

St Leonard's Church, Sandridge Herts.  
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**SANDRIDGE CHURCH, HERTFORDSHIRE. By SOMERS CLARKE, F.S.A.**

The following notes principally relate to a particular feature in the church, namely, the wall separating the nave from the chancel, in the manner of a chancel screen. This is the feature of the greatest interest in the church; which, however mean as is its external aspect, is not devoid of beauty or other objects of interest within. Some excitement has risen of late amongst antiquaries on the rumour of the possible destruction of the wall just mentioned, but I venture to hope that no such destruction may take place.

I am indebted to Dr. Griffith, the vicar of Sandridge, for the following historical notes: —

The manor of Sandridge was, in the year 794, given by king Egfrid to the monastery of S. Albans, recently founded by his father Offa.

The first record that we have of a consecrated building in Sandridge is that Herbert de Losinga, first bishop of Norwich, consecrated the chapel of S. Leonard for the abbot and monks of S. Albans. The said Herbert died in 1119. The chapel was later on turned into a vicarage, and served by a vicar appointed by the abbey.

John de la Moote, elected abbot of S. Albans in 1396, "rebuilt the chancel from the foundations."

The later history of the church and parish does not concern us at present, so I will not trouble you with it, but will proceed to give a short description of the building, which must be done to enable you to appreciate the difficulties and the interests of the case.

The building now consists of a chancel without aisles, a nave of four bays with narrow aisles, and small north and south porches placed about midway in the length of the aisles. The nave is now without its clerestory. It opens into a western tower, a mean and impudent little brick edifice, oblong on plan, erected in 1837 in place of an old tower, which was described by Salmon in the year 1728 as follows: — "The steeple hath been down and lain in rubbish almost forty years, without any endeavour to repair it to the great shame of the inhabitants." It was a pity they did not let it alone a little longer.

The Norman or perhaps pre-Norman building was most probably an aisle-less nave with a chancel, the chancel arch consisting of a semi-circular ring of large bricks, such as are to be seen at the neighbouring abbey. This arch was not very wide. There is a horizontal line in the lower part of the chancel walls north and south which seems to suggest that some of the early work still remains with later work above.

Of the early nave there seems to be nothing at present visible, except the four responds of the Norman arcade.

The arcade, the principal feature of the now existent nave, is of fine transitional work, circa 1160. The octagonal columns are surmounted by capitals, with abaci square on plan, each corner of the cap being carved into a species of volute; the effect is very refined and noble. These caps carry an arcade of semi-circular arches. The arches were surmounted by a clerestory, but this is now quite gone, and the roof rests above the arches, and is lit by two large high raised dormer windows presenting a singularly odd effect on the exterior.

The west end of the nave opens by a fine and well moulded pointed arch, with details just merging into early English, into the tower.

The nave aisles are in effect later, but it is most probable that the present windows are inserted in the older wall built when the arcades were constructed.

The chancel, as has been already stated, was rebuilt from the foundation by John de la Moote, elected abbot in 1396. My own belief is that the work was not of so radical a nature as these words suggest. The side windows of the chancel are of two lights, cusped and under a depressed head. I will not commit myself by assigning a date to them, but they do not strike one as being of quite so early a date as the pierced wall which stands between the nave and chancel, and to the description of which we will now address ourselves.

I will ask you to imagine yourselves us standing in the chancel and looking west.

The semi-circular chancel arch of large bricks already mentioned was revealed by the removal of some plaster not long since. The crown of this arch lies a little below the tie beam of the chancel roof. At the springing level of this arch, a moulded string, which forms the crowning feature of the later work, is carried completely across the wall face; beneath

this string, in the middle of the wall and occupying a width somewhat less than the opening of the brick chancel arch, we see a well moulded pointed doorway, with square flowers in the hollow of the moulding. This doorway is flanked on either side by a square headed three-light window opening; the pointed heads of these lights are cusped with five foils; the square inclosing moulding being the same as that of the doorway. The brick arch above is filled in, in part, but a two-light window, generally similar to the three-light windows below, is placed over the doorway, and at the corners is cut into the ring of the brick arch, which has thus not only been deprived of its supporting jambs (it now springs from over the opening of the windows) but has its integrity completely destroyed by the window opening. It has revenged itself by cracking the wall and window openings on which it rests, for in fact it now stands on the top of the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century structure forming a chancel screen. We are, in fact, now standing on the east side of a stone chancel screen, which, unlike most screens to which we are accustomed, is solid above the heads of the openings, with the exception of the small window over the door.

We may observe that the moulded side of this opening is towards the east, we know that in most screens the richest side is towards the west.



The western side of the window openings in the present instance shows jambs, very much splayed, and surmounted by depressed arches.

On either side of the doorway, on its eastern face, is a low stone seat end, with figures clumsily carved on them, much worn. I had not the opportunity to look very carefully at them, and will not hazard a conjecture as to their meaning.

There are not now visible indications shewing the attachment of timbers or panelling on the west side of the screen, as I shall now call it, but there are distinct indications of the ends of a beam, placed some three or four feet west of the screen, and level with the arches above the windows. This beam doubtless carried the floor of a gallery, and may have marked the line of its parapet front. The lower part of the screen wall, now so plain, was doubtless covered with wood panelling and tracery, and it lays but a small tax on the imagination to see a screen facing west, much like many that still remain. I am not aware that any evidence has yet been found of side altars beneath the window openings, but it is not unlikely that such may be found.

Having as I hope shown that the lower part of the screen may not after all have presented, when perfect, so abnormal an appearance as at first sight we should suppose; it may, I think, be shown that the solid partition above was a very common thing, but it was usually of wood and not of rubble.

The crusade against screens, which has been going on for centuries with more or less vigour; the change in the services, and the effort to turn a place primarily intended for worship, into a preaching house; these things, combined with modern "restoration," have cleared away numberless screens with their lofts and decorations, and have left us little evidence.

On the other hand, it is certain that there were in many cases partitions which, standing above the open screen, severed the nave from the chancel. Until recent times many of these remained, bearing the royal arms and tables of the law. I remember seeing such a partition at Ewerby in Lincolnshire. At Ifield church, Sussex, the chancel arch bears distinct evidence of having been closed with wood work; the holes to receive the uprights are visible, but now the screen and all its adjuncts are gone.

At S. Nicholas church, Brighton, where there remains a very sumptuous screen with a very wide loft, the arch above the screen was filled in and a shallow gallery ran across on the west side, doubtless a successor to the old rood gallery, and possibly made up of it in part. The screen remains. Other examples occur, — at Barton Turf the upper part; at Tivetshall S. Margaret, Norfolk; at S. Michael's, S. Albans; at Monkton church near Pembroke; at Capel le Feme near Dover.

The question of such divided churches deserves a separate paper. Probably many in Pembrokeshire, in Wilts; one now destroyed at Yalesbury near Ealm; at Stockton near Salisbury. The most interesting which I have seen is the remarkable little old Norman church at Scawton between Rivaulx and Bylands abbeys.

At Micheldean, in Gloucestershire, the partition remains complete. This was divided into panels with paintings, and is fully described by Mr J. H. Middleton in the Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, vol. vi, part 2. At Bettws Newid in Monmouthshire the whole thing remains complete. The frame work of the upper panelling is arranged to form in the centre a large cross; on each side of this and low down there is a little three-light window, which calls to our mind the two-light window already described as coming over the doorway at Sandridge.

I must now speak a few words on the proposed restoration at Sandridge Church.

There is no doubt that the very solid partition which now divides the nave from the chancel presents considerable difficulties in the use of the church, and the separation of the two parts of the building will seem more marked when a clerestory is built in the nave, and this is intended to be done. The brick arch is, as I have already said, crushing the window openings below, and something must be done here, or ultimate ruin will follow.

It is Dr. Griffith's desire that nothing whatever shall be touched or even repaired where there is not absolute necessity. However a man is not always able to carry out his views. To relieve the weight of the brick arch upon the window openings it is proposed to turn a new chancel arch, at a higher level, over the old one, and to leave the old arch. The whole wall should also be left as high as the crown of the brick arch. I can conceive of nothing that will better meet the difficulties of the case, as it will make a sufficient space to throw the roof of the chancel well open to the nave, and still conserve all the features of the old wall, and nearly all the wall itself.