

SCREENWORK IN THE COUNTY OF SUFFOLK.

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PART I. DEVELOPMENT AND TYPES.

The Elizabethan Injunction which ordered the removal of such rood-lofts as still existed in 1561 strictly ordained that "the beam running in length over the vaults," and everything below it, should be left intact. Where the loft was already removed no alteration was to be "otherwise attempted." A new structure was allowed only "so it be to the height of the upper beam aforesaid." Where no partition was left at all, it was ordered that "there be one appointed."

So runs the law. How thoroughly the Church has broken it the empty eyesore of the vaulting-spandrels at Woolpit or Yaxley, the lameness of the beautiful fragments at Kersey or Westhall, the disfiguring muddy paint at Walsham or Dennington, the utter emptiness of the chancel arch in so fine a church as Stoke-by-Nayland, all testify too well. The tale is the sadder in that at least as much of this illegal vandalism was committed in the "age of reason" and in the time of pseudo-Gothic enthusiasm which succeeded it as in the intemperate days of the Reformation and Rebellion. It is extraordinary that even when the "superstitions" once connected with it were forgotten cultured men could be blind to the primitive demand for mystery and for order which the *veil* of the Jewish and Apostolic age, the *roodscreen* and *iconostasis* of the Medieval, arose to satisfy.

Our parish rood screens have been variously derived. Francis Bond¹ suggests that we owe them to the Roman basilica, in a combination of the sanctuary collonade before the apse with the low marble parapet surrounding the choir, so forming a single parapet-collonade—first within the nave, and later (with the eastward extension of the apse) at the position of the chancel arch. He cites the famous Reculver collonade, and triple chancel arches generally; though it will presently be seen, in connection with the screen at Bramford, that the latter certainly have also other factors of origin.

The second theory is that of development from the early, and Eastern, practice of veiling the act of consecration. This theory, though leaving room for some confusion between the sanctuary-veil and the lenten-veil (which alone remained in the later middle ages), has definite Anglo-Saxon authority, and even some support from that codifier of ecclesiastical custom the thirteenth-century Durandus.² Here it is interesting to note that at Shepreth, Cambs., curtains are still hung behind the low and narrow Norman chancel arch, which is also fenced with a wooden lattice such as experts have supposed within such early arches. It is also well known that long after the supersession of Celtic uses in England, our English builders still stuck to the native traditions, and planned their churches according to the Celtic attitude of mystery. At Gedding (Suffolk), where the thirteenth-century chancel is so small that a veiling of the sanctuary would most conveniently be effected at the chancel entrance itself, there was until the modern construction of two narrow lateral openings no connection between nave and chancel but this single doorway of six feet wide.

1. Screens and Galleries in English Churches.

2. For a full statement of this theory see Bligh Bond & Camm, "Rood-screens and Roodlofts."

Perhaps the truth lies in a view which includes both the Roman sense of order and the Celtic feeling for mystery ; both require the screen. Indeed, to medieval Christendom, and especially to medieval England, its absence was unthinkable ; and two great architectural districts in this country independently evolved a type of church (that of Blythburgh and Covehithe and of the later churches of the West), in which the screen, in addition to its other functions, was called upon to take the place of the structural division of the building itself, and in which its removal renders a Catholic church into a senseless meeting-house.

The development of the rood-screen and loft, till it attained the perfection and variety of the fifteenth century, is bound up with that of ecclesiastical use and ceremonial and of polyphonic music. Nevertheless, it is a story which can only be told in terms of the growth of English craftsmanship.

The early woodworker was the slave of the smith and the mason. His doors and chests owed their life and beauty to the splendid elaboration of the ironworker ; his screens were copies in wood of that which was only proper and effective in stone. His tracery, as at Fritton (Suffolk) or Burstall, was labouriously pierced and moulded from thick and long horizontal boards, and clumsily built up upon shafts which in unconstructural manner and inadequate scale imitated from a distance the works of the mason, in strong contrast with the frankly *boarded* construction adopted in the base. Notice in the Burstall screen how at a distance all the careful moulding disappears, so that the subordinate members of the tracery alone relieve the clumsiness of the general scale ; and how the gaps between the capitals of the shafts and the band of tracery they nominally support offend one's sense of sincerity in construction. The earlier and more rigid example at Fritton, though not without a certain

charm, has not even the grace of the other's variety. But for a really typical piece of lithic construction it is necessary to cross the Norfolk border. At East Harling are all the characteristics to be seen at Burstall and Fritton in a still earlier and more marked degree, with the added concealment of paint and the added emphasis of finer workmanship. The dado-rail has all the appearance of a stone sill; the pierced and battlemented cresting has hardly even the distinguishing modification of scale.

The emancipation of the woodcarver from his apprenticeship to the mason is marked by some most interesting stages and examples. At Finchingfield, not far from the Essex border, there still appears the unconstructive horizontal band of tracery with its shafts and capitals and anulets, and the charming human ornaments in the hollow of the cornice are still too small and scattered; but the tracery, which has distinct ancestry in the Burstall type, is now reduced to a scale which corresponds with that of the shafts; and the benefit derived from the change to a more flamboyant manner of architecture is clearly apparent in a new freedom far more appropriate to the material. A slight effort of the imagination, projecting the shafts to the head of the screen, but retaining the arched, cusped and moulded principals and also the subordinate tracery, makes visible to the mind the graceful type of Grundisburgh or of the more rectilinear examples at Scarning (Norfolk) or Cowlinge.

The roodscreen at Grundisburgh is a superb example of the new style. The clumsy methods of the fourteenth-century are superseded by logical and satisfying construction. The muntins are framed into the beam, and ogee arches carry properly-subordinated tracery of the Perpendicular type so essentially appropriate to a fibrous medium. The arched and vaulted head was to introduce modifications which would conceal

this construction, and to reduce the tracery to the proportions of a mere fringe within the arch ; but not all the change and variety of a brilliant century of elaboration was to destroy the fundamental means. But this example is not in advance of contemporary development, having yet many features which recall its lithic ancestry. Notice the still narrow spacing of the muntins, the elaborate and minute moulding of the arches, the wide empty panels below the rail, the tracery built up of its three separate horizontal boards, with the vertical members cut across the grain. Notice also the still naturalised treatment of the crockets, and their sharpness of edge and convexity of surface ; and compare this with the conventionalised treatment they were later to receive—tight-closed and lumpy as at Bramfield, or flowering and imperial as at Sibton—or with the stylised naturalism of the delightful carving in the doorhead of the south parclose at Barking. The early naturalism of the crockets of the Grundisburgh screen is even surpassed at Scarning, where ornament is produced in this style which in its delicacy of execution rivals even the vine-trails of the West.

At Scarning there occurs another feature, already vanished from the otherwise more primitive screen at Grundisburgh, which recalls a fresh aspect of the transitional stage in construction. I refer to the projection of the head of the ogee—from which, however, this upper stage is distinguished by a slight band or capital—in the shape of a floriated fillet within the hollow of the cornice. This is also seen at Lavenham, where it may be remarked, it could hardly be more ' Decorated ' in character than in some of its examples at Scarning. The roodscreen at Lavenham, in addition to other typically fourteenth-century characteristics—the tiny crocketed pediments and diminutive heads carved upon the muntins, the assertive bulbous crockets of the

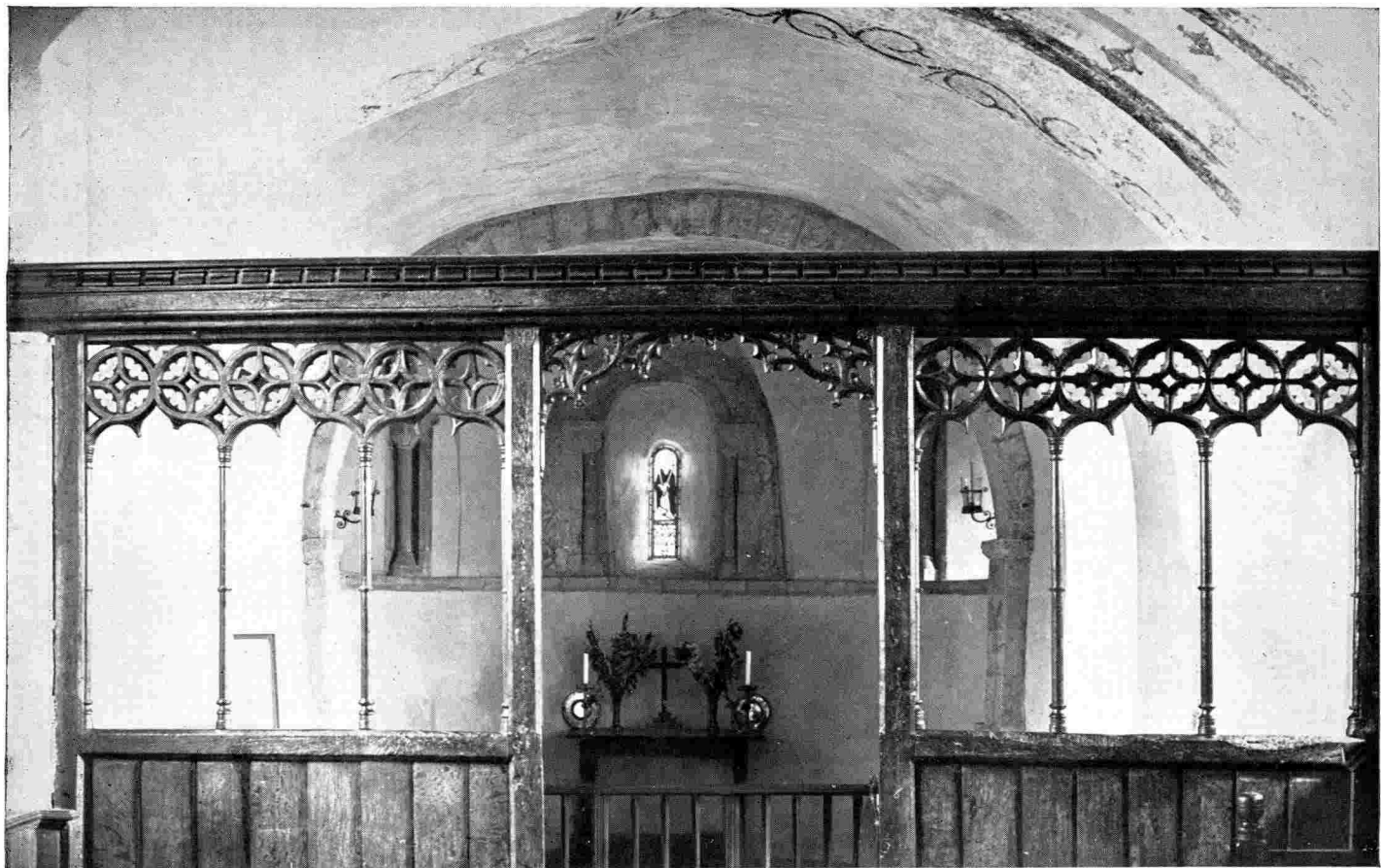
ogees, the broad and rounded surface of the tracery with its shallow cusps, the perilous and cross-grained methods of constructing and framing the tracery itself—presents the further curious compromise of arched with framed construction in its extraordinary open spandrels. These not only cause an ugly gap in the design, but clearly betray the imperfect reconciliation of the now largely solid muntins with the transverse beam above. The narrow apex of the arches, and the slender pinnacles between, are a singularly unsatisfying support for a roodloft. These conditions are more perfectly illustrated outside Suffolk. In the parclooses of S. Nicholas', King's Lynn, and in the earlier, Geometric work at S. Mary's Hospital, Chichester, the arch is replaced by a wide pediment, thus leaving a gaping triangle within the spandrels.

The story of this attainment to a practical and graceful solution of the problem of construction, fascinating as it is, is yet surpassed in interest by the wonder and variety of the century of achievement which it made possible. For in this century, which saw that magnificent tide of rebuilding by the East Anglian wool merchants and traders, the woodworker found his opportunity. Godly piety and civic pride were combined in an effort and competition after beauty, of which the glowing dignity and endless variety to be seen in the roodscreens and font-covers of Norfolk and Suffolk was the result. This spirit of "improved copying" has been ably emphasised by Mr. Howard³; and may readily be seen in the very human pages of Dr. Cox's "Churchwardens' Accounts." It is, of course, the lifeblood of all Gothic art; but never was the opportunity so ample and so rich, never were artist and patron so conscious of their means and aims.

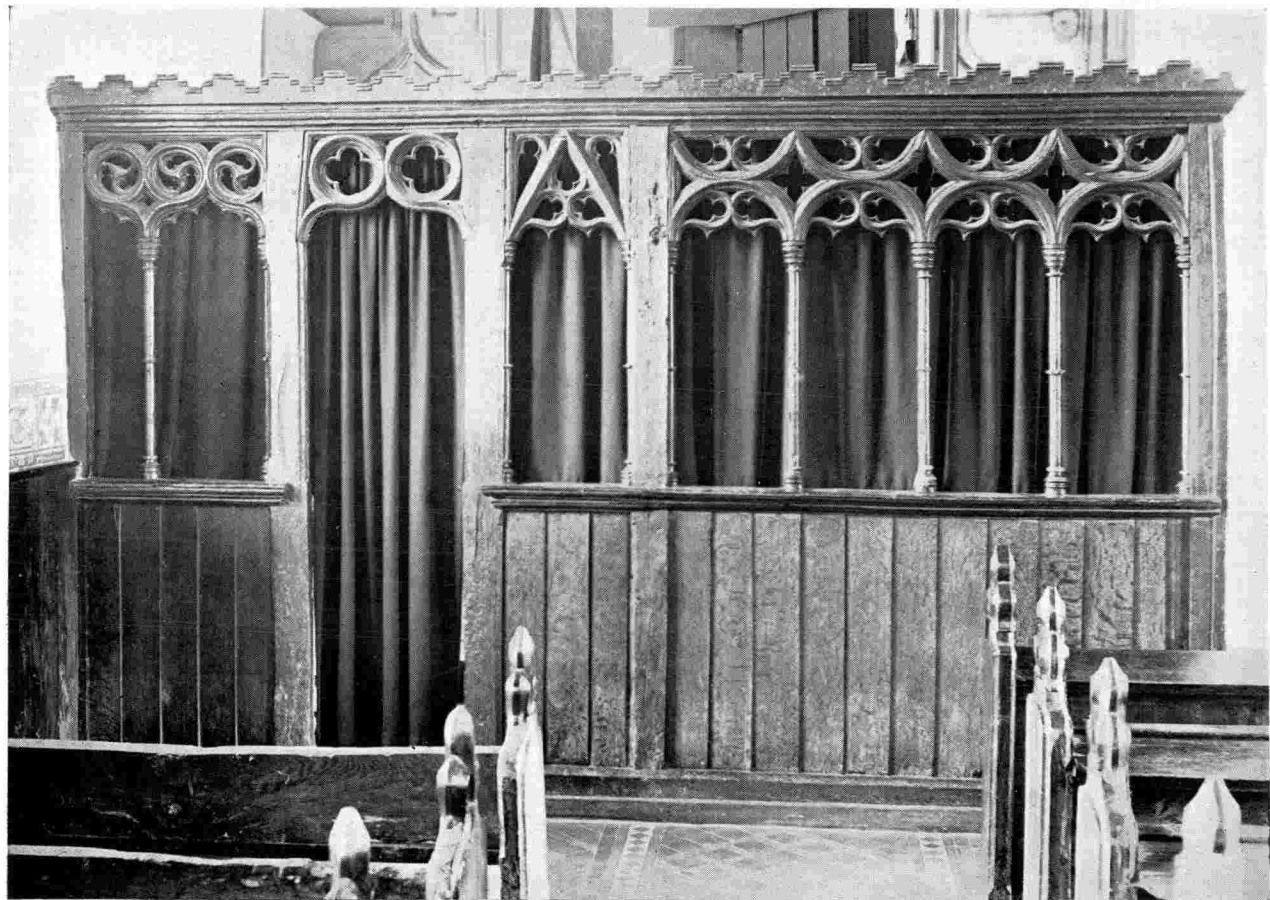
3. Howard and Crossley, "English Church Woodwork," 2nd edition.

The rich variety of this phenomenon is seen most obviously in the broader comparison of county with county. Cambridgeshire, for example, a neighbour county lying on the borders of the Midlands, throws most valuable light on our Suffolk examples, and is full of such interest, both in the history of the chancel screen in stone, and in the matter of fifteenth century types in wood.

Let us consider the latter. The primitive type, such as the westward screen to the Ely Chapel at Willingham, though earlier than anything I have met with in Suffolk, and therefore an interesting supplement to our own primitive material, belongs to the "Cathedral" epoch, and shows none of the local peculiarity of the age of the parish church. But the second definite style is full of significance. Of such is the tower screen at Guilden Morden. Here the tracery is small in scale and "Decorated" in design and is set in a narrow frame without any principal arcading of ogees. This is the starting-point of the whole Midland family of screens. The style lingered also on the borders of the Eastern and Western districts; and is seen as a passing stage in Suffolk itself. A short journey through Cambridgeshire into Hertfordshire or Northants will show many screens, of their developed and even late period, like the aisle screens at S. Paul's Walden and Ircchester, in which these features are retained and exaggerated—the tracery "Perpendicular" in treatment, but still within the narrow square frame, and reduced even further in scale; the presence of the ogee curves in the lower edge of the tracery-panel almost entirely concealed. In a group of churches among the Mendips there accurs a similar phenomenon—less complete in that the ogee, though not a separate imposed member, is distinctly retained, but in most striking contrast with the wide arch-framed tracery of the period in West Somerset or Devon. The rood-



FRITTON. 14th Century.



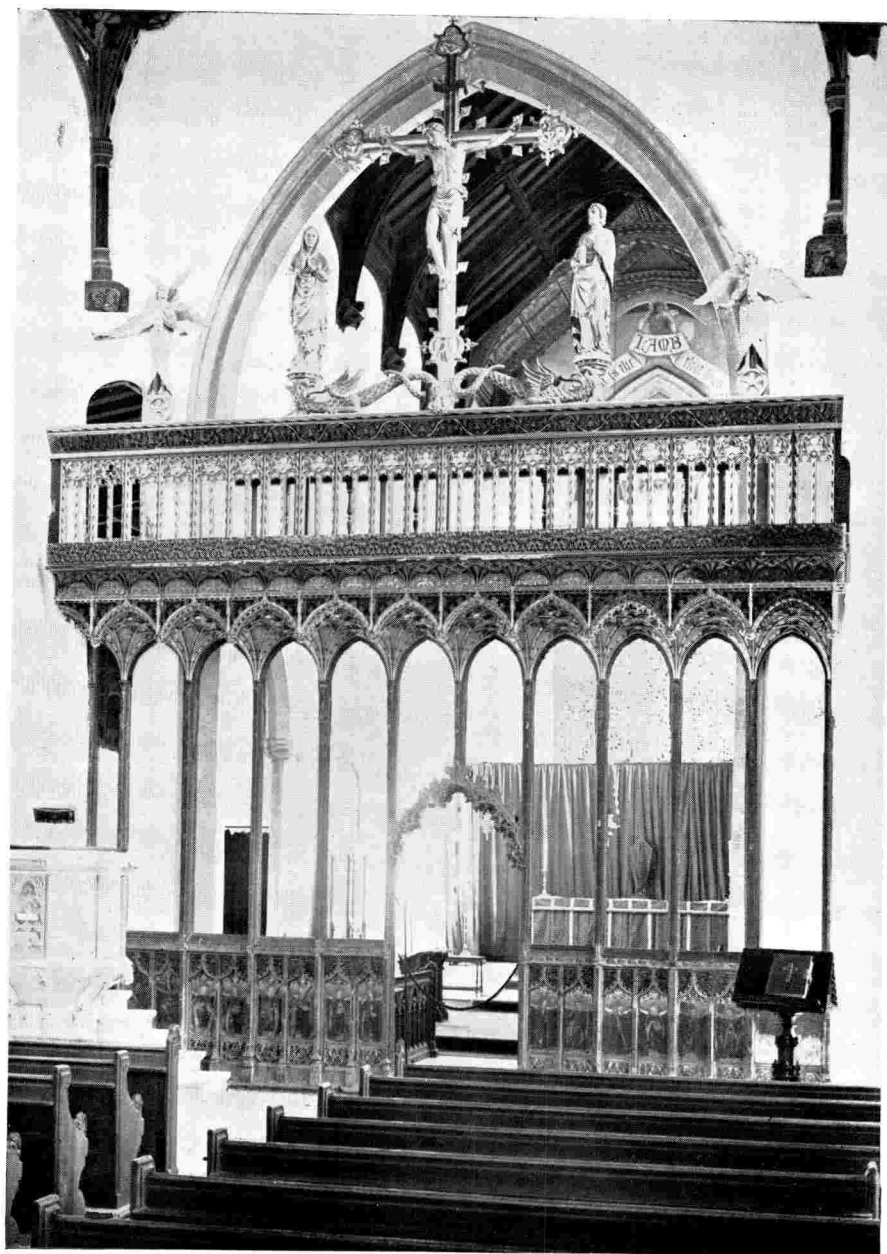
BURSTALL. Late 14th Century.



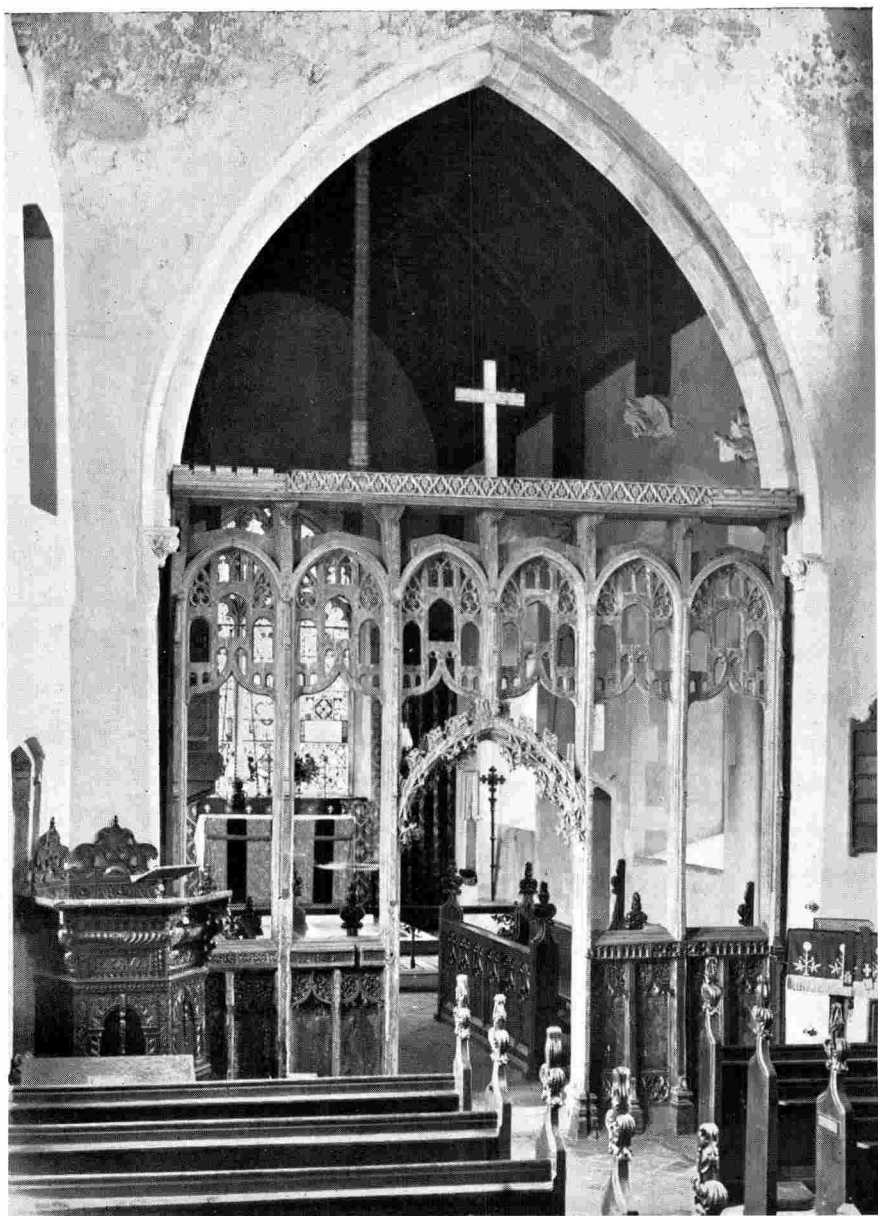
GRUNDISBURGH.



DENNINGTON. North Parclose. 15th Century. A "restoration."



EYE. Late 15th Century.
Vaulting, Balcony and Rood an excellent restoration.



YAXLEY. An adapted "copy" of the screen at Eye.



SOUTHWOLD. Roodscreen and N. aisle screen. End of 15th Century.



LAVENHAM.

screen at Parham can only be explained in relation to such works as these. Though not without parallel in the small scale and stilted treatment of the base fragments at Burstall, or in the narrow divisions and simple, abrupt tracery of the interesting panels at Bedfield, this example is right out of the main line of East Anglian development. It has the further peculiarities of open panels below the rail (unique in Suffolk and rare throughout the country) and of small and severely "architectural" colour-decoration upon the white ground of muntin and butress.

The other timber screens of Cambridgeshire belong to the period of development and expansion. In this period it is the earlier screens, put up before the final preference for square-framed tracery and for mullions within the widened space between the muntins, that most conform to the normal Suffolk types. These early Perpendicular screens once more stand significantly at the parting of the local styles, and throw a revealing light on our own. At Hessel, for example, there are the marks of an exactly similar stage of development. The tracery is almost "Decorated" in design and somewhat spare, the ogees comparatively acute and finished at a noticeable distance from the head of the tracery-arch, but the muntins are bold in design and widely spaced. From this point the local styles were to be elaborated in divergent ways. The Cambridge joiner was to widen the frame so far that his design would become impossible without the use of mullions—a method to be seen *par excellence* in the strange screen at Ickleton, but also in the attenuated fenestrations of Great Shelford, or in the peculiar local type of Bourne or Combarton (where an ogee which is a third of the width of the whole structure is met by semi-arches of similar scale supported upon a strong central mullion, and thus forming pairs of two main lights, each subdivided by a slenderer mullion,

and a diamond-shaped opening beneath the head of the ogee). In Suffolk, on the other hand, the method adopted at Hessel was never superseded. This has meant the preservation and encouragement of that rich relief to be seen in a strong framework and delicate ornament; and not at the expense of the tracery, as in the Midland screens. It has also tended to preserve the arcuated form within the head, and so indirectly to foster the development of the vaulted loft; and it provided a deeper and more effective field for the light and shade of colour-decoration.

The screen at Combarton above referred to is exceedingly satisfying, being both compact and graceful. This may well be owing to the example of the slightly earlier screen at Barton, the neighbouring village; and this screen has been attributed to Suffolk workers.⁴ It is the meagre proportions of the tracery which is the typical fault of the later Cambridgeshire screens, and especially of those in which the superposed ogee is omitted. One has only to compare the roodscreen at Balsham with any of Norfolk or Suffolk to make this clear.

The contrasts between the latter counties are less marked, and on the whole are favourable to Norfolk, as the sphere of the great labours of the workshops at Norwich, the influence of which, if not the works themselves, extended into the north-eastern district of Suffolk. In Norfolk, where this influence did not reach them the carvers were inclined to continue the narrow and slender "vertical" tracery to be seen at Upper Sheringham or Scarning, and the four narrow panels below the rail in each division of the muntins, as at Litcham. But the work of the Norwich factories is distinguished by an extreme originality. It must also be judged with imagination; for of the lofts

4. Bligh Bond, "On the Roodscreens in Cambridgeshire,"
Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, 1908.

which were the crowning glory of their screens only one survives, and this, at Attleborough, in a damaged and repainted condition, and upon a screen the height of which was limited by the structure which it had to fit, and which is now removed out of its proper setting. Moreover, their work was constructed and carved to be decorated with colour, and therefore was concerned with line rather than texture; so that it is surprising how untrue the charges of sparseness and imperfection really are. These accusations are due to a misapprehension of the dignified reserve of their subordination of carved detail to the whole design of line and colour; which conceals its real quantity and excellence, often as at Eye or Ludham, as great as in the West; but never concentrated upon a single point of vantage such as the cornice, but dispersed also upon the tracery and spandrels of the panels below the rail, and upon the delicate double fringes under doorway and arch. Allowance must always be made for the perishing and removal of much colour-decoration and gesso-work in relief, but it must not be imagined that either of these ornaments was allowed to do the work of carving in the wood itself; which, it has already been urged, was done in greater elaboration and more complex relief for the very purpose of such decoration. In the lofty screen of Cawston, for instance, a sturdy crocketed ogee was introduced, with this end in view, and in order to stabilise the great height and scale of the whole structure, into the heads of the panels below the rail. This plan is further elaborated at North Elmham, and elsewhere, by filling the spandrels above with charming human and animal figures in full relief, or with large floral designs, in gilt, and generally with a background of colour. The latter are found, of course, at Eye and Yaxley.

But in spite of these things the accusation of meagreness and carelessness of carving lingers, and must be fairly met. I have mentioned the early, narrow-framed construction as a stage before the parting of the ways. The separation of the Midland from the East Anglian tradition which followed was more than a matter of technique; it was like the difference between the decline into old age and a new birth. The architect who measures the woodwork and ornament of the great screens of the Broads, or any visitor who has done more than glance at the parcloes at Long Melford, is well aware that these works make no claim to mathematical accuracy, which is a virtue of an age of machines. But in many of the churches of the Midlands, and again and again in Hertfordshire or Cambridgeshire, one sees screens in which a nominal allegiance is paid to the traditions of the East Anglian renaissance, but in which its spirit of inspiration has not entered; the slips and roughnesses are not those of preoccupation with an ideal which is greater than the parts, but of mere poverty. Deane, in Beds. occurs to me as a random example; though something of the sort is not unknown in Suffolk. At Rattlesden, for example, there are some panels of the former rood-screen which, though really adopting the fifteenth-century plan of applying ornament upon a plain framed panel, have all the appearance of a bench-end hewn out of the solid. It may indeed actually have been the work of a bench-carver, and therefore of an amateur, as regards screen-construction; since it is well known that in East Anglia the two branches of church woodwork were in quite different hands.

The final manifestation of the East Anglian tradition is characterised by a new *naturalism*, which has already been referred to at Sibton, and which is most striking in some of the later screens of Wales. At

Sibton it is found in conjunction with the most exquisite "architectural" treatment of the tracery; in Wales it is expressed in the tracery itself. But where this phase appears in Norfolk and Suffolk the tracery is normally superseded, and its place taken by a narrow fringe, single or double as the case may be, of slender cusped archlets, having the appearance at a distance of delicate tendrils of gold. In Norfolk this carving is often repeated within the large crocketed ogee under the arch, as at Marsham or Worstead. This peculiar development of the ogee, is one of the most striking contributions of the Norwich workshops, and is part of their solution of the problems of the increasing loftiness of their screens and the increasing area of the great east windows of the period, both of which made the older and more complicated tracery of little or no effect. When instead of this compound and acute treatment, the ogee is depressed, as at Ludham, it is often accompanied by a small crocketed member, curving inwards from the side of the vaulting-arch, and so forming a charming circular figure into which the ogee is sturdily projected. This feature occurs at Bramfield.

There is an interesting development to be seen at Eye and Yaxley, which as far as I am aware is unique. This is an attempt to solve the same problems, of increased height and scale and of halation from the great east window, in an opposite direction. Here the tracery, if such it can now be called, is widened until it becomes a mere set of open niches, once pedestaled, canopied, painted and gilt, upon a field originally raised and diversified with gesso-work, and glowing with colour. It is at least as successful a solution as that of the Norwich workers; though more suited to the lofty proportions at Eye than to the smaller scale demanded by the humbler church at Yaxley, where it was copied.

The problem of analysis in these later screens becomes increasingly difficult as we descend to a number of particular examples. The question of origin in a common workshop, never easy in East Anglia, where the spheres of influence were so wide, is further complicated by the question of period; so that the whole matter, in the present state of research, is too uncertain to allow of dogmatic statement. But a little interesting evidence appears; as, for instance, in the case of Eye and Yaxley already referred to, where the reproduction is faithful even in such details as the carving, with its colour, along the rail; and only the panel-paintings are from a different hand and school.⁵ Again, the tracery in the sanctuary-benches at Stoke-by-Nayland (once part of a screen) is obviously derived from the same workshop as that in the aisle-screen at Kersey, and seems once to have adorned panels painted with similar figures. The interesting Perpendicular style to be seen in the parcloles at Dennington and Barking may also be attributed to one centre; whilst that striking feature of the tracery-head at Bramfield which has been noted above as characteristic of the Norwich school also occurs in so distant a work as the parclose at Little Walsingham.

NOTE.—This article will be followed by another on the *Colour Decoration* of the Suffolk screens, at the end of which it is hoped there will be appended a full list of surviving examples of Suffolk screenwork and of their panel-paintings. In order that this list may be as accurate and complete as possible, it is strongly hoped that members will notify the writer of any screens or fragments of such, which have escaped the notice of the compilers of such lists in the past.

5. They are by the hand that painted the S. Mary Magdalene at Bramfield and at Sotherton. At Sotherton the screen has disappeared; at Bramfield it is of course a very different composition from that at Yaxley.