

SHROPSHIRE

By the Very Rev. D. H. S. Cranage, Litt.D., B.D., F.S.A., Hon. A.R.I.B.A.

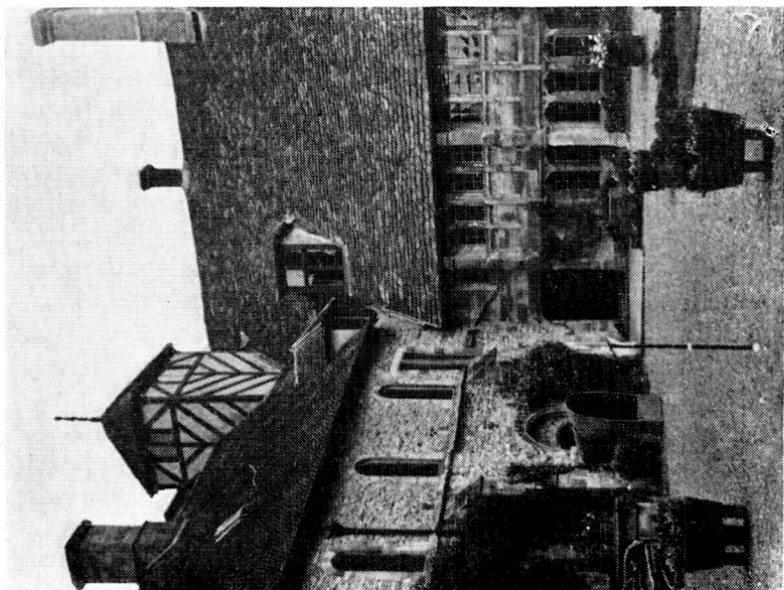
PROUD Salopia! Proud indeed, but what have Salopians to be proud of? First and greatest, the works of Nature. Mountains. They are not lofty. The highest, the Brown Clee, is only 1,806 feet above the sea. Better known is the Wrekin (1,320 feet), partly because of its central and isolated position, partly because it has caused a popular toast to "All Friends round the Wrekin," partly because of a narrow cleft in the rock, "the Needle's Eye." Rivers. The chief is the Severn, of about the same length as the Thames, just over 210 miles. Trees, for the county is well-wooded.

Leaving the unapproachable works of God, what can be said of the handiwork of man in church, castle, manor house, cottage? Pre-historic remains are scanty. The Roman occupation is still shown at Wroxeter, the Roman Uriconium, where a lofty wall has only recently been strengthened to avoid collapse. The Middle Ages are rich in ecclesiastical architecture. There were at least five monasteries—Benedictine at Shrewsbury, Cistercian at Buildwas, Cluniac at Wenlock, Augustinian Canons at Haughmond and Lilleshall. A friend of mine, after leaving my home five miles away, came back from Buildwas, on the banks of the Severn, with the report "It is too good to be true." The monastic churches were ruined at the Dissolution, except the nave of Shrewsbury, taken over as a parish church. The conventual buildings, however, are of great interest, especially at Wenlock, where the farmery and prior's lodge have become a unique "gentleman's residence." At Shrewsbury, the 14th century frater pulpit has been cruelly cut off from the church and cloister by a modern road.

There is no bishop's cathedra, for the county is divided into the dioceses of Lichfield and Hereford. If ever a diocese of Shrewsbury is formed, there is the fine church of St. Mary waiting for the bishop to preside. This began as a cruciform building in the middle of the 12th century. A little later, a western tower was added, and before the end of the century and early in the next, great extensions and alterations were made, so that we have here, in nave and eastern



ST. MARY'S CHURCH, SHREWSBURY



ABBOT'S HOUSE, MUCH WENLOCK

chancel, as charming Early English work as can anywhere be found. Alterations were also made in the 14th and 15th centuries. Another church of cathedral rank is St. Lawrence at Ludlow, the largest in the county. Here there is no Norman work, but the 13th century is clearly represented, though what is most prominent dates from the 14th and 15th centuries, including the central tower, over 160 feet in height. The choir stalls were finished about 1450 with the money of the Palmer's Guild. As this was a collegiate church, stalls were a necessity, though few elsewhere have such a fine number of carved misericords. Interest in medieval architecture is fortunately not confined to the larger churches. In this county there are scores which repay attention. There are four undoubted examples of Saxon churches, much altered later on—Barrow, Diddlebury, Staunton Lacey, Wroxeter. At Barrow, the chancel may well date from the 8th century, the nave from just before or just after the Conquest. The west wall of Stottesdon may also be Saxon, and also part of the north and south walls of Rushbury.

The Norman period is very rich and one building, the Heath, is one of the most complete Norman chapels in England. The chapel in Ludlow Castle, now ruined, is one of the four round churches of medieval date which remain in England, the others being at Cambridge, Northampton, Little Maplestead. The Temple church in London, of similar character, was sadly damaged in the war of 1939 to 1945. More than a hundred churches may be assigned to the Norman period, either in their original parts or in later additions. The latter half of the 12th century may be described as the great building period of Shropshire. Often the work is plain, but at Much Wenlock parish church the west front rivals almost anything in the country. Unfortunately it is obscured by the late Norman tower. There are rich Norman doorways at Edstaston, the grandest and most elaborate being the main south doorway of four orders. There are fine doorways also at Aston Eyres, and Holgate, and chancel arches at Quatford, Shiffnal, Stirchley, and Upton Cressett. Linley is a complete example of the style, with chancel, nave, and western tower.

Nearly a hundred churches were built or added to in the Early English period. The beautiful work at St. Mary's, Shrewsbury, has already been mentioned. At Cleobury Mortimer the chancel, south aisle, and porch are excellent examples, with good mouldings, stiff-leaf foliage and banded shafts. At Acton Burnell there is a complete example of the latter part of the period. It deserves careful study, especially the early tracery of the east window, the

mouldings of capitals and bases, and the graceful roof of the north transept.

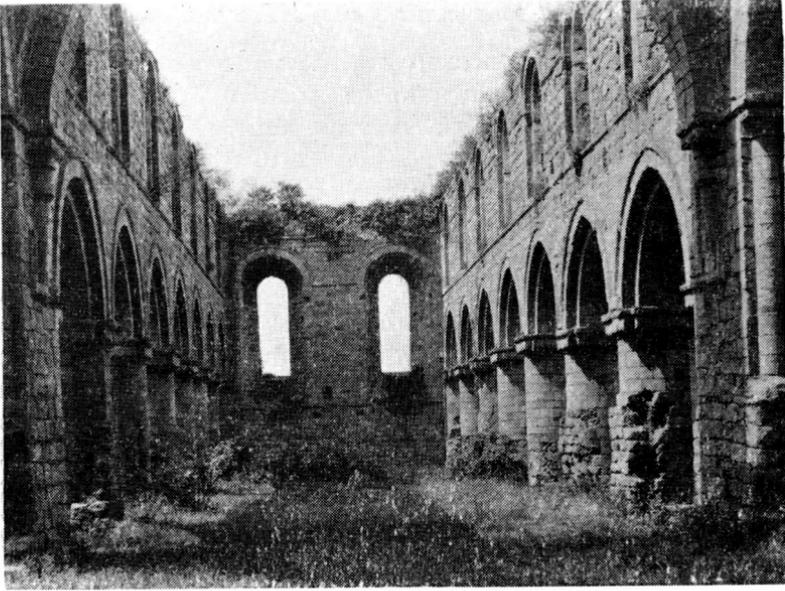
By the 14th century the main church building of Shropshire was completed and less than twenty churches were then begun. However, good art never lagged and more than a hundred churches illustrate the taste of the period. It was an age of fine window tracery. Five-light examples can be seen at Kinlet, Stottesdon, and Chelmarsh. Natural leaf carving, generally so common at the time, is not much seen in the county, but the characteristic ball-flower occurs again and again.

Surfeit of building of course affects the 15th century even more than the 14th, but more than a hundred churches have representations in the fabric, especially in windows, towers, and roofs. There is a deterioration in ornamental carving.

Stone vaulting is unusual in an English parish church. There are only seven medieval examples in Shropshire, the latest being the fan vault over the Vernon chapel at Tong, dating from 1515. Wooden roofs occur everywhere—trussed-rafter, tie-beam, hammer-beam, collar-braced. There are examples from the end of the 12th century onwards. Stone is used almost universally for walls, but there are some examples of half-timbered work, especially in porches. I have found no brick till Minsterley was rebuilt in 1689. However, it had been used in domestic building before that date.

There are over a hundred medieval fonts. Most are quite plain, but some are elaborately carved, notably that at Stottesdon, one of the finest in England. Acton Burnell displays the charming architectural detail we find in the church itself. Nearly all the fonts have evidently been locked. A few medieval altars have been desecrated, but some have been restored.

In the Oxford Dictionary, "ancient" is defined as "belonging to times long past." For my present purpose I am assuming it may include the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Gothic architecture did not die out with the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558, though most of the subsequent work might be described as debased. The chancel of Shipton was built in 1589, and has windows which quite reflect the style of the 14th century. At Astley Abbots the chancel, rebuilt in 1633, shows the Decorated style in the tracery, but the mouldings are Perpendicular. The same mixture is seen in the Shavington chapel at Adderley, 1635-37. The Civil War caused disasters and several churches had to be rebuilt. Apart from actual building, about half the churches contain Jacobean wood-carving, and the period was rich in monumental tombs, as indeed other



BUILDWAS ABBEY



STOKESAY CASTLE

periods are also. Tong actually can boast of a collection from the beginning of the 15th century to the beginning of the 17th. They commemorate members of the Vernon family, in whose honour a special chapel was built in 1515. One of the earliest tombstones is that at High Ercal, with the effigy of a knight, dating from the beginning of the 13th century. The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods are represented by more than a hundred monuments, some of great magnificence. That at Kinlet of Sir George Blount and his wife, 1581 and 1584, can hardly be matched anywhere in England. It is of special interest as showing Gothic feeling mixed with the Classical ornament, which was so soon to be dominating. Brasses are not so common as in some counties. Some thirteen are medieval and about fifty are later, up to 1700. One of the best is at Clun, dating from 1653. Old stained glass can be seen in nearly fifty churches, but it is often framed by modern glass. St. Mary's, Shrewsbury, has a fine series of windows, but most of the glass is foreign, and was collected and presented by a former vicar.

One of the most puzzling features in medieval churches is the "low side window," the reason for which has never been convincingly explained. There are quite thirty examples in Shropshire, dating from the 13th century onwards. One of the most remarkable is in the east wall at Ludlow, and not, as in every other case I know, in the south. It dates from the 13th century, and yet is in a wall of the 15th, moved there no doubt when the chancel was extended in the Perpendicular period. It may be confidently supposed that it was originally in the 13th century south wall. The whole arrangement cannot prove what the purpose was, but the late Dr. Cox maintained that such windows "were used for the purpose of ringing the sanctus bell therefrom at the time of Mass." The Ludlow example cannot be quoted against such a use, and certainly destroys most other theories, including the absurd suggestion of their being "leper windows." The purpose of "ancient monuments" is usually quite evident, but, where a common feature has puzzled generations of antiquaries, it seemed worth while to dwell for a moment on a possible explanation. One cannot now be certain that every medieval church had a "low side window," but there cannot be much doubt that every one had a piscina, the ceremonial water-drain, nearly always placed on the south side of the altar and in an arched recess. About 110 still remain in Shropshire. As every altar seems to have had its own piscina, there were often several in a large church. There are six double piscinas, and of these, no less than three are in one church, Acton Burnell, dating from the third

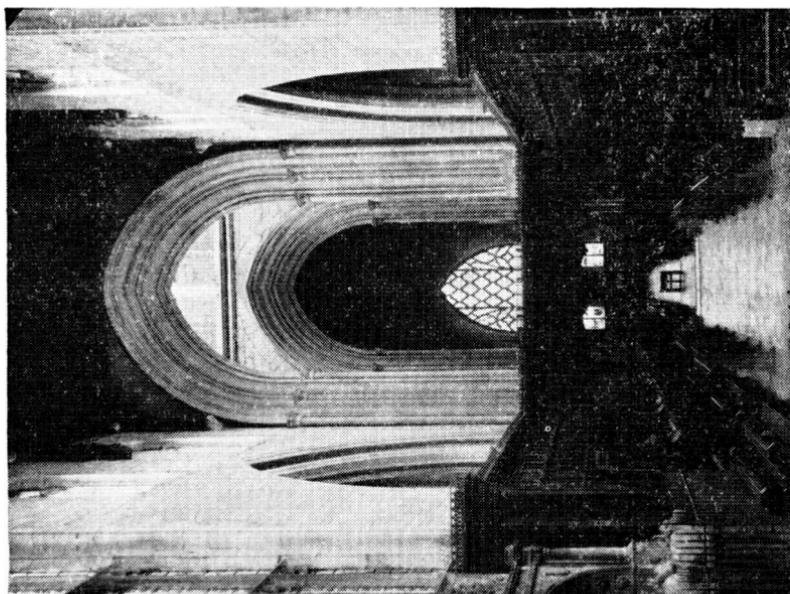
quarter of the 13th century. That in the chancel is a beautiful feature, with charming "stiff-leaf" foliage. In several cases the bowl is cut on one side to allow room for placing the Communion vessels. This room was often provided by a credence shelf, which is found in about 15 cases.

The "Easter sepulchre" probably survives in seven examples, as a recess in the north wall of the chancel. Those at Billingsley, Diddlebury and Wroxeter date from the 14th century, and are beautifully ornamented. Stoups for holy water remain in a few cases. Most of these are inside a nave or aisle, but those at Cleobury Mortimer and Much Wenlock are in the porch.

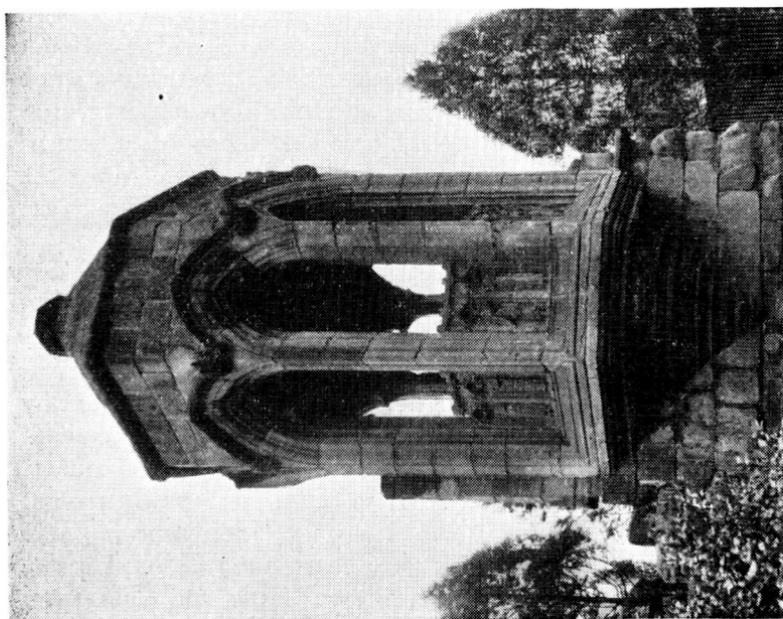
A rood loft was a common feature in a pre-Reformation church, but its existence cannot be proved in as many as 25 cases in this county. No complete example remains, but much of that at Middleton, near Bitterley, replaced a hundred years ago, dates from the 15th or early part of the 16th century. I think it highly probable that a rood loft at Church Stretton had an altar, served by a piscina, which still remains in the sill of a window. Several churches have a staircase to the rood loft or indications of one. Some fourteen rood screens remain in a fairly complete state in addition to others which have been almost wholly renewed. Half of these may be classified as of the Devonshire type, with bold coving to support a rood loft, and half of the lighter East Anglian type, which may not in all cases have had a loft on the top. There is actually a stone screen of the 12th century, bonding in with the Norman chancel arch in the ruined chapel at Malinslee. There are several other screens with no connection with rood lofts: Ludlow has four. Much the finest post-Reformation screen is that at Adderley, dividing the nave from the Shavington chapel.

About forty churches retain parts of their churchyard crosses, but only one is at all complete—the noble cross at Bitterley, probably dating from the latter part of the 14th century.

In early times, Shropshire was a turbulent county, and in the 8th century Offa's Dyke, of which much remains, was constructed by the king to defend his territory from the Welsh. After the Conquest, more than thirty castles were built, more than in any other county. Most of these have disappeared or are in ruins, but Shrewsbury and Ludlow castles still dominate their towns, the latter enshrining one of the round churches of England. There are still considerable remains at Hopton Castle, Myddle, Sibdon Castle, and Clun, from which place the Duke of Norfolk takes one of his territorial titles. The great building at Stokesay might be described as a fortified



ST. LAURENCE CHURCH, LUDLOW.
THE CHOIR



SHREWSBURY ABBEY FOREGATE.
THE REFECTIONARY PULPIT

mansion rather than a castle. It is perhaps the most priceless example of that type, dating from the 13th century. The great hall remains with the solar at the south end, and there is a massive tower, some 60 feet high. The Tudor gatehouse is a fine example of half-timbered work, which has been for long a prominent feature in this well-wooded county, not only in considerable residences like Pitchford Hall, but in country cottages and small town houses.

A county may be purely a geographical convenience, but some are much more than this, and, like the county of Salop, can evoke the passionate love and loyalty of its sons and daughters.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Castles of Great Britain by Sidney Toy, F.S.A., F.R.I.B.A. Octavo. 278 pp. + 32 pages of plates, and line illustrations in the text. William Heinemann Ltd. 1953. 25/-.

In an earlier work on the subject of military architecture, Mr. Toy considered the fortifications of Europe and the Middle East, and it is from this general study that he has proceeded in this new work to examine in great detail the development of the art of fortification in Great Britain. He has admirably succeeded in producing a book which is a noteworthy addition to the literature of castles, being at the same time one of the most scholarly and generally interesting works which have been produced on this fascinating subject. All aspects of fortification are considered, from primitive earthworks to the artillery forts of the 18th century, and extensive first-hand research has thrown new light on many aspects of this development. Almost all the major castles of Britain are examined and related to the overall picture—Raglan Castle, that last great fling of the medieval castle builder, being almost the only notable omission.

The instructive character of this research has led Mr. Toy to find a lesson for today in his conclusion that "there can be no security in defence unassociated with attack."

The book is exceptionally well-illustrated with a wealth of photographs and drawings, including over 200 plans and sections, which support and clarify every aspect of the work, and all illustrations are the work of the author. Mr. Toy has produced a book which will be of great value to the serious student of architectural history, whilst at the same time giving information and pleasure to all who can feel stirred at the sight of battlemented walls and towers.

R.B.W.-J.