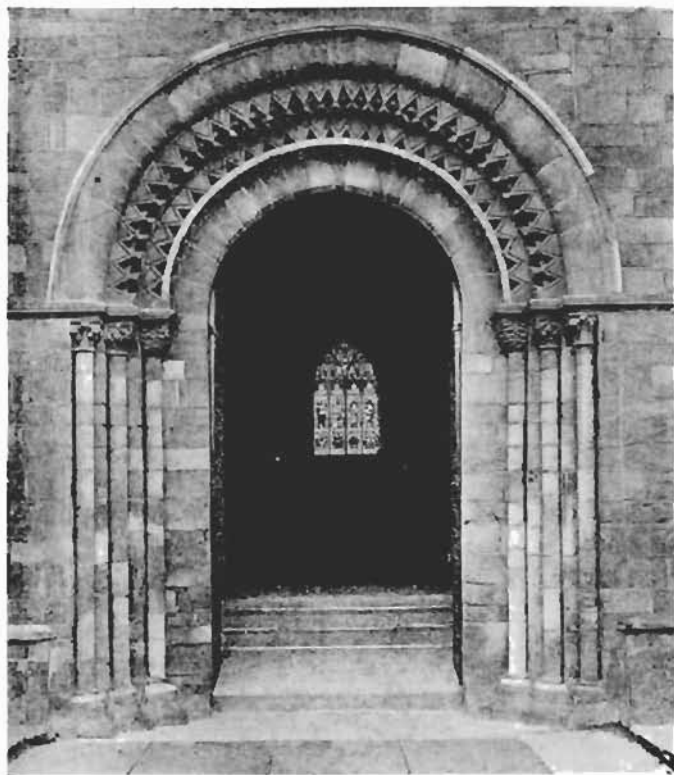
LEDBURY CHURCH, as it is presumed to have been circa 1140.

had originally each *three* round-headed deeply splayed windows. Of these one only (the most easternly) in each wall still remains, the two others having been replaced by a geometrical window on the south (1315-25) and a perpendicular one on the north (1450-80); but the walls fortunately retain the outline of the original Norman windows. In like manner the east wall which originally was pierced with three Norman windows (the bases of which are still to be seen behind the altar-piece) has been altered and a large transitional perpendicular window been substituted. A good deal of the stained glass in the upper part of this window is old.

The west front with its beautiful doorway embellished with rich roll mouldings and elaborate carving of the capitals of the shafts has only been altered by, again, the substitution of a late window for the two original round headed Norman ones, the outlines of which still exist, as do also the graceful and uncommon Norman pinnacles.

It follows that the church built *circa* 1140 was of the same length as the present one, namely: nave 97 feet, chancel 90 feet; but its appearance was very different both from without and from within. The round low arches of the chancel were continued down the nave, while on either side was a narrow aisle 10 feet only wide with a lean-to roof, the dripstone of which is to be seen on both walls of the chancel underneath the curious circular clerestory windows which doubtless were also continued down the nave.<sup>1</sup> The low outer walls of the aisles would be pierced with round-headed windows; but as these and the very small clerestory windows were the only means of admitting light the church must have been dark. Nor externally, with the exception of the west front, can it have been attractive, with the long

<sup>1</sup> These circular clerestory windows are not common, but good examples of them are to be seen in Southwell Minster and Avebury Church, near Marlborough.



WEST DOOR (enlarged).



WINDOWS IN SOUTH AISLE

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straight roofs of the chancel and nave apparently unrelieved by a tower (Plate I).

But a most important alteration was made when (1280-1300) the old Norman aisles were removed and wide ones substituted, the roofs of the chancel and nave being at the same time raised to their present height. The new aisles were covered with pitched roofs of the same height as the nave and the present large windows inserted (Early English in design on the north and cusped on the south), which make the church as singular for its abundance of light as it must have been formerly for the deficiency of it. The conception of this transmogrification shows much architectural ability. Unfortunately in the execution of the work there is less to admire, for the north pier-arcade (the south one has been rebuilt) is of poor construction and the windows in the north and south walls are of indifferent workmanship, though those on the south are interesting as showing the earliest idea of geometrical tracery (Plate II). Any defect in these windows is, however, retrieved by the beautiful proportions of the east and west windows of the north aisles with their elegant shafts and bands and tracery of cusped circles (quatrefoils). These windows, which are exceptional in their elongation, are supposed to have been made in imitation of similar ones in Hereford Cathedral, placed there by Bishop Aquablanca in 1250.

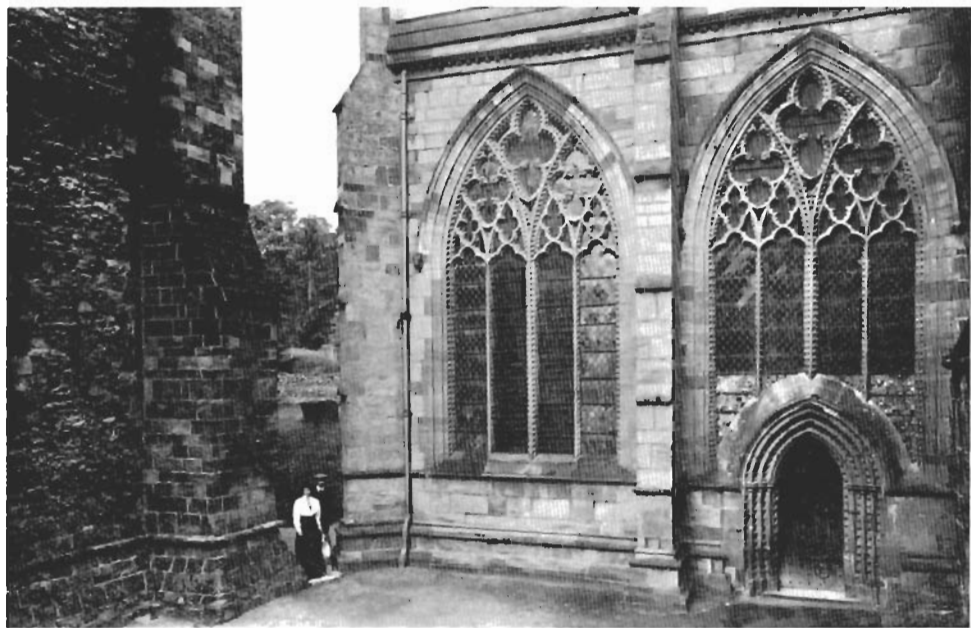
The last change made in the church was the addition of what has been known as St. Catharine's Chapel. In 1399, licence was granted the then Bishop of Hereford (John Trefnant) to found a chantry "in the Church of Ledbury for the souls of the King and Bishop," and in 1401 Letters Patent were granted to enlarge this into a college consisting of a warden and eight chaplains, the income of the prebends of Overhall and Netherhall, Ledbury, being devoted to the endowment of the college. The nine stalls are still to be seen in the choir. Ledbury

Church then became collegiate. No documentary evidence is forthcoming as to the reason for the erection of this addition; but as the probable date of the building coincides with the elevation of the church to collegiate dignity and there is nothing in it to infer that it was used as a chapel or chapels, I am strongly of opinion that it was the chapter house of the collegiate church. Whatever may have been the original purpose of the building, the door and windows are excellent examples of rich geometrical tracery with mouldings and mullions covered, both externally and internally, with delicately executed ball-flower ornament, almost to excess (Plate III). Professor Bond considered them inferior to none he had seen.

As already stated, the addition is known as St. Catharine's chapel, and has been supposed to have been built either by Ledbury's patron saint or through her instrumentality. It is interesting to note that the terminals (finials) to the mouldings over the entrance from the aisle are the heads of two religious women (Catharine and her maid Mabel?). This Catharine Audley, the recluse of Ledbury, was a cousin of Edward II., and was granted an annuity of £30 for her piety and worth.

The legend of St. Catharine is that it was revealed to her that she should not set up her rest till she should come to a place where the church-bells rang of themselves. She and her maid Mabel, coming near Ledbury, heard the bells ring, though the church-doors were shut and no ringers were to be found. Certain it seems that here she spent her life and built a hermitage. Her name and that of her maid are perpetuated in such names as "Catharine's acre" and "Mabel's furlong" and probably in the building we are considering, and are commemorated in a sonnet by Wordsworth.

In this same building against the south wall, now standing upright in a recess, is the effigy of a priest in



WINDOWS IN CHAPTER HOUSE.

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EFFIGY OF PRIEST IN EUCHARISTIC  
VESTMENTS.



SOUTH AISLE, showing Corbel-table of Norman roof and  
dripstone under Clerestory Windows.

eucharistic vestments. It was disinterred from the centre of the building when the present font was put there (Plate IV).

Mr. Bloxam in his book on *Ecclesiastical Vestments*, says :—" Till the 14th century sculptured sepulchral effigies of ecclesiastics who had attained no higher grade than that of priesthood are rare. A fine and interesting example of the 13th century is, however, preserved in Ledbury Church. Few effigies of the kind are indeed more interesting than this, or in a better state of preservation." He then gives elaborate details of the vestments, a copy of which I have had printed ; and it hangs by the side of the effigy.

In the lady chapel is a tomb and effigy of a lady whom Ledburians would fondly associate with the Catharine to whom I have already referred, without, I fear, any evidence to support their aspirations.

An interesting feature in the church is the hagioscope in the wall between the lady chapel and the chancel. In pre-reformation days the high altar probably stood between the aumbries. When in this position the celebrant at mass would be in direct line with the angle of the hagioscope and at the elevation of the Host the sanctus-bell could be rung in the bellcot of which it is supposed the block of masonry above the then roof is a part.

There are two mural monuments of interest in the chancel. One to Dr. Hoskyns, vicar of Ledbury (1612-1631) and another to Dr. Thornton, master of St. Katharine's hospital, Ledbury, vice-chancellor of Oxford and tutor to Sir Philip Sidney. He was born in 1541 and died in 1629.

In the sanctuary is a canopied monument of Edward and Elizabeth Skynner, 1631. It will have struck the visitor when approaching the church that the tower is detached. There are 15 churches in England which

have towers so placed, and 7 of these are in Herefordshire. Why they were built away from the church itself has caused much discussion, without, I believe, any satisfactory solution being arrived at. The lower part of the tower was built c. 1300 and is of very plain design. It was surmounted by a shingle spire. In 1733 this was removed, the tower raised one storey and the present graceful spire erected (Plate V).

The height of the tower is now 76 feet ; spire 127 feet ; total 203 feet, making the spire to be three-fifths of the total elevation. The usual rule in England is for the tower to be only rather less in height than the spire.

I lay no claim to any personal originality for any remarks I have made. If there be suggestions which are in any sense new, I am indebted for them to Mr. Francis Bond, who during courses of Oxford extension lectures on architecture here spent many days with me in this church ; and I have done my best to incorporate his views in my paper.



WEST END OF CHURCH, showing Norman Door and Pinnacles.

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