

The Church of

St. Nicholas

Loxley

Warwickshire

Vicar

Rev. A. Gordon Greenhalgh

Churchwardens

Mr. T. H. Meadows. Mr. C. T. Worth

“The simplicity of a pastoral sanctuary is lovelier than the majesty of an urban temple.”
Ruskin

The church of St. Nicholas, at Loxley, is undergoing repair. The disaster foreboded by an ominous crack above the chancel-arch has been averted by the timely generosity of the patrons of the living; and one of Warwickshire’s historical monuments, fortunately, saved from ruin.

The building thus preserved consists of chancel, nave, and tower. Secluded in its sylvan churchyard beneath tall chestnut trees, and beautiful in spring with wild violets and forget-me-knots, it stands, beside the lane from Charlecote to Stratford, upon one of the oldest foundations in the county; the site having been given by King Offa, three hundred years before the Conquest, to the Cathedral Church at Worcester. Of the original structure, dedicated in the tempestuous dawn of Mercian Christianity, there are no traces remaining; even the herring-bone work concealed beneath the wall-plaster – which the late squire Cove-Jones used to pick away with his fingers in order to exhibit the masonry – is of scarcely so great an antiquity, although it is probably a fragment of the church in which “one priest” recorded in Domesday Book, ministered to the villeins and bordars with whom he is grouped. The next to emerge from oblivion, of the men who performed this holy office, is Willelm presbyter de Lochesleia” whose signature attests a twelfth century charter of Robert Fitz Odo granting lands to the Priory of Kenilworth. The gift was amplified by the descendants of this early lord of the manor – whose identity with Robin Hood may some day be established as a fact – and the Black Canons of St. Augustine found themselves, by the middle of the 13th century, owners both of the estate and the advowson. Their architectural zeal manifested itself in the Gothic windows, buttresses and arches of the existing fabric; and, in spite, of sad mutilations, the characteristic features of Early English Transition are recognisable in so much of the structure as has been spared by subsequent alterations. Let Sir William Dugdale give his account of the ceremony – graced by the episcopal magnificence of a very arrogant ecclesiastic – that followed the reconsecration.

“The Church being given to the monastery of Stone in Staffordshire (which was a Cell to the Priory of Kenilworth) by Rob. Fil. Odonis before specified, and confirmed thereto by

Basilia de Mora in 1 Joh. was in Edward 1. time rebuilt, and newly consecrated upon the Sunday next after the Feast of S. Thomas the Martyr” [i.e. July the seventh, the Translation of St. Thomas à Becket] “an. 1286, 14 E. 1 by Godfrey Giffard Bishop of Worcester, who then preacht therein upon this Text, Sanctificate domum hanc quam ædificasti”. The Latin seems a little uncertain, although the meaning is clear; and this house is truly hallowed by the prayers of twenty generations.

To this period of the church’s history belong the remarkable piscina, where the eucharistic vessels were washed after use, and the small coffin-lid – implying that some child of rank was brought here for internment – embedded amongst the ivy on the west wall. The marks, noticed by the late Rev. George Miller, of arrows having been sharpened on the stonework, are of more secular significance, being a relic of archery practice. A curious tradition that a secret passage runs between here and Kenilworth may possibly have its root in the roadmaking activities of the Canons during their long tenure, which lasted from the Plantagenets to the Tudors. Those were Loxley’s most prosperous days, although they were not marked by any event of outstanding importance beyond a visit from Bishop Wolstan, in 1348, accompanied by his lawyer, John de Peyto, a member of the Chesterton family; their business was to dispose of a long-standing grievance urged by Worcester Priory as to the payment of dues. There are one or two bequests worthy of notice beginning with “VI d. yearly to the Church of Locksley at the Feast of S. Michael, towards the maintenance of a Lampe there”, and ending with a share of the money left by Sir William Lucy to the “eight Churches next adjoining to Cherlecote”, in the seventh year of Henry the Seventh’s reign. At the date of this latter legacy the end of the medieval church was not far off. Rumbblings were even then to be heard of the storm that broke over England at the Reformation.

A link between the old order and the new, John Hybbins, the last incumbent appointed by the Prior and Convent of Kenilworth was the first to keep a parish register. This precious volume, formerly locked away from Sunday to Sunday in the ancient chest, is the church’s most treasured possession, and a sense of intimacy is conveyed by the handwriting of vicar after vicar; William Jeffes, in particular, wrote a most exquisite script. The entries are sometimes of a peculiarly personal interest. The fingers, for instance, of a proud and happy young clergyman took up the quill to say “Mr. John Duppa, vicar of Loxley, and Dorothy Pope of Haversham in Buckinghamshire, the second day of October 1586, was married”. That was the occasion for the new bell, lately come from Appowell’s factory, near the home of the bride, to ring its exultant loudest. It still hangs in the belfry, side by side with a “Watts Nazarene” put in during the vicariate of William Debanck, the parson who built himself a private pew and secured a letter from the chancellor of the diocese restricting its use to the minister. His successors, Henry Ballard and Mr. Jones, appear to have been Nonconformists, for a new vicar, Mr. John Bissell, was appointed by Charles the Second. Among his parishioners, at that time, were two families of the minor gentry: the Hoppers, who are buried in the nave; and the Southams, whose tombstones, admirable in design and astonishing in phrase, are encrusted on the outer wall of the comparatively modern vestry.

Of Mr. John Moore, the next Vicar, a large stone in front of the Communion Table testifies that he was:- “A good pastor, a Faithfull Benefactor, who carried a good

correspondency both with the great and the simple; and ready at all times to serve his neighbour". His nearest neighbour - and presumably "the great" referred to in the epitaph - was Sir Reginald Forster, an old Royalist whose father had expended a large fortune in the service of the Stuarts. The baronet had married Miss Nash, the heiress of a Straford gentleman, and spent his later years on the estate of his wife, at Loxley. Several of his daughter's children were baptized here; and one, Jane, became the wife of William Norcliffe, Esq., of the Inner Temple, eventually returning with her husband to occupy her grandfather's late residence. In 1704, already a widow, she lost her only child, a boy of nineteen; and having presented the church with a fine silver chalice and paten, removed to another parish. To her liberality may be ascribed, in all likelihood, the classical renovation of which the effects are apparent in the excellent Communion rails, the pulpit - projecting like a bracket, so that the preacher suddenly emerges (to the delight of any juvenile members of his congregation) from the south wall of the nave - the circular headed windows, the box pews, the handsome west-door, and its pretty flight of steps. Loxley House was afterwards occupied, there is some reason to suppose by Mr. Tempest Hay, a member of the noble Scottish family, whose crest, a demi-husbandman, and arms, three inescutcheons, are barely discernible on a stone in the chancel floor.

With the early nineteenth century appears a notable figure: Mr. George Huddesford, a satirical poet, the friend and pupil of Reynolds, and the subject of one of his best pictures - "The Two Gentlemen", now in the National Gallery. Huddesford was presented to the living of Loxley in 1803. The present vicar declares he feels "very shy" whenever he happens to glance at the mural tablet that eulogises the excellencies of his versatile predecessor.

Of the church's subsequent history there is not much to be said. A flat stone near the reading-desk displays the arms of Milward of Lechlade. The alterations in the 'forties were the work of the Rev. William Cassebon Purdon. Now, in this present winter, the restorers are busy once more. The disused gallery has been removed; the arch between the nave and the tower has been opened up; a glass-light representing the patron saint - of boys, thieves, parish-clerks, sailors, pawnbrokers, and Loxley Church - has been inserted in the lancet window; and a cross has been fixed on the gable. Here, after a thousand years, still stands a witness to the continuity of the Church, a symbol of the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, nor susceptible to the touch of Time. These walls will fall, at last, and the stones will crumble; but there is a prophecy in the motto of the sundial on the tower:

"I die today, and live tomorrow"

R.M.J.

[After years of anxiety and delay, due to the war and other causes, the restoration is practically completed, the whole cost being borne by Mrs. G. F. Kendall and her sons, of Loxley Hall; and the formal opening will, it is hoped, be held within the next few weeks].