

## WOLFHAMPCOTE AND ITS CHURCH

*by Lyndon F. Cave*

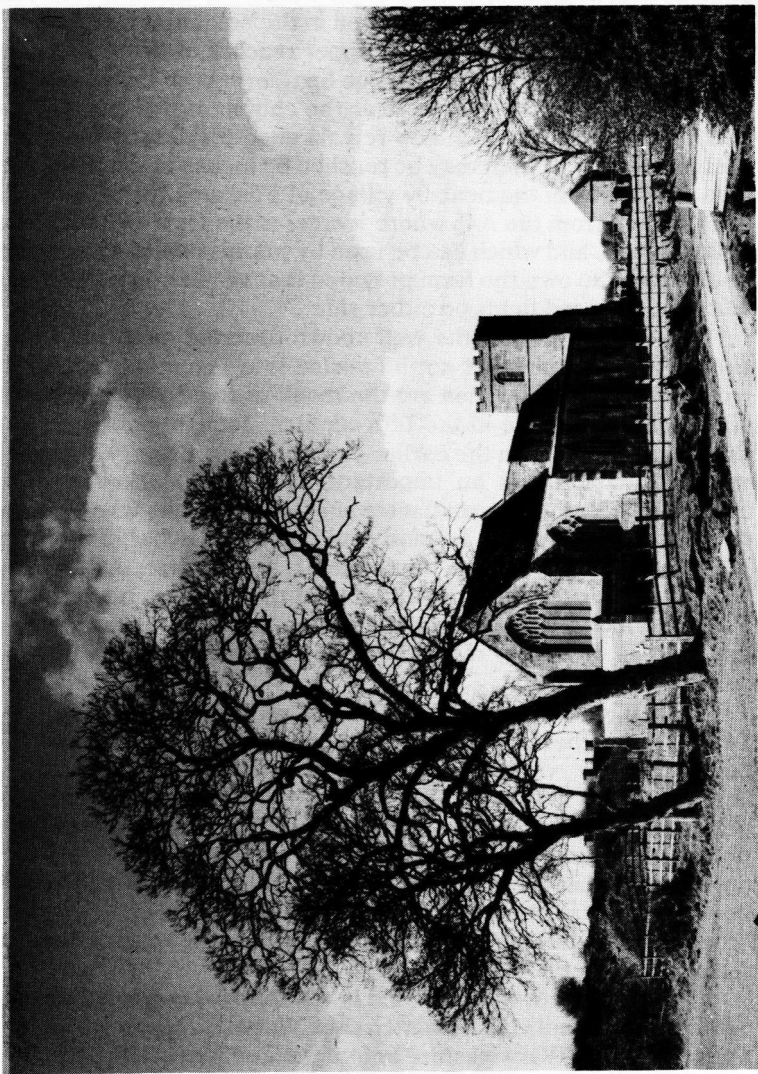
Wolfhampcote stands in an isolated position on the eastern edge of Warwickshire, not far from where the modern A45 runs past the hillside village of Braunston in the neighbouring county of Northampton. It is here that the upper reaches of the river Leam, which gives its name to Leamington Spa, form both the county and parish boundaries as it flows near the church of St Peter and the handful of buildings which now remain near this deserted medieval village site. The church may be reached by means of a minor gated road leading from the near-by village of Flecknoe, or by a private track leading from the A45 where it crosses the Grand Union Canal at Braunston, and which can be used by permission of Mr and Mrs Thompson who own the farm provided that visitors do not trespass on the unenclosed fields on either side.

These form part of the well known deserted medieval village site, but the visitor must not be misled into assuming that all the mounds which can be seen are the result of the destruction of the village some time late in the 14th century. Some are disused canal workings, dating from the earlier part of the last century, and made when Braunston was an important focal point for water-borne traffic. Adjacent to the canal were substantial basins where barges on their way to or from London could load or discharge the many products required in this agricultural area. Later disturbances were also caused during the building of the now redundant L.N.E. Railway which crosses the village site on an embankment, but this line leading to Rugby was never very profitable and had a comparatively short life.

Today, as it has done for many centuries, the small river Leam, the furthest stream from the churchyard, forms the parish boundary; the village originally spread beyond this towards Braunston, but at that time the county boundary was not so clearly defined as at present. The major part of the parish was enclosed under Acts passed in 1744 and 1757, although in many places, particularly near Flecknoe, the district still has the appearance of being largely unaltered since pre-enclosure times, giving a rather bleak open landscape, this by no means being the result of modern farming practice.

Wolfhampcote was recorded in the Domesday Survey as being owned by Turchill, the Saxon Earl of Warwick, who owned large areas of land in Warwickshire before the Conquest. The parish was then called 'Ufelmescote' and among the people living there was a priest, which suggests a church on the site before the arrival of the Normans. No traces of this earlier building have yet been discovered.

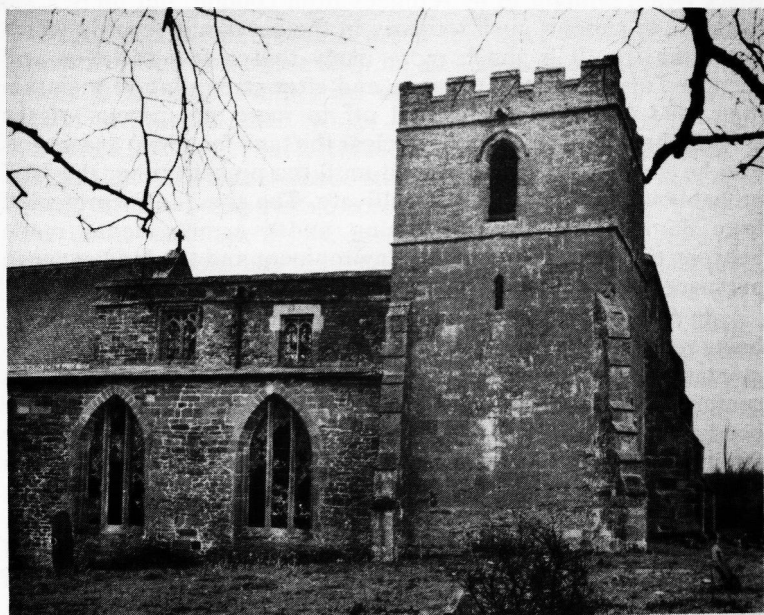
Early in the reign of Edward III the manor passed by marriage



Rural tranquility: Wolfhampeote Church, Warwickshire, a general view. The building is now vested in the Redundant Churches Fund.



View from the north showing the Hood mausoleum added to the east end of the church in 1848.



The sturdy tower, altered in 1690, and south aisle, the windows revealing all too clearly the attention they had received from vandals.

to the Peto family who held it for about 300 years until in 1614 Sir Edward Peto, of Chesterton, also in Warwickshire, sold the land to his tenant Robert Clarke. The manor remained with this family until in 1800 Thomas Clarke, the last male heir, died. In the church may be seen several memorials of this family, others having been lost or damaged during the years. In 1826 the estate was bought by Charles Tibbits, of Barton Seagrave in Northamptonshire. Later in the century Mary, the daughter and heir of Richard Tibbits, married the third Viscount Hood. She still owned the property at the time of her death in 1904 when it was sold and the manorial rights finally extinguished. The family later took the name Gregory-Hood which it retains. Monuments relating to several members of this family can also be seen in the church.

The hamlet now consists of a modern cottage, behind which stands an old stone tithe barn, the manor house, probably built in the 17th century, which survives as the present farm house and, standing slightly isolated, by a disused railway track, the last vicarage built in 1873 and now a private house. Standing apart from all these is the church of St Peter in what was the centre of the original village.

Local legend suggests that the village was wiped out by the Black Death brought in by refugees from London, but there is no evidence to support such a theory in the surviving records which are extensive. It is much more likely that a few cottages still remained after this great plague and after struggling to maintain their land the villagers drifted off to more prosperous places leaving the Lord of the Manor to clear the land for sheep grazing as best he could. So it has remained until the present time, the land probably being too difficult to cultivate. The site is now protected from damage by deep ploughing under arrangements made between the Department of the Environment and the landowner in pursuance of the Ancient Monuments legislation.

In medieval times the village was often known as 'Ovencote' being referred to as such in the early parish registers, while documentary evidence also exists to show that at the end of the 11th century the inhabitants were one priest, four brothers, four bondsmen, seven villeins and ten bordars (smallholders) with their families; perhaps a 100 persons in all. During the centuries which followed there are scattered references to the parish in the various surviving records, including an account of a trial held at Coventry in 1221 concerning three cases of murder in the village; one of these involved a villager called Geoffrey who killed Robert, son of Richard of Flecknoe. He afterwards fled into the church of St Peter, seeking sanctuary, and later acknowledged his crime before going into exile.



After the village disappeared the church remained to serve the few people still living in the parish as well as the neighbouring hamlets of Flecknoe, Nethercote and Sawbridge. Today Flecknoe is a large village, but the other two are now little more than names on a map. Later references to the church are also found in the Quarter Sessions Books, in two fine copies of glebe terriers dating from 1682, and in the parish registers. The first volume of these, dated 1558, was the result of the Injunction of 1597 when Queen Elizabeth approved an Act to record all baptisms, marriages and burials in a bound parchment kept in each parish church. At the same time it was decreed that parish records from the first year of the Queen's reign, which was in 1558, should be copied into the new books from their beginning, and this was done at Wolfhampcote by the incumbent, John Fisher.

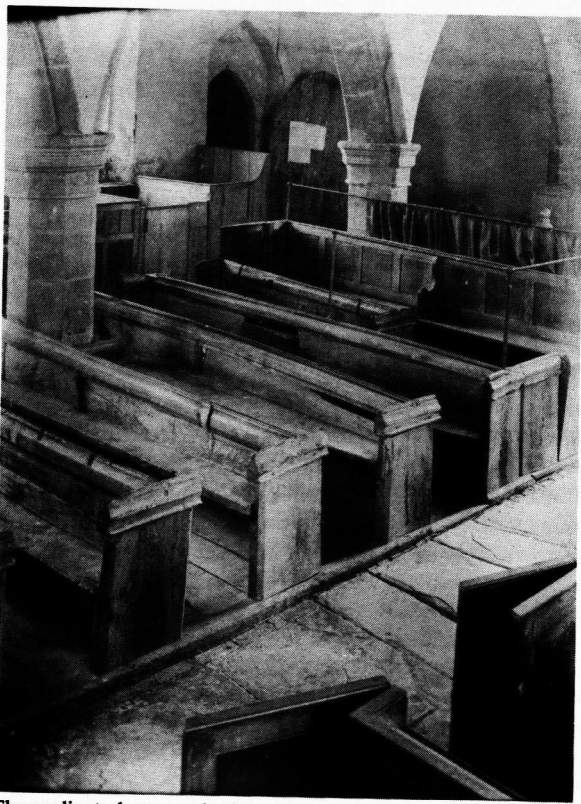
Some years ago the glebe terriers and the parish registers, from 1558 to 1768, were transcribed by Dr Edward Reid-Smith, a life long friend of the church, and printed privately by him. The volume on the parish registers is now almost a rare book in its own right as only a 100 copies were printed for sale but the originals of the documents can be seen at the Diocesan Records Office at Warwick where they were placed for safe keeping when the church was closed.

Around the churchyard are a few grassy enclosures which mark the area of a house with its accompanying land, or toft, but there is no visible indication as to where the dwelling actually stood in the enclosure, which is about 160 ft by 100 ft in size, although it is likely that it fronted on to the main village street. The original moated manor house stood on the north side of the churchyard, the site being visible across the modern track which serves the farm. Although the village has been known to historians for many years, there has been no large scale archaeological investigation of the site, apart from a trial excavation carried out in August, 1955, by a group of students under the direction of Mrs D. G. Hurst. This investigation was sponsored by the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group with funds from Birmingham and Coventry Museums. Traces of pottery from the 11th to 15th centuries were discovered, the greatest proportion being from the period between the 12th and late 13th centuries when the village was flourishing. Traces of timber buildings were also found in the clay soil, together with such items as knives, buttons, buckles, a rare barrel padlock as well as a stone spindle whorl and a bone shuttle indicating that cloth making took place in the district.

Although according to the Domesday Survey there was a church at Wolfhampcote no trace of this early building survives. It is likely that if it existed it stood on the same site as the present

church. But we know that in 1248 Geoffrey de Langele placed a chaplain, called Henry, in charge and that eight years later Robert de Langele presented the living to Peter de Leycestria, a noted pluralist and sub-deacon of St Mary's Church in Warwick.

The Langley family held the right to the living until in 1331 it



The earliest photograph of the interior of Wolfhampcote Church (before 1903) showing the medieval benches. National Monuments Record copyright.

passed to the Peto family. In 1365, Sir John Peto granted the living to Thomas de Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, and in 1392 the Earl gave the church to the Dean and Canon of the Collegiate Church of St Mary at Warwick. During the 14th century the church was rebuilt and in the next century the roof was altered and the clerestory added. So although the tower was not yet built the church had by then assumed the form we see today. About the same time the church was pewed and some of the original 14th century benches can still be seen in the building. They have been recently

repaired. Others survived until the restorations of the last century when they were cut up and used to make other fittings, which have long since disappeared.

At the Dissolution the patronage passed to the Crown, and not long after 1586 came into the possession of Thomas Spenser, who



A medieval bench end, the design to the left incised but never completed.

presented the vicars in subsequent years. The lower part of the tower was reputed to have been built about this time, but was later altered. During the recent restoration a date and initials, those of the vicar and churchwardens of the time, were found on the outside of the crenellations at the top of the west side of the tower. These show that the top was altered in 1690 when it was also re-roofed. This date is visible only at certain times in the autumn when the sunlight strikes the tower at the right angle to reveal the outlines of the worn lettering. It was confirmed by the discovery of the same date, with other initials, carved on the remains of a beam removed from inside the tower in 1976 when attacks of death watch beetle were being treated.

The church remained unaltered until the first of the modern restorations, in 1848, when work was carried out at the expense of

Lady Hood, who also built the family mausoleum on to the east end of the church. This was repaired in 1976 and the entrance blocked to prevent further damage by vandals, who had in the past obtained access to the interior. It was commonly thought that the chancel was also rebuilt at this time, but evidence of old stonework uncovered during the recent restoration shows that this was probably not the case. It appears much more likely that the outside of the chancel was faced with the stonework that can be seen today, leaving the original structure intact behind this later facing.

The story of St Peter's is really about a church which, although from time to time neglected, would not 'die' and the chief problem from the middle of the last century, and perhaps before then, down to our own time has been the small population living in the parish. There were only 399 persons in 1871 and by 1901 the number was down to 261, while at the time of the 1971 census there were 196 persons in the civil parish living in 60 households.



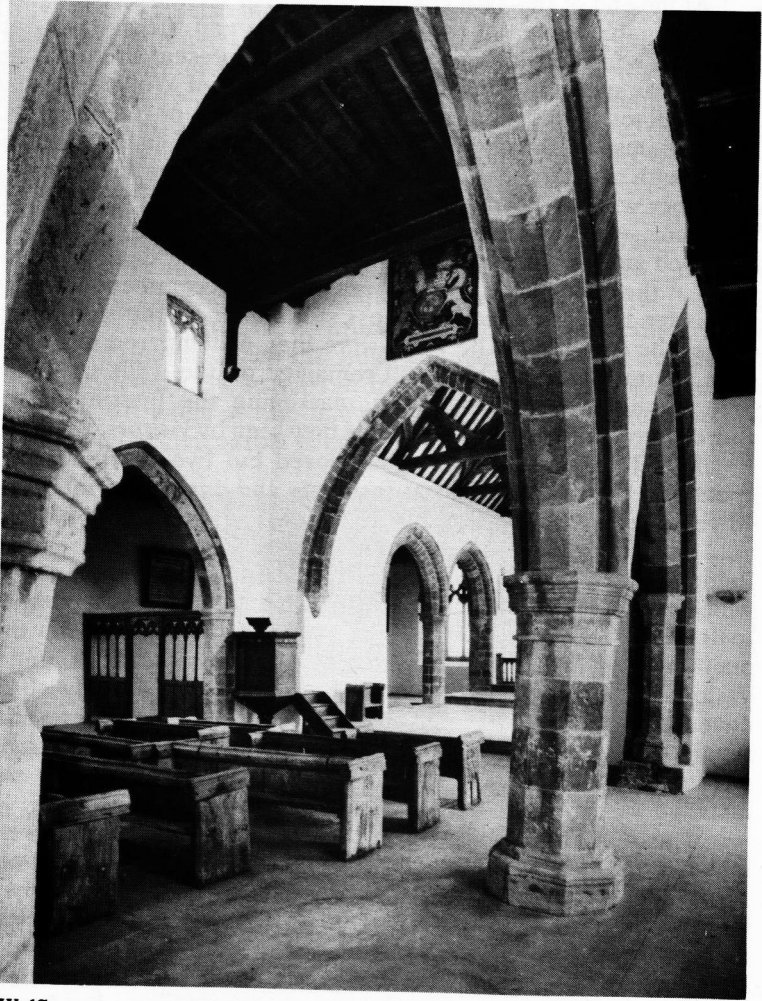
The north chapel and sanctuary in 1969 before restoration. National Monuments Record copyright.

At the end of the 19th century the parish started a restoration fund to enable essential repairs to be done and these started in 1903, this being the last restoration until the present time. A sum of £425 was spent, the builder being Mr Brown, of Wollaston, near Wellingborough, working under the supervision of the architect, Mr Williams, of Daventry. The nave, and south aisle, were re-roofed with sheet iron laid on boarding and one of the 15th century clerestory windows had to be renewed, the other being repaired. The floor was also cemented over concealing many of the old inscribed stones, while at the same time a cement dado was provided at the base of the walls, a practice not recommended today as this tends to drive the dampness still higher up the stonework, as was the case here. The walls were then distempered in a terra cotta colour much of which still remained on the walls up to the time of the present restoration, darkening the interior of the church in contrast to the white walls now seen by visitors.

In 1910 St Peter's was again closed but two years later reopened at the request of local residents and during the following 40 years was used for occasional services, as well as for burials, until just after the last war when the church was finally closed. Being isolated, it at once became the victim of much vandalism which carried on until in the late 1950s the diocese took a decision to demolish it, leaving the walls as a 'picturesque ruin'. After this plan was objected to by The Friends of Friendless Churches, under its founder Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, the idea was eventually abandoned and 'Friends' were given permission to carry out essential repairs to keep the fabric intact. The iron roof, which was leaking after more than 70 years in use, was taken off and a copper roof installed.

This did not long remain in place as the copper sheets were stolen in three successive raids. Vandalism, which had long been rife, continued and almost all the modern woodwork was destroyed which was, however, little loss. One of the bells was also stolen, but was fortunately recovered before being melted down for scrap. As a precaution 'Friends' bricked up the lower window openings and the main doorway and vandals were denied access. But for the action of the 'Friends' this important church would not have survived long enough to allow it to be formally declared redundant under the procedures of the Pastoral Measure of 1968. On 3 March, 1972, the future of St Peter's became secure when it was vested in the Redundant Churches Fund which took over where the 'Friends'





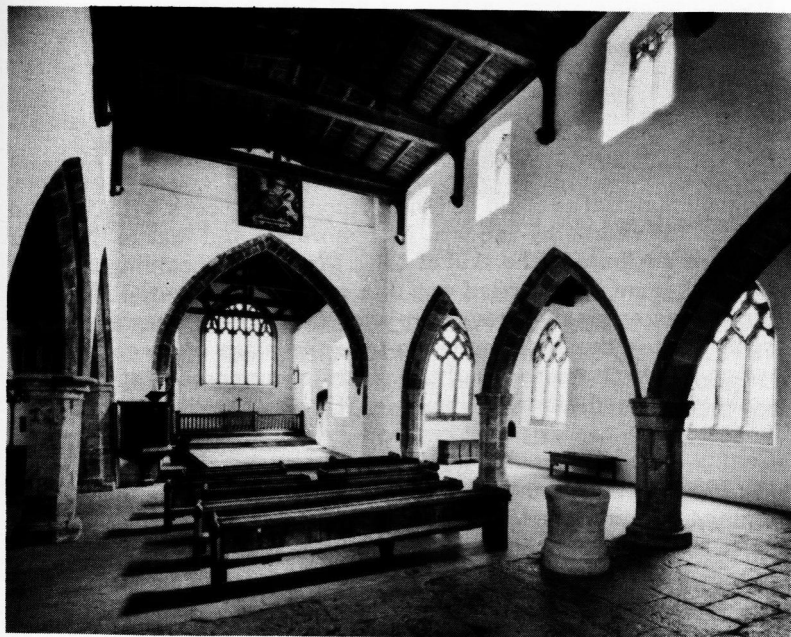
Wolfhampcote restored, a view looking east showing the benches and royal arms.

left off and started a programme of repairs which lasted about three years. Due to the isolated position of the building it was not practical to carry out any work during the winter months.

The first step was once again to repair the roof. It was obviously useless to re-cover the roof in copper or lead, and, despite the shorter life, it was covered with bitumous felt. The brickwork was removed from the windows which were 'reglazed' with a new plastic material reinforced with a strong diamond

shaped metal mesh which allows the interior once again to be seen to its best advantage. The east window was originally filled with stained glass, which included the coats of arms of the Beauchamp, Peto, Loges and Langley families, but this was removed during the reconstruction of the east end of the church early in the last century. What remained in the other windows was smashed beyond repair before the windows were bricked up to prevent access to the building.

A chemical damp proof course was then injected into the walls, the earth outside also being cut back to allow a drainage channel to be laid around the building and other repairs were done to the walls to prevent further decay to parts of the stonework. This was followed by the stripping of the old plaster, a victim of damp penetration which allowed structural repairs to be carried out to the stonework exposed for the first time for 50 or more years, and in some cases for the first time ever. After the walls had dried out the surfaces were replastered and decorated. The only walls not replastered were some parts of the chancel where the modern covering of cement mortar was almost impossible to remove without damaging the stonework underneath.



Nave and chancel after restoration.

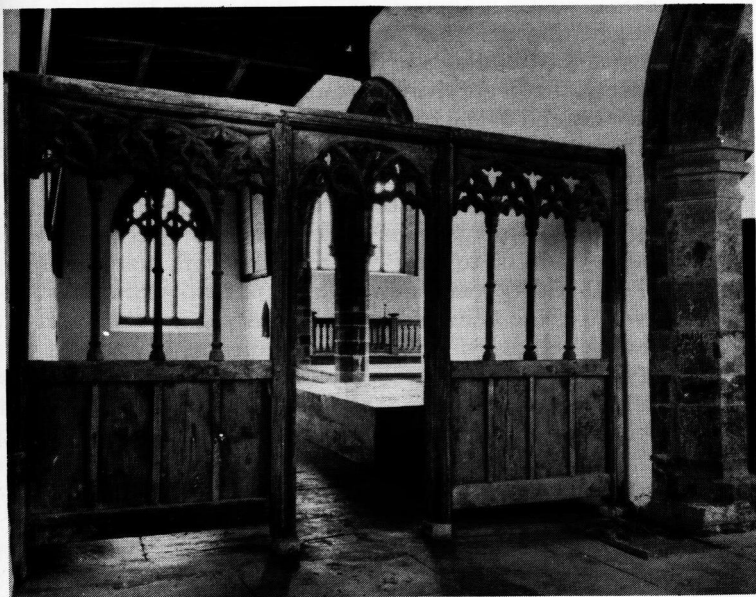
A new floor, using old stones from elsewhere, has been laid in the north chapel and general repairs carried out to the floor in the rest of the church, although no efforts were made to uncover stones already covered by cement screed. In the chancel are some stones on which can faintly be seen the armorial devices of the Raynesford family and a small brass tablet, dated 1687, which is a memorial to the wife of Thomas Benyon, once a vicar of the parish. On the walls near this are some 19th century memorials to the Tibbits family, including one to Samuel Tibbits Hood, Viscount Hood, who died in 1846.

The Royal Coat of Arms of Queen Anne, dating from 1702, now hangs in its original position over the chancel arch, and its style suggests the painting is by a local sign-writer rather than a professional artist. Only the few people who saw the condition of this panel when uncovered from beneath a pile of rubbish can appreciate the work done to clean and repair it by Mrs Eve Baker, of South Newington near Banbury, who is a specialist in this form of conservation technique.

The Victorian pews, and other fittings of the same period, were removed as they had been so broken up that repairs were not practical. All the other woodwork, with the roof trusses, was treated against further attacks of beetle infestation, and repairs made when required. The trusses over the nave, and the two side aisles, are obviously of the 19th century, but those over the choir and chancel are of a steep pitched king post type having stone chamfered tie beams, and purlins, with shaped wind braces between the three trusses, all dating from the 14th century.

The pulpit, dated 1790, was restored using as much of the original material as could be found among the pieces left scattered around the church by vandals. Its restoration and that of the altar table, is a tribute to the skill of Clive Markey, of Leamington Spa, the craftsman who carried out this work. It is reputed that this pulpit was originally brought to the church from another parish some time in the last century to take the place of an earlier one which had been made out of the pieces of numerous 14th century pews which had survived intact in St Peter's until that time. No traces of this earlier pulpit can now be found but as the Victoria County History records in its description of the church, written in the 1950s, there were then 11 of the pews, or benches, of varying lengths with moulded top rails, plain panelled backs, some with vertical boards and some with long panels in one piece. One, then in the chancel, has one end carved with two trefoiled panels with rosettes above but left unfinished, although the design is marked out ready for carving. There is some doubt over the actual date of these ancient benches. Some authorities date them from the 15th

century rather than from the 14th century. Those which survive have been repaired although one of the 11 has disappeared since the V.C.H. account was written, probably being smashed up by the intruders. The 18th century altar table has been restored, having a new top fitted, while repairs were also carried out to the communion rail, the chest and the bier which all date from about the same period as the altar table.



The 14th-century screen, rescued from a neighbouring farm and replaced in its original position.

Among the oldest items in the church is the 14th century screen at the entrance to the north chapel. This had been taken out of the church for safety and placed in a farm some distance away, but was recovered by the 'Friends' and replaced in its original position. It is said to have been removed some time in the last century to a place under the tower. This screen originally had a door in its centre and the opening where this stood has a moulded frame and a cinquefoil traceried head. On each side there are two open panels formed by slender turned balusters resting on a rail and supporting trefoiled heads with plain panels below.

Access to the church is now by the door in the south wall of the choir, but the surviving doors from outside the 14th century porch, which has remained bricked up for reasons of security, can be seen at the west end of the nave. The date of these doors is uncertain as

they are not the original ones. Let into the west wall of this porch is a shaped stone slab, possibly an ancient coffin cover or a memorial stone. Just inside the original entrance to the church, at the south west corner of the nave, is the font which is Norman in date, repaired by the 'Friends' after being broken into two by vandals. In the north chapel are a 14th century piscina and aumbry, which indicates that an altar once stood here. In the south chapel there is also a piscina, which judging from its style dates from the 13th century, suggesting that this part of the church was built earlier than the rest of the building and that an altar also once stood here, or alternatively, that it survived from an earlier building.

At the west end of the church is a squat tower originally built in the 15th century and finished with a battlemented parapet thought to have been added in 1690. All the timber beams supporting the floors and bell frames in the tower had been attacked by death watch beetle for perhaps as long as 200 years and were mostly on the point of collapse when repair work started. Being unsafe, all timberwork was renewed in oak or elm, with a new floor being provided to the belfry and new beams put in to support the bell frames, the largest of which was retained as it was still in a satisfactory condition. This probably dates from early in the last century but it might be earlier. The tower contains two bells, as it has done since the 18th century. The larger had never been moved, but the smaller had been hung at Flecknoe and was recovered in the recent repairs. These were removed and taken to Loughborough where they were repaired by Messrs John Taylor and Co., the bell founders, and rehung so that it is now possible to ring the bells. This was done for the first time for more than 30 years, and perhaps even longer, at the time of the annual service on St Peter's Day, 1976. The smaller bell is inscribed: Pack and Chapman of London. Fecerunt. 1780 and contrasts with the other bell which weighs between 18 and 19 cwt. This is of great value being a large example of the work of John Sturdy of London and was probably cast just prior to the middle of the 15th century. Although in medieval times it was usual to cast large bells on, or near, the actual site of a church this was was, in accordance with the usual practice of John Sturdy, probably cast in London and brought by cart to Wolfhampcote. It bears the inscription *IN MULTIS ANNIS RESONET CAMPANA JOHANNIS*, with crowned capital letters at the start of each word. These crowned letters were first used by an earlier London founder named Stephen Norton. The bell also bears an old London founder's mark which first appeared in the 14th century, together with a cross of four fleurs-de-lis in an octagon, a mark which was first used by John Sturdy.

Because of their historical interest the canons have been



retained at the head of the bell which has now been turned round to allow the clapper to strike a part of the sound bow which has not been worn thin by the blows of the clapper during the last 500 years. This is the first time this medieval bell has been turned round in this way and perhaps even the first time it has left the church tower.

Outside the church the east end of the original building is concealed by the vault built in 1848, and by the time the present work started this was in a derelict state with trees growing out of the stonework. It has now been repaired using new stone, cut out of old stones, to make good the walls, but as far as possible its design has been reproduced, its style being 'nineteenth century gothick'.

The churchyard contains many fine tombs which had been broken into by vandals or pushed over by cattle. The table tombs have now been repaired and pieced together, while as many as possible of the headstones have been raised. In the course of this work it became obvious that many of these were buried in the earth as investigation shows that the level of the churchyard had risen from between 18 inches to 4 feet since the stones dates 1693 were first erected. Many of these, and some later, stones were buried and have now been raised to the new level of the ground with the result that many interesting inscriptions unknown to the present generation have been brought to light. This may be the wrong thing to do from an archaeological point of view, but it was felt that the churchyard should be restored to its original appearance showing these previously hidden stones, especially as in so many cases churchyards are now being cleared to make it easier to cut the grass. In this case at least the visitor will be able to see the typical English churchyard as it was in the past. All this work, as well as the repairs to the church, was carried out by the builder, Mr Eastwood, of Leamington Spa, and his small group of craftsmen, under the supervision of the architect, Mr L. F. Cave.

In 1970 The Friends of Wolfhampcote Church were formed under the chairmanship of Sir John Betjeman, C.B.E., the Poet Laureate, to stimulate interest in this old church. This association also arranges occasional services, one of these normally being held each year on, or near June 29, which is St Peter's Day.

This article could not have been written without the help and advice of Ivor Bulmer-Thomas, who has been Hon. Director of the Friends of Friendless Churches since its formation and was chairman of the Redundant Churches Fund during the period when the present repairs were carried out. More than any other person Bulmer-Thomas was responsible for saving this church from demolition. Reference has also been made to the history of this

church in the volumes of the Victoria County History of Warwickshire as well as the following works compiled by Dr Reid-Smith: *The Parish Registers of Wolfhampcote Parish Church 1558-1768* and *Notes on the History of Wolfhampcote Village and Church*. Copies of both these may be seen at the County Record Office in Warwick. Apart from those reproduced by courtesy of the National Monuments Record, all photographs in this article are by Christopher Dalton.