

This article is from a press cutting provided by Anthony West of Remenham Manor – it must have been written about 1912 when the Rev George Gwilliam had just retired as Rector of St Nicholas

The Little Churches of Berkshire

IV Remenham

This the scene that greeted us one summer morning towards noon, when the heavens were an arc of deepest blue and the temperature was verging on 90 degs. in the shade. The tower of a newish-looking little church set in a neat churchyard bounded by laurelled greenery; a warm group of farm buildings; a low, long house of delightful proportions dating from an early Georgian day; a glimpse through the busy littered farmyard of the glistening Thames; a few wherries and gay parasols; a narrow lane coiling away up a high chalk bluff, crowned with darkening clumps of trees; a group of sturdy horses worried by the flies; a healthy, bronzed farm lad whistling snatches of modern refrains as he sat across a sleek brown mare; and a general atmosphere of drowsy rural contentment. These were the first impressions on coming to Remenham – the fourth of the lesser churches of Berkshire that we have decided to visit.

For at least fifty weeks in every year a pleasing solicitude hovers about the church of Remenham; the other fourteen days are given to so much of the bustle and confusion that overflows from the oarsman's Mecca. For here we are but a mile from Henley as the sign post near the foot of the classic bridge tells you. We did not time our visit during these fourteen days, and peace reigned, as it should, in this riverside retreat.

The church is dedicated to St. Nicholas, and at first sight appears a little disappointing from an antiquarian point of view. But this somewhat modified after a tour of the edifice, which still has features of interest that successive restorations have not quite effaced. The first church here was almost certainly a Saxon one, since a charter in the records of Westminster Abbey of the year 1070 mentions the soke of the chapel of Remenham, and it would not appear very difficult to reconstruct in the mind's eye the Norman edifice that succeeded it. It would have a simple nave with a north door and perhaps a south one, and with the apsidal chancel which has survived to our day, for although the present chancel has modern roof and its walls have been rebuilt in the upper portions and the whole refaced, the interior of the lower portion is original, as the opening of the windows on the north and south of the apse. These, with the centre window, which is modern, have now later heads, but may have been simple Norman lights or Early English lancets. The present windows in the north wall are of Decorated date; one of chalk, is original, the remainder are new. The piscine and aumbrey are in "in situ"; the south aisle is quite modern; the tower is evidently a rebuilding; the roofs are all new.

There is one feature of the church, which, although quite modern, is very fine indeed. It is the pair of iron gates that screen the chancel from the vestry. They are of Italian workmanship and were the gift of the late John Noble, Esq., of Park Place, Remenham, who lies buried in the family vault in the churchyard. They bear the word "Siena" and the date "1873". The

design, rich wreathing vines and basketted fruit with flowing tracery and bunches of grapes, set in well wrought frames of knotted ropes, recalls the ornament of some of the gates and balconies of Bellinzona that Ruskin loved.

There remain three ancient monuments within the church. There must have been several more at one time. One is a handsome marble on the north wall to Griffith Gunnis, a former Rector. A long Latin inscription records his virtues, the death of his two daughters, by which he was so affected that within a month "of the demise of the elder, he removed from earth that he might be united to his daughters forever in heaven". The other two memorials are brasses, now set on the north and south walls of the tower, but originally on the floor of the chancel. They are rather poor specimens of the last few years of brass engraving, which rapidly declined with the age of Elizabeth. The older one has lost its head within living memory, possibly on its removal; the lettering which suggests that both may have been engraved by the same hand. The older one represents a rather ungraceful and badly proportioned Knight in armour, with spurs and sword, his hands clasped in prayer. The inscription runs thus: "here lieth the bodye of Thomas Maryet of Remneham in the Countie of Berk: Esquire who dyed the 22 December ano dni 1591" it is probable that the Maryets were among the chief folk in the neighbourhood. They may have lived at the Manor House the foundations of which, together with the course taken by the moat which surrounded the house, can still be traced between the river and the church. Like the Manor house of Phyllis Court, about three-quarters of a mile away, the moat was fed from the Thames.

The other brass is perhaps the more interest since it is complete. It is a tolerable example – no more – of the break up of an art that attained to such magnificence in Plantagenet times. The style of dress is vogue in the time the Charles the First did not lend itself to defiguration upon memorials of this type, and this, together with other factors including the rise of the table tombs and sepulchral monuments, killed completely the custom that had been waning for many years. Here at Remenham a pastor is represented in his robes – ruff and preaching gown, - and the inscription has a certain quaintness that is not common upon memorials of the type:-

In obitum viri clarissimi Johannis Newman hujus Ecclesiae quondam pastoria
Qui populum vera pavit pietato sepultus
Hic jacet et cineres urnula parva tenet
Corpus humo clausum est animam Deus ipso receipt
Felix aeternis vivere caelicalis

Obijt Ano dni 1622. Mensis Junis 29. Abi aetatis suae LX

Here is the translation: –

On the death of a most illustrious man, John Newman, sometime pastor of this church; who fed the people with true piety; being buried, here he lies, and a small urn holds his ashes. His body has been enclosed in the ground; his soul, God Himself has received. O happy one; to live the eternal inhabitants of heaven.

There are several old tomb slabs set in a turf bank on the south side of the churchyard; they were once in the floor of the church. There is one low stone on the north side that the elements have caressed softly. It is the head of a smiling cherub, a treasure among the host of babes that adorns the "God's acres" scattered up and down this land. It seems to breathe a message – "In coelo quies".

On the wall of the south aisle is a square stone once the base of a marble font that would seem to savour of early Georgian days. There is a story of this that is worth recalling. When the church was restored in 1865 a font more in keeping with that style and architecture of the church was provided. The question arose what to do with the old one. A suggestion was put forward that it should be broken up and that each parishioner who had been baptised in the church should, if he or she wished, have piece of the font in memory of his her baptismal vows. It was done.

It has been said in the defence of those accused of over-restoration, that a church is primarily a sanctuary in which to commune with the Almighty, and archaeological and antiquarian study. Remenham Church is an excellent example of this precept. The old galleries – there were two - that once blocked the nave, the high pews and blots of a stultified age in religious matters, have gone the way of their kind. No one regrets their disappearance. Remenham, though situated far from the Principality, has usually had a Welshman for Rector, as it is in the gift of Jesus College, Oxford, and has been held by a succession of Fellows of that society. The recent Rector, the Rev. G. H. Gwilliam, Fellow of Hertford College, is also a Member, though not a Fellow of Jesus College, and as a Sanscrit student has few equals in the country. He was devoted to his church and was happy to be of service to all those who were reverently interested in it. He has been of no little service to us in the preparation of these notes: we here record his unflinching courtesy and our gratitude for his kindness.

Ernest W. Dormer

