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ASHMANSWORTH CHURCH.

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With a description of the Mural Paintings by Charles Keyser, M.A., F.S.A.

Ashmansworth or "Ashmersworth" as it is printed in the 'Liber Regis' is a long scattered village, neglected and deserted in its aspect, with a rapidly decreasing population, and is one of the poorest parishes in proportion to its acreage in this part of the county. It was until late years, a chapelry attached to the rich rectory of East Woodhay, and a "Peculiar" of the Bishops of Winchester, so called from being specially exempted from Archidiaconal jurisdiction, and remaining under the immediate and peculiar authority of the Bishops of the diocese.

The earliest historical allusion we can find relating to Ashmansworth is a charter of King Athelstan the Victorious (925-940,) who gave the manor to the Cathedral Church of Winchester. It is included in the list of the bishops' manors in the 'Taxatio Ecclesiastica', and the patronage of the church has remained in the possession of the See of Winton from that time to the present day.

As connecting the present Ashmansworth with the past, there is no more potent link than the ancient church, dedicated to St. James, but whether to St. James the Less, or St. James the Great is not specified in the records. Of the usual type of small parish churches of the Norman period, it consists of an aisleless nave and chancel. The original chancel walls remain on the South and North sides, but the East was rebuilt (1746) in a manner which has done irreparable injury to the venerable structure. Owing probably to the subordinate position of the church to the parish of East Woodhay, and a non-resident curate, the old building was allowed to fall into a very ruinous condition, and its story until recently has been that so familiar to archaeological students of church architecture - misplaced zeal and fanatical iconoclasm. An effort is now being made to preserve it from further ruin and decay by timely repairs and general attention as distinguished from the usually unsatisfactory process of "restoration."

There may have been and probably was a still older church on the same site as the present one, which appears to have been built about the middle of the twelfth century. The chancel is entirely of that date, and the nave is of the same, or not a much later period, although the only feature of definite date is the window in the South wall, which is of the fourteenth century. This window is an addition made for the sake of giving more light to the two altars which stood right and left of the chancel arch. A like insertion at an earlier date was made in the south wall of the chancel to give light to the altar there.

The narrow round headed windows in the chancel are original, but unfortunately the stonework has been covered with cement on the outside. The other windows are of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as also are the doorways and the porch, which latter acts as a buttress on the south side. The floors were at this time raised because the level of the churchyard had risen, and the old doorways thereby became too low and were altered. The north door, after the alteration, was

blocked up, probably for the sake of warmth, and two plain windows were put in on this side for light. The chancel arch is very small as is usual in very early churches. In the middle ages an opening was made on each side of it, in an oblique direction, to enable persons sitting right and left to see the elevation of the Host of the high altar. In comparatively modern times, when the chancel was not used in connection with the nave these openings were stopped up with brick and plastered over; the heads of the apertures being supported by rough oak slabs.

In the opinion of Mr. J.T. Micklethwaite, F.B.A., who has directed the repairs, in connection with the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, the roof of the nave is over six hundred years old, and the curious moulded beams with their carved bosses are said to have been brought from Winchester Cathedral, but the present Dean Stephens of high reputation as an archaeologist, entirely discredits this long existing belief. The roof of the chancel is modern, and of deal, rather light in construction. Before the present work was taken in hand there was a modern plaster ceiling in the nave, and the new light barrel panelling is only a temporary substitute until such times as a new oak open roof can be constructed, which we fear is in the dim and distant future. The font at first sight appears to be of the seventeenth century, but it is said it had been cut into its present form out of an older one within memory.

The almy or locker on the north side of the chancel was discovered and opened out by the writer in 1887, having been previously blocked up and plastered over, and the bason or head of a pillared piscina was at the same time found built into the wall.

At the foot of the quoin at the north-east angle of the nave, there is a piece of moulded stone which has every appearance of Roman work, and as suggested by Mr Shore, was most probably brought from Silchester, which was used as a general quarry after the destruction of the city. The material employed in building many of the neighbouring churches evidently came from that place, and much is said to have been used in the building of Reading Abbey.

It may be added that the old church of Ashmansworth has interesting associations from the circumstance that Bishops Ken, Bishop of Bath and Wells, 1685-1691; Hooper, Bishop of St. Asaph, 1703; and South, Bishop of London, 1766-1777, as Rectors of East Woodhay, often ministered within its ancient walls.

Remains of several wall paintings were brought to light during the recent repairs, and are here described by the distinguished archaeologist and eminent authority, Mr. C.E. Keyser, F.S.A., of Aldermaston Court, to whom we are indebted for the accompanying illustrations.