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HIGHAM CHURCH (ST. MARY).

THIS was more than a parish church. It was likewise a priory church for the nuns of Lillechurch Priory or Higham Abbey. The two equal limbs (each consisting of a nave and chancel) were not equally divided. The nuns seem to have had only the chancel, or east end, of the north limb; the bells were in the west end of that limb, and there are no traces of any solid, or closed, partition between the naves of the two limbs.

There was a church here at the time of the Domesday Survey, and two Norman windows are still visible within the church. One, perfect, but blocked up, remains in the north wall at its west end under the bell turret. Of the other nothing is left except its round top, in the north wall of the high chancel, over the apex of the arch which separates it from the Nuns' Chapel. That arch and the font are probably, in point of age, nearer to the Norman windows than are any other features of the church. They are Early English.

The Priory of Lillechurch was founded by King Stephen about the year 1151, and his daughter Mary was the first Prioress. Lillechurch is said to be a mile from this site, on the road to Cliffe. If so, it is pretty clear that when the Priory was at Lillechurch, the nuns did not make use of this church for their daily devotions. The date of their removal hither, to Higham Abbey, is not known; but when Walter de Merton endowed a vicarage here, with the consent of Amfelice, then Prioress, it was stipulated that the vicar must sustain the burthen of clerks sufficient in number to minister in the church, one of whom should therein daily celebrate High Mass before the nuns. This was towards the end of the thirteenth century, about 1280, which date fairly accords with the style of the arch between the chancel and the north or Nuns' Chapel. It is possible, therefore, that about that time the Norman chancel wall was broken through, and that the Nuns' chapel was then built on the north side of the chancel. The blocked doorway, on the north side of the church, may well be of the same date. Whether the Priory buildings were then moved from Lillechurch to this site, there is no direct evidence to decide. The main features of the church are evidently of the Decorated period. No doubt the Nunnery was then in its prime. Hamo de Hethe, Bishop

of Rochester, visited it in 1320, and received the profession of eight nuns. In 1328 he buried, here, the Prioress Joane de Hadloe, and confirmed in office, Maud, her successor. In 1357 the church was under repair, and the Pope granted an indulgence to all who would contribute to it, during the next five years. Thus we know pretty accurately the origin of those Decorated features of the church which have survived, either *in situ*, or in modern reproductions of the originals.

The fine canopied tomb, on the south side of the chancel, is one of the original Decorated features. The *designs* of many of the windows (all of which are modern copies of the originals); part of the nave arcade; and the flat brass-rifled tombstone of Vyllem le Mary, in the north nave are of the fourteenth century. The inscription on this tomb, "*Vyllem le Mary . . . me eit merci, Amen,*" had never been deciphered until Mr. F. C. J. Spurrell visited this church with me, and very cleverly made it out. The Nave arcade looks as if the piers may be of different dates from its arches.

The screen across the north limb, separating the Nuns' chapel from the north nave, is a very handsome specimen of those Rood Screens which represent a series of traceried pointed windows, side by side. It resembles five acutely-pointed windows, each of four cinquefoiled lights, having, on its western face, round shafts between each pair of windows. The middle arch divides and forms two doors, which open. The panelling of the lower portion of the screen is also arched and cusped.

In the arch between the chancel and Nuns' chapel, there is, above the round cap of each pier, a square hole into which was inserted the beam of a parclose screen, which divided the nuns from the high chancel.

The two iron-bound chests, the two altar tombs against the north wall, and the monumental brass to Robert Hylton,* all in the Nuns' chapel, are worthy of inspection.

* INSCRIPTIONS IN THE NORTH CHANCEL.

All those that for my soule doth pray
To the Lorde that dyed on Good friday
Graunte them and me by their petition
Off oure offencis to have remission
Ye may perceue now in every Age
This lyffe ys but a pylgremage
Toward hevyn that ys Eternal
Whereunto God bringe us all. Amen.

Here lyeth Robert Hylton late yoman of y^e garde w^t the high & myghty

There is a locker, or aumbry, in the south wall of that chapel, and in the south wall of the chancel there is a pretty, but narrow, arched piscina with projecting octagonal basin and stone credence shelf.

The entrance doorway (south), and the pulpit, are elaborately carved. Probably they are of the fifteenth century.

prince of most famous memory Henry the viii y^e which departed owte of this present lyffe the iij day of December Anno D'ni m^occcc^oxxiii.

Here lyeth the body of Elizabeth Boteler, who dyed the xv day of October Anno D'ni 1615, late wife of Will^m Boteler of Rochester Esq. (daughter of S^r Will^m Crayford in Kent, Knight) leaving issue 2 sons & 2 daughters, Henry, Thomas, Anne & Elizabeth. *Ætatis suæ* 32.

[Arms : (1) three covered cups impaling (2) on a chevron 3 hawks' heads.]