

THE CHURCH AND PRIORY OF  
S. MARY, WOODBRIDGE.

BY JOHN ARNOTT.

At what date the earliest parish church of Woodbridge was founded there is no evidence to show; but Domesday book records that among the possessions of Robert Malet, in "Wodebryge" was a Church with nineteen acres of land.

From the Malets the estates passed to the famous Earl Bigod; and then to the families of Rufus or Rous and Seagrave, members of which were by marriage connected with Thomas of Brotherton, son of Edward I.

The Priory was founded either by Ernardus Rufus (or Rous) or his son Hugh at what precise date is uncertain, but probably about 1193, and was of the Order of Saint Augustine of Hippo, the chief of the orders of regular Canons. There were at first only some five or six Canons, but it soon increased in numbers, and was endowed by many benefactors with lands in Woodbridge, Hasketon, Burgh, Grundisburgh, Stradbroke, Ipswich and elsewhere. Between it and the great Abbey of Butley there long existed a close connection, while at Alnesbourn, near Ipswich was founded a daughter cell. The advowsons of Brandeston, and of S. Gregory, Ipswich, Hallowtree in Nacton, and Alnesbourn were vested in it. The first Prior of whom we know is Prior Ambrose, in 1267, and after him the 19 who followed can be traced in regular succession.



WOODBIDGE.

But the Priory Records were dispersed at the Dissolution, and it is only possible to gather up fragments of its history here and there from charters and deeds, and there is little over which we need linger. The Priors fostered and supervised the commercial life of the town. They provided for its educational requirements, and for its spiritual needs: and even their enemies have no scandalous tales to tell of the Canons of Woodbridge Priory.

The old Parish Church served for a time as the Priory Church too, and within its walls were buried many members of noted Suffolk families:—Ufford, Rous, Brews, Peyton, Weyland, and others. In it was an Altar of S. Thomas of Canterbury. Of the Priory buildings no trace is now left, but they were probably of considerable extent. Whether any portion is incorporated in the present Abbey building is very doubtful; more probably they stood further westward, for the great Gateway was in Seckford street. The rectangular fish pond yet remains.

The exact date of the foundation of the present church and its founder's name cannot now be certainly known. It has long been ascribed to John Lord Seagrave and Margaret de Brotherton, his wife; but the former died in 1353, and the architectural features of the building forbid us to date its founding earlier than the last years of the XIVth, or early in the XVth century. Sir Robert de Brews, one of a great church building family whose hand is traceable in many Suffolk churches, contributed largely to the building of the splendid Tower and North Porch, which were completed soon after 1450. Sir Robert married Ella, daughter of Sir Miles Stapleton, of Ingham, and the Arms of Brews and Stapleton may be traced upon the North Porch, and in the West Window of the North Aisle, the only fragment of pre-reformation stained glass now remaining. But these great Perpendicular Churches speak to us not so much of Warrior Nobles and belted Knights and feudal power, as of a new race of freed-men emerging into wealth and influence, of a prosperous trading class expanding and thriving in a spacious time.

It would seem that almost every person of substance who died in the town during the XV. century, left some bequest towards the building, and doubtless the Trade Guilds, here as elsewhere, gave their help to the good work. And at last there stood the Church as we now see it, with its splendid proportions, its noble arches, its beautiful clerestory, its fine western arch and window and its tower and porch, which, even in Suffolk, have few rivals. Within it were, besides the High Altar, Altars of S. Nicholas (as is usual in shipping towns) in the North Aisle, and S. Anne in the South Aisle. Piscinæ mark the sides of these, and the row of sedilia on the South side of the Altar for the canons assisting, reminds us of the Priory near.

The Church, which is a fine example of the flint Churches of the Eastern Counties, is 109 feet in length (excluding Tower), and 53 feet wide, the height of the nave and chancel (between which there is no external distinction) is about 49 feet, and that of the tower 108 feet. The pillars and arches which support the roof of the nave, the clerestory, the western window, and the tower belong to best period of Perpendicular Architecture. The Aisle windows exhibit lingering traces of the decorated style; a distinctly decorated window in the South side of the tower was perhaps brought from the Priory buildings. I would point out as worthy of close inspection the curious "grotesques" which adorn the corbels of the roof of the South Aisle. Two alone of these—near the South door—are proper faces, and these may probably be portraits of the founder and his wife. The woman has a caul head-dress, date about 1400. The flint panelling of the Porch is very fine, and that of the Tower parapets and the band of tracery beneath them is exceptionally good.

The Rood Screen, of which the mutilated base alone remains, when complete was probably little inferior to any of the famous Suffolk Screens. It was very lofty, as will be observed from the height of the upper doorway, and richly carved, gilded and painted, and was erected by John Albrede, twill-weaver, and Agnes his wife who died (as

their Wills indicate) about 1450. The Saints depicted on it are probably as under:—

*North Side—*

- No. 1. S. Mary the Virgin, with lily and book.
2. S. Ursula V.M., 5th Cent., bearing shipload of Virgins.
3. S. Cecilia V. (named).
4. S. Fides                    "
5. S. Lucia V. & M.       "
6. S. Barbara (?).
7. S. Thomas of Canterbury, with Archiepiscopal cross
8. S. Philip Ap., with basket of loaves.
9. S. Matthew A. & E. with battleaxe.
10. S. James the Less Ap., with fuller's club.
11. S. Andrew Ap., with cross saltire.
12. S. James the Greater Ap., with staff, wallet and book

*South Side—*

- No. 13. S. John Ap., with cup and serpent.
14. S. Paul Ap., with uplifted sword.
15. S. Simon Ap., with oar.
16. S. Jude Ap., with boat.
17. S. Thomas Ap., with spear and book.
18. S. Cuthbert, B.C. 663, with crosier and ring.
19. S. Matthias Ap., leaning on sword.
20. S. Edward the Confessor, K. 1066.
- 21 to 24 (Grained over).

There were formerly at least 34 panels, of which coloured drawings (made about 1790) are in the British Museum, including S. Kenelm; S. Oswald, S. Blase, S. Leodgar, S. Jerome, S. Quintin, and others. These most interesting portraitures, some of which are very rarely found, seem to have been specially selected for destruction about 1830, when a number of the panels were grained over and used to form a reading desk! The Inscription so far as legible in 1790 was "orate pro animās Johannis Albrede et Agnetis uxoris ejus qui soluerunt pro pictura totius hujus operis superni.....videlicet crucis crucifixi Marie Archangelorum et.....Totius candelabr....."

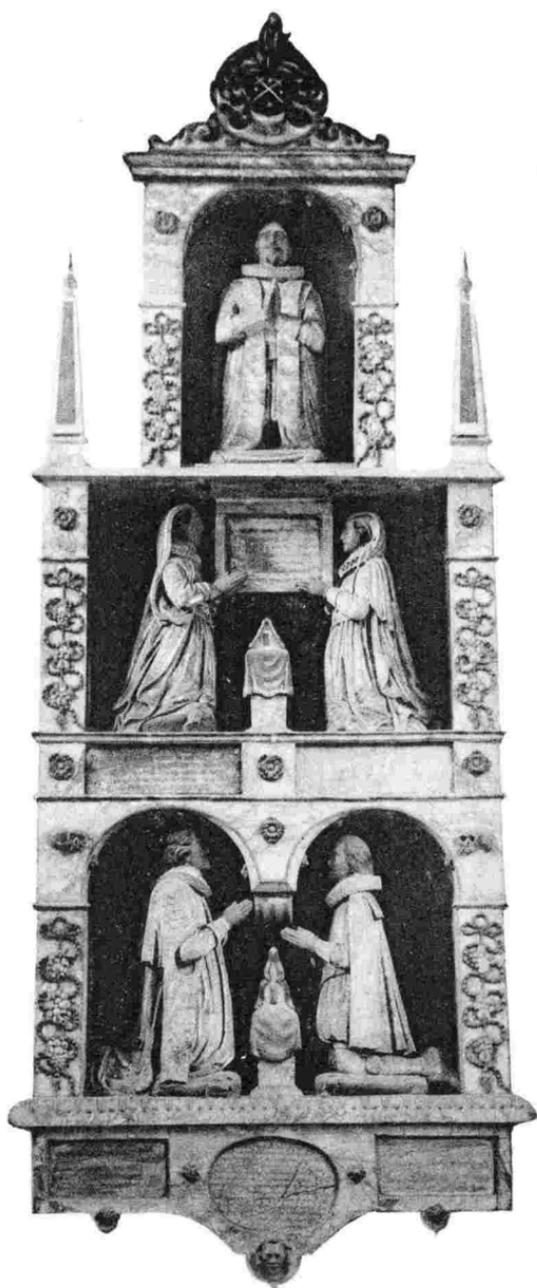
The Font, too, though sadly mutilated, is worthy of

notice. The designs in its Panels are very quaint, and represent the Seven Sacraments with the Crucifixion for the eighth panel. They are—

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| No. 1 (North). Ordination.                                | No. 5 (South). Penance (a woman             |
| 2 Matrimony (the Priest giving<br>the kiss of peace).     | is being shaven and the<br>demon expelled). |
| 3 (East). Holy Baptism.                                   | 6 Holy Eucharist.                           |
| 4 Confirmation (Acolyte hold-<br>ing phials of holy oil). | 7 (West). Extreme Unction.                  |
|   | 8 The Crucifixion.                          |

The base is adorned with the Lily of S. Mary. The head dresses of all the women depicted are of the period 1470—90.

It was not long that the Church and Priory remained in their completeness. About 1530 Thomas Cook, the then Prior, acting under the influence of one of Henry VIII's Ecclesiastical Commissions, alienated a large portion of the Priory Estates into lay hands. After him came Henry Bassingbourn, the last Prior, whose medallion-portrait is still shown in the Abbey, and in 1540 the final dissolution of the Priory, and the grant of its house and manor to Sir Antony Wingfield, of Hasketon. It is a sad and sordid history of self-seeking, and illustrates very clearly that ungodly scramble for Real Estate upon which so much religious benediction has been expended. "Every other nobleman hath his portion," writes the Earl of Norfolk to Thomas Cromwell, "I trust well for Bungay and Woodbridge." He obtained a portion of the estates. The Chancellor, Sir Thomas Audeley, got *his* picking; Thomas Alverd, of Ipswich, had the Manor of Alnesbourn; the Burgesses of Ipswich sent over post haste to secure the Market Rights. The Tithes of the parish went with the Priory Manor to Sir Antony Wingfield, leaving this large Church and parish only a bare curacy, practically unendowed. The Churchwardens and others sold Church plate to the value of £26 7s. 6d., and applied the proceeds to expenses which should have been defrayed out of the local taxation, also £57 worth more to Sir John Wingfield, for which it is doubtful if he ever paid. In 1542 Sir John



PITMAN MONUMENT, WOODBRIDGE.

pulled down the Priory Church and added the site on which it stood to the Churchyard. In 1564 the Priory lands passed to Thomas Seckford, who paid into the Treasury the sum of £764 8s. 4d. for them.

To Thomas Seckford we owe (1587) the last addition to the fabric of the Church—the North Chancel Aisle in which the Organ stands, and under which is a vault wherein the Seckfords lie buried. To his descendant Dorothy Seckford, who died in 1673, the parish is indebted for the restoration of the Tithes to the service of the Church. Jeffry Pitman, High Sheriff of Suffolk, who died in 1627, and whose imposing monument is seen at the East end of the South Aisle, bequeathed his estates in Martlesham for the reparation and maintenance of the Church. But these are only fitful gleams of better things. In 1640 the Organ was destroyed, and the Commandments painted on the East wall (“very indifferently,” says a subsequent visitor) at a cost of £1 19s. 0d. On January 27th, 1644, the day after his orgie of destruction at the beautiful sister Church of S. Mary at Ufford, came the Parliamentary visitor, Dowsing, who “took down two superstitious inscriptions in brass, and gave order to take down 30 superstition Pictures.” For this the Churchwardens paid 7s. 8d. The Font was disfigured, and a small iron basin costing 2s. was fixed near the pulpit: the painted windows were broken, and the beautiful rood screen defaced; the brasses wrenched from the sockets and ultimately sold. The old oak benches with their carved poppy heads were destroyed. Soon unsightly pews filled nave and aisles: galleries “scaffolded” the Church on all sides, and to make room for them the upper portion of the screen was taken down. About 1658, to save something in the roof timbers, the pitch of the roof was materially lowered, to the sad detriment of the external aspect of the Church.

It was not till 1863 that the parish awoke to its splendid architectural heritage, and the North Porch, which had fallen into serious decay, was tenderly restored. Eleven years later, pews and galleries were swept away,

the piscinæ, sedilia, priest's door and rood staircase brought to light, and the rood screen restored to its original position. And if some modern embellishments are conspicuous rather for their good intentions than for their artistic merit, we may at least be glad that again, to quote old Weever's words as to this very parish, "people of all degrees are forward to beautifie the House of God."

### TOWN HALL.

This quaint Flemish-looking structure was built by Thomas Seckford about 1575, at which date the Quarter Sessions of the Peace were removed from Melton, where they were formerly held. He gave the upper part for the use of the County for ever, reserving no rent, and the lower portion was and is used as the Market Hall. Formerly the lower part was open on all sides, like many old Market Halls, but in 1803 the arches were enclosed and windows and doors inserted, and other considerable alterations were made. Doubtless the Architect was one of the immigrants from the Low Countries who settled in East Anglia in large numbers in the 15th and 16th Centuries, and who added so materially to the prosperity of their adopted country.

### WEIGH HOUSE.

This curious erection, which is attached to a very old half-timbered Inn, was for the weighing of waggons or carts with their loads on their way to the Market Hill. Chains were passed under the cart, which would be just lifted from the ground by the counter-balance during the process. The principle is merely that of the ordinary steelyard—a small weight on a long arm counterbalancing a heavy weight on a short arm—and differs not at all from that of the trim weighing platforms which we find in modern markets. The weigh-bridge has not been used for many years (although the writer remembers seeing a waggon of straw suspended from it some fifteen or twenty years ago), but it is to be hoped that this picturesque and almost unique survival of bye-gone days will long be allowed to remain.



TOWN HALL, WOODBRIDGE.



WEIGH HOUSE, WOODBRIDGE.