

TYPICAL CHURCH TOWERS OF ENGLISH COUNTIES.

PART VI.

ESSEX.

ESSEX does not bear a very good name for scenery, and few people would select the county for a walking tour. The "cyclist," however, may do worse than take a run through Essex; because although some districts are flat and ugly, and others devoid of wood, yet there are localities which are pretty, and the number of old manorial estates with fine parks, ancient mansions, castles, abbeys, and more than usually picture-que villages, render it by no means an uninteresting county.

Although ancient churches (some very old indeed) abound, yet it cannot be said that they possess the splendour or dignity which one would expect to find in a county which was a favourite place of residence for the aristocracy. Thus, although a rich field for the study of domestic and secular architecture, it does not offer the same scope for ecclesiastical architectural investigation. The

reason for this is not very difficult to discover. The fact is that before the Reformation the county possessed a more than usual number of wealthy monasteries; and no doubt the nobility subscribed generously to the building of their churches, which must have been very sumptuous. At the Reformation Essex suffered perhaps more in the way of destruction than any other English county. From some reason, which it is difficult to account for, the monastic churches were almost entirely demolished. Of those of Colchester, Walden, Stratford and Barking Abbeys, nothing whatever is left; of St. Osyth Priory little if anything; of the church of Colchester Priory a fragment of the west front and an arch or two of the nave; of Coggeshall some ruins of the choir and transepts. The only monastic church of which the remains are extensive is Waltham Abbey, the nave of which is converted into a parish church. The architecture is very fine Norman work. Now of course when these monastic churches existed entire

Essex would have passed as a county rich in architecture, but at present it may almost be said that there are only three really fine churches in the county, Waltham Abbey, Thaxted and Saffron Walden. Both of the latter have spires, but that of Thaxted is the only ancient stone one in the county; it is a good example, but with nothing very characteristic about it. In fact, the whole of this noble church is devoid of local peculiarities; parts of it look like the work of the architect of Henry VII.'s Chapel. Some of the Essex churches are remarkably interesting; Castle Headingham, Little Maplestead, Boxted, Hadleigh, East Ham, Rainham and St. Osyth are especially so.

The towers of the Essex churches are not particularly remarkable. They are generally rather squat, and although there is but one stone spire, the village churches are often crowned by small wooden structures, a kind of cross between a roof and a spire, which are frequently curious and certainly characteristic. One of the most interesting is at Upminster, near Hornchurch. The church has been almost entirely rebuilt, and the tower itself very much restored. Our drawing is copied from a sketch made some years back, when the tower was in its original condition; but at present, though the original form has been preserved, much of the work is new.

Hornchurch has a singular peculiarity; instead of a gable cross at the east end, there is a carved head of a bull in stone with the natural horns of a buffalo affixed to it. This remarkable "ecclesiastical feature" is said to have given the name of "Hornchurch" to the village, but of the origin or history of this strange object I could find nothing.

It may not be out of place here to put in a plea for the preservation of the ancient towers of the Middlesex, Essex and Hertfordshire churches. They are not grand or elaborate architectural structures, and may, in some cases, be inferior to the modern towers which replace them; but these far more pretentious modern works do not teach so much, because they do not speak either of our own time or of past days. How many of these old towers have been rebuilt of late years it is difficult to say, but it is sad to think that this work of destruction is still going on. Would it not be better to follow the excellent example set by the good folks of Stanmore, who, some years back, finding their old church past repair, built a handsome new one close to it, leaving the old church to become an ivy-clad ruin. These two churches in the same churchyard have always struck us as looking most interesting and appropriate; here you see, side by side, an old church and a modern one, both teaching a lesson, and looking well. If they had rebuilt the old church it would have possessed neither the advantages and convenience of a new one nor the historic interest of an old one. These quaint and singular old churches and towers should of course, if possible, be repaired, but if that is not possible, do not attempt to rebuild them; even in their ruined condition they are most valuable historical witnesses. What they tell us is certain to be true; they cannot lie, as written documents often do. They speak to us with a voice from out the past, and to thoughtful minds their grey mouldering walls and decaying stone-work teach lessons that are worthy to be learnt and handed down to future ages; lessons of patient toil and of pious endeavour, of man's weakness and God's strength; veritable "sermons in stones," though, like all man's works, bound to decay; yet, as long as they last, pointing to a hope, for that future peace which "suppasseth all understanding."

(To be continued.)



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