Church of St James the Great, HANSLOPE

An Architectural study of the structure.

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Hanslope Parish Church is one of the proudest churches in Buckinghamshire, partly on account of its splendidly tall steeple, its impressive Norman chancel, and its generous setting in an immense churchyard, and should perhaps have merited inclusion amongst Simon Jenkins' England's Thousand Best Churches.

Architecturally, the earliest features of the church can probably be placed in the mid 12th century, suggesting that William (II) Maudit, who had applied to build the church on the present site in 1260, began the work shortly after. The style, with external and internal storey arcading is very unusual in Britain and external, half-shafts on pilaster wall articulation can be seen elsewhere in the Midlands only at Tickencote, Rutland, and at St Peter's, Northampton. The transfer of the parish status from Castlethorpe to Hanslope was probably effected around this time, and was some century later confirmed by Bishop Grosseteste in 1235-53.

The advowson, which had been granted by Henry VIII to the 'mayor, sheriffs citizens and commonalty' of Lincoln in 1546 was conveyed to George Hyde of Lincoln Lodge, Hanslope, in November 1837, who sold it to George Checkley on 25th May 1857. In 1859 Checkley passed the advowson and perpetual presentation to the Revd John Hunt of Wing, who transferred the patronage to the Bishop of Oxford in March 1860. It is probable that greater interest was now being shown in the church and following these exchanges the church was heavily restored by the Diocesan Architect (since 1850), George.E.Street over the years 1864-5 at the same time he was working at the Norman church of Stewkley. Although his quoted aim in restoration work was "the hearty, loyal and reverent setting forth of the Prayer Book", he appears to have taken as his lead the remains of the Norman chancel walls. He removed the crenellated parapet and low-pitched roof and reduced the wall height to what appeared to be the original height and provided the chancel with a steeply pitched slate roof and new windows. As far as can be ascertained from early drawings and the surviving elements, the Romanesque chancel was most unusual and innovative in style. It is 5.69m (18ft 7in) wide) and 12.66m (or more) long, and consists of five bays formed by storey height half-columns at 2.08 centres underpinning the bold corbel table 4.6m above bases. Closely inserted between them and above the mid-wall string course arches formed by three-quarter nook shafts (115mm in diameter), interrupted by a string course with a rounded moulding and chamfered top and bottom. The string course and the springing of the arches form the foot of small high windows in Romanesque style with round-heads, the external lintel carved with radial leaf motifs. These were replaced in the 19th century, and raised Pevsner/Williamson's doubt whether the crudeness of the leaves belonged more to work carried out in the 1770s[1]. The five bays have a half bay at both ends without surface articulation – whether this was the original scheme cannot be told as the

east end of the chancel was rebuilt seemingly further in and finished with corner buttresses, and the western half bay is created by the later insertion of a rood stair turret. The first complete arcade bay from the west is thickened out to take a richly decorated priest's door, described below.

All construction work is in ashlar, in a light coloured limestone, probably of local origin, and the walling material for the external walls 840mm (2ft 9in) wide is largely of a local brown ferruginous limestone, similar materials to St Peter's, Northampton.
The wall shafts rise from carved bases to bold decorated cushion capitals and underpin the vigorous corbel table below the eaves, there being three corbels between each shaft capital. All have strongly carved bearded heads, or dragon masks with lenticular eyes, and some, unusually, a pair of heads.
The design of the south chancel wall was clearly repeated on the north side of the chancel, now incorporated in the vestry and the former Troughton Chapel, later the organ chamber. However, this arrangement was drastically altered by the insertion of a huge 3.49m wide 14th century arch of two plain orders, and a door to the vestry. One and a half bays of the original exterior however do survive, one shaft and capital (fortunately in its pre-Restoration condition) and a reset collection of displaced corbels very similar to the south side. East of the present timber door to the vestry the wall appears to be completely rebuilt.

The priests door, mentioned above, is a glorious essay in later Norman work, consisting of an arch of a single order nook shafts with moulded bases and decorated capitals, the shafts missing, with the three-quarter shaft carried around the arch, overlain with looped arches containing quasi-ball-flowers and leaf motifs in the spandrels. The outermost order has a bold chevron and the whole composition is topped by a string ornamented with double-cone beads, and a small mask at the apex. The capitals are badly eroded but were not replaced in the 19th century. They are decorated with four-footed beasts lightly enveloped in formalistic foliage. All this is in uncompromisingly bold and confident work but differing from the other more traditional Norman churches in the area.

There is no indication that the external walls were originally plastered externally, although they may well have been 'buttered' and limewashed. However, the contrasting white and brown stone is a feature that appealed to the Normans elsewhere and the walls may have been left with the stone exposed.

External arches as decoration are rare in Britain, although are frequent feature of continental Romanesque from Hildesheim to Santiago and are probably ultimately derived from the north Italian Lombardic Romanesque where the walls are expressed with pilasters and eaves arcades. In Britain, Tickencote in Rutland has similar storey-height half-shafts with horizontal strings at the springing line, dividing the wall into two and a half bays. The lower level has intersecting arcades. Tickencote was considerably rebuilt in 1792 by S.P.Cockerell, and may not correctly represent the original builder's design. St Peter Northampton, founded

probably by Simon de St Lys II in 1110-40, has high-level blind arcading below the corbel table, as does St Mary de Castro in Leicester, founded by the first Earl of Leicester in c.1107.

On the south side there are two small round-headed Norman style windows, mentioned above. They seem to have been introduced by Street during his 1860s restoration, as earlier illustrations of the church show two three light windows. The illustration by Gilbert Flesher of Towcester, is the clearest, and he illustrated Northamptonshire churches between 1807 and 1812 and probably others further afield. Flesher, a polymath, died around c.1840, having 'invented' permeable road surfacing in advance of John Loudon McAdam who is now credited with this important achievement to modern transport and life[2].

A drawing by 'Basire' of 1805[3] also shows a triangular feature above the priest's doorway which may be a draughtsman's error as it it is shown as a round arch on Flesher's drawing.

These early illustrations all show three 3-light cusped windows on the south side of the nave clearly present before 1864. If we can believe the accuracy of the drawings the easternmost window is remarkably close to the east end wall, the other to the right of the priest's door. The window heads rise well above the present eaves line reaching up to a dentilled table and crenellated parapet. All this was apparently removed during Street's restoration when the low pitched roof was replaced with the present high pitched slated roof.

If the present Norman style windows are indeed Street's work then where did he get the curious decoration of the small window heads from, for it is so unlike any other works of his as to be hardly credible[4]. The solitary window on the north side of the chancel wall also has a similar carved head and this too looks to be of the same age. It should be said in his defence that Street was one of the leaders in the growing movement towards more sympathetic restoration and had signed the petition in 1863 leading to the formation of the Committee on the Conservation on Ancient Architectural Monuments and Remains (CCAMR), so he may have seen evidence for the design in the early work he was replacing.

Internally, the chancel is in essence is still Norman, but has been altered in various respects. The south wall exhibits a double chamfered string course as exists externally, originally running up to the east wall (though tipping 3 degrees up towards the east), and providing a stop to the deeply chamfered window sills. At east end of the south wall, a large 13th century sedilia with integral piscina has been inserted, the west end bay having had its head reset so as not to interrupt the sloping window sill. The symmetry of the first arch at the east is similarly also out-of-balance. At the west end of the south face the wall has been interrupted by the insertion of a lancet in the half bay at the west end, its sill dropped to form a low-side window which had an internal shutter in its lower part.

The story of the north chancel wall is much more chequered, due to the opening up of the huge arch on to the eastward extension of the north

aisle (once known as the Troughton Chapel, now the choir vestry), and the subsequent building of the north east chapel. The eastern part of the wall was obviously taken down in 1864, leaving only one external semi-shaft and capital, and the corbels of the table were reassembled in a jumble and reset at the top of the walls. There were, it seems, five surplus corbels, four of which were cut down and, with the fifth intact, built into the west wall of the north aisle, and a further three inserted around the two-light window east of the north porch. Internally the continuous string is remade in a simpler form and has been set 360mm lower than the south side. In view of the early-mid 12th century date of the inserted piscina-sedilia arrangement on the south side, it seems probable that the Easter Sepulchre, now in the south aisle, was originally here on the north wall, within ritualistic reach of the High Altar, as was advocated by early church practice[5].

One other possibly original feature in the chancel is the rather plain aumbry on the south side, west of the sedilia. This has been supplemented by a further aumbry on the north chancel wall.

In the vicar's vestry, there is a piscina of very unusual form, a round arch defined by a hollow chamfer, with curious and crude leaf carvings in the spandrels. It has a whorled drain, a little off centre, and is backed by a large cushioned monolith. It is conceivable that this was the original piscina of the chancel, predating the present 13th century arrangement, and like the Easter sepulchre, has also been reset.

The final point of note in passing, is a rectangular slot in the north wall, some 90mm deep x 200mm wide, 1.42m from the present east wall. This could be a supporting mortice for an altar celure, but of an unknown date.

The whole of the east wall, with its fine mid 15th century window, is not properly bonded to the side walls. It appears to have been rebuilt further to the west than the original, perhaps even later than the insertion of the two 3-light cusped windows as shown by Flesher, the easternmost being very close indeed to the east end.

The chancel arch is another distinctive Norman feature, distinctive by its relatively simple form. It has paired half-columns flanking the opening, behind four recessed orders on the Nave side, all formed of surprisingly plain small voussoirs. The nook shafts in the orders rise from plain turned bases to surface decorated cushion capitals carrying dosseret caps decorated with coarse scrolls with alternating leaf forms. The capitals are based on scalloped capitals with surface decoration rather than being moulded[6]. The original hood moulding and its return were chiselled off in the late medieval period for the insertion of a rood screen. The western nave wall is thicker to accommodate the arch up to level with the eaves line, then reduces probably to the standard wall width of around 900mm-1.0m. On this wall over the arch there was a fine medieval painting recorded by Whitbread and ruthlessly removed with all the wall plaster in 1907 with many other paintings[7]

It is probable that the internal floor level was continuous with the nave, the present three steps to the high altar position being a response to the demands of the Ecclesiological Society exhortations.

When was this large and innovative Norman church built, and for whom? Architecturally, it could be in the first half of the 12th century under King Henry I Beauclerk, who was fond of art and fine buildings, as suggested on architectural grounds by Professor Eric Fernie[8], the doyen of Romanesque architecture in Britain,- that is before the Civil War[9]. William (II) Maudit applied to build a church on the present site in 1160 and the work may have started shortly after, the same half-century as St Peter's Church, Northampton, a palatine chapel associated with the castle, was being built by the St Lys (Senlis) family, a neighbouring aristocratic Norman family[10]. The transfer of parish status to Hanslope from Castlethorpe was probably effected at this time, and some century later confirmed by Bishop Grosseteste of Lincoln in 1235-53. However, the unusual elaboration of the priest's doorway, with its chevron and oval beads ornamentation speaks of a later period, possibly the 1160-80s. Although the door frame fits rather too tightly between the wall shafts, there is nothing in this to suggest it had been removed to Hanslope from elsewhere, although the possibility remains that it was the main south door of the nave. This would account for why it is more elaborate than priests doors usually are, and perhaps offer us a date for the completion of the original Norman nave. In the chancel the whole of the wall panel containing the door was thickened out to accommodate the depth of the recesses of the door. The, admittedly slender, evidence for this is the slight displacement in the alignment of the external wall string above the door. As to dates, Keyser offers a broad date of 1130-75, while the Royal Commission on Historic Monuments suggests a date for the chancel of c.1170[11]. The truth may lie in the possibility that the building was founded before the Civil War, the work proceeded gently until it was rudely interrupted by the wars. Only later was it completed with the priest's south doorway.

The second documented restoration of St James took place in 1907, under the architects J.Oldrid Scott & Son. Mr. Whitbread, who lived in the village, took a special, what we would now call, an archaeological interest in the work, and interestingly, comments that Scott was too far away to take the necessary interest and attention that the job needed. In fact it seems that he not only recorded what was being done, but personally took an active hand in, for instance, discovering and unblocking the north entrance holy water stoup.

THE NAVE

The nave at Hanslope is 7.67m (25ft 2in) wide (approximately 2m wider than the chancel) and was precisely symmetrical to the chancel, and apparently, laid out on exactly the same east-west axis rather proving its contemporary layout. This very probably represents the original complete width of the Norman nave although the original nave length was estimated by the Royal Commission as the same as present, 17.6m (58ft)[12]. This may be based on observation of Norman style stonework in the piers at the base of the tower, but these are no longer visible since

the alterations to form a lavatory in the tower base and installing a new rear organ gallery approved by faculty in 1998.

Generally. in this area of the country, as observed by Pevsner, Norman churches are without side aisles. Leckhampstead, only 20ft wide had a late Norman aisle added c.1180. Naves are generally in the proportion of 2:1 to 2:3 nave length to width. Exceptionally in this area, Shenley has small transepts and others have central towers.

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1 Pevsner/Williamson. *Buckinghamshire.* Buildings of England series. (1994), 369. The 1770s date was recorded by Whitbread on a roof truss – this has yet to be found.

2 In private hands. See Giggins, B. *Gilbert Flesher, a man ahead of his time'* in Towcester, The Story of and English Country Town. (1995).

3 In Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society's Collection, Aylesbury.

4 Pevsner suggested the 1770s period on the basis of similarity to the work at Tickencote.

5 Durandus. ' Rationale Divinorum Officiorum' (1271)

6 One base and one only is decorated with a ring of very small dog-tooth ornamentation.

7 Whitbread notes the work taking place at length in Records of Bucks. IX. 302-7.

8 Fernie, E. The Architecture of Norman England. (2000), 227.

9 The civil war in effect was from 1139 to the death of Stephen in 1154, during which time 'the countryfolk were put to sore toil building castles' whilst churches and church property were being looted and destroyed.

10 Woodfield, P. '*Church of St Peter, Marefair, Northampton'* Churches Conservation Trust Guide (2007).

11 Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, *Buckinghamshire, north.* (1913).

12 Stewkley, for comparison, is 6.7m (22ft) wide and 14.3m (47ft) long.