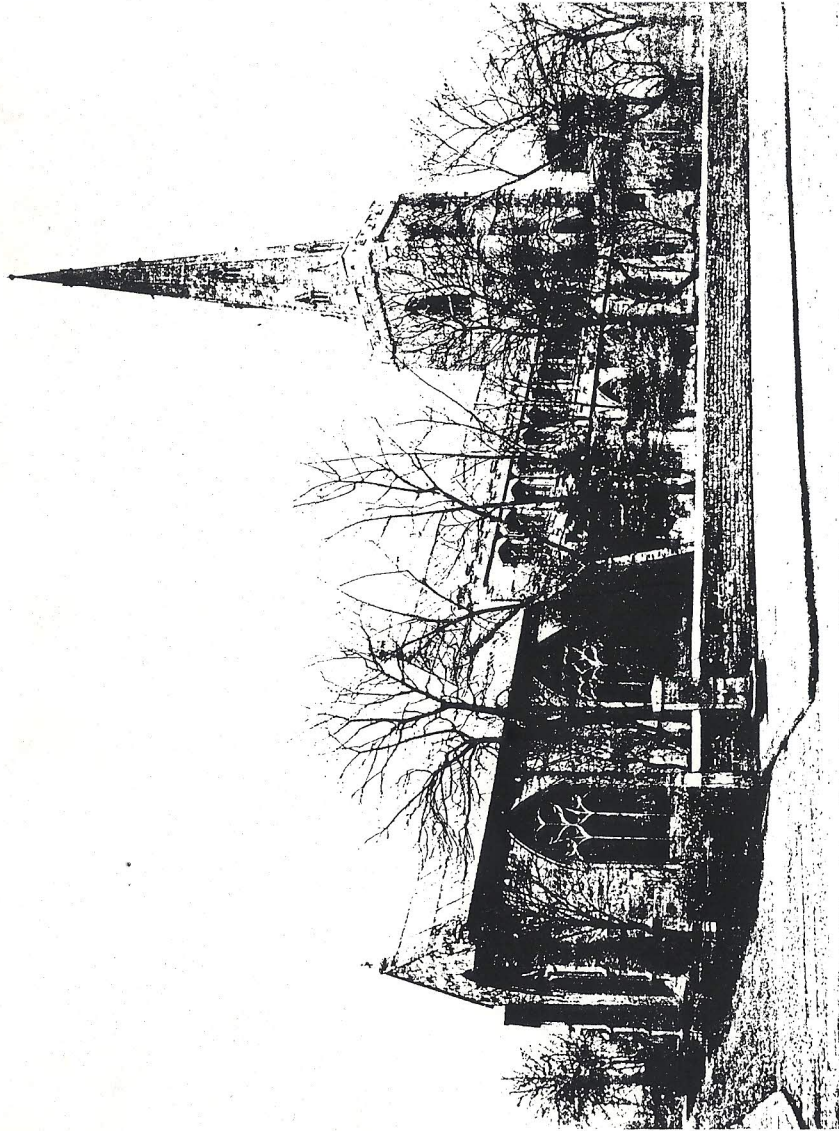


NOTES ON
HOLBEACH CHURCH

HENRY PEET

HOLBEACH 1890



Architectural and Ecclesiological

NOTES ON
HOLBEACH CHURCH.

BY

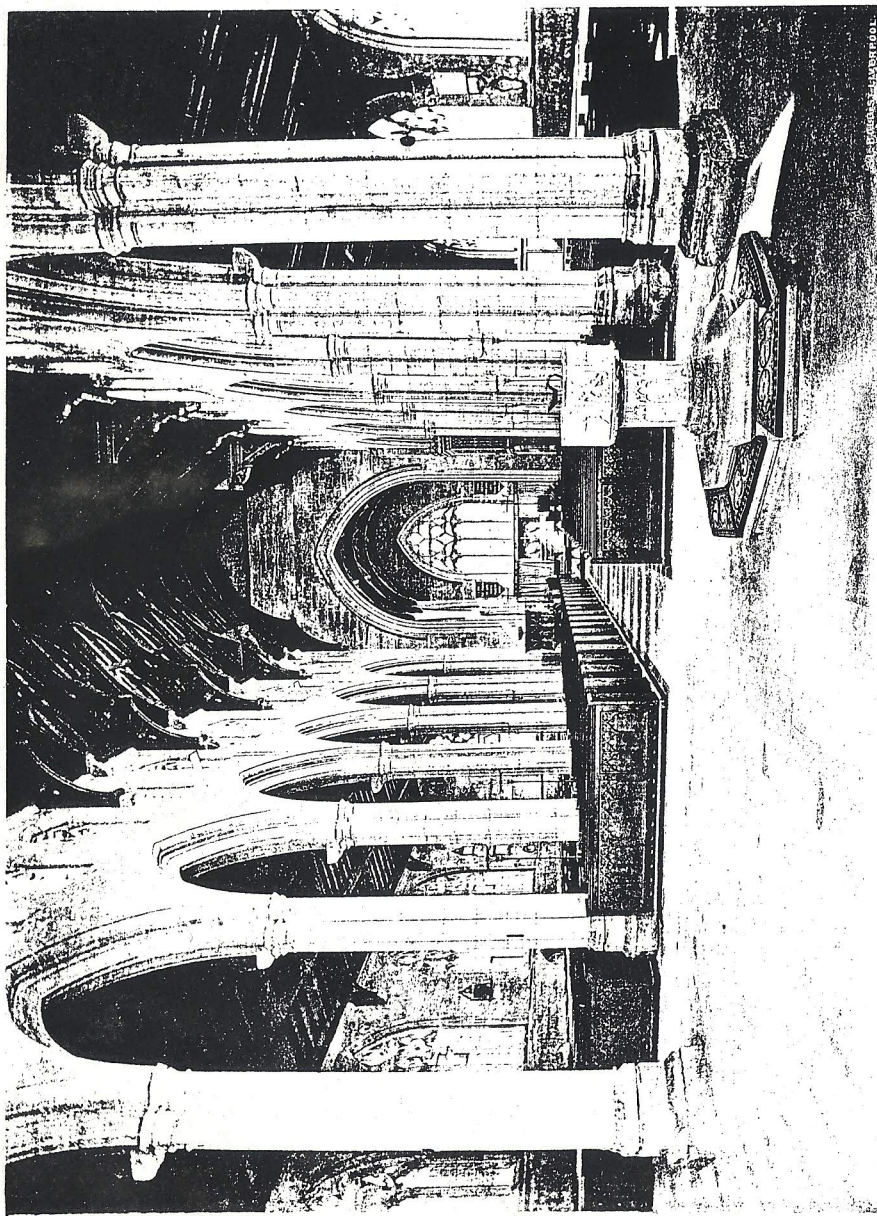
Henry Peet

(Member of the Historic Society—Lancashire and Cheshire).

A Paper read before the Members of the Holbeach Literary
Society, Tuesday Evening, November 18th, 1890.



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1890.



P R E F A C E .

THE autotype illustrations of the interior of the church have been prepared from views specially photographed; and the view of the exterior has been reduced from a large photograph, somewhat faded and indistinct, which came into my possession many years ago. Several inquiries were made to find the photographer of this particular view, for the purpose of obtaining a print direct from the "negative," but without success. I, however, ascertained that the "negative" was accidentally broken, after only two or three impressions had been taken. Believing this to be pre-eminently the finest view of the church, and knowing the difficulty, amounting almost to an impossibility, of obtaining a similar picture from the same standpoint, I determined to submit my print to a firm of high-class photographic artists, with the result that they have most fortunately been able to reproduce the permanent and beautiful autotype which forms the frontispiece of this pamphlet.

I must express my thanks to Mr. J. Kennerell, of Wisbeach, for the careful manner in which he followed my instructions in taking the "negatives" of the interior; and to Mr. Bell, of the firm of Brown, Barnes, & Bell, Liverpool, for the unremitting care and skill he has expended in producing the autotypes from these "negatives." These autotypes will bear very close and minute inspection,—every detail being most faithfully reproduced. I am persuaded these views are incomparably the most complete and artistic, which have yet been made of this venerable edifice.

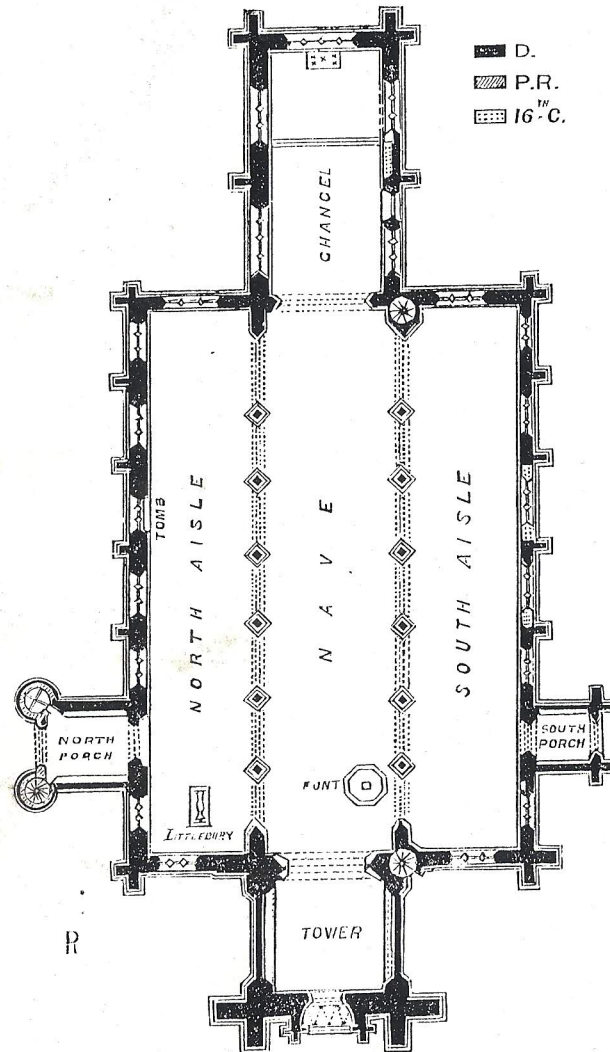
In the letterpress many literary errors, I fear, have crept in, but as these pages will for the most part come before indulgent readers, I will anticipate only friendly criticism.

HENRY PEET.

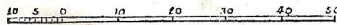
MOUNT PLEASANT,
LIVERPOOL.



*Architectural and Ecclesiological Notes
on Holbeach Church.*



SCALE.



An eminent and trustworthy writer ranks the stately church of Holbeach amongst the four finest Curvilinear Parish Churches in the United Kingdom, and whilst it is an excellent specimen of the architecture of the period in which it was built (circa 1340 to 1390) it fortunately presents few difficulties to the student, being one of those architectural books in which he who runs may read. We are told there are sermons in stones, and, I may add, very interesting ones, too, if we only know how to read them. Some of the neighbouring churches are, perhaps, more interesting to the archæologist from the variety of the styles, or orders, which may be found in them; whereas in this building we have an uniform church built from its foundations in one style of architecture, and, with the exception of a slight break of about twenty years, the building work was continuous. The structure was enlarged and altered very soon after the first portion of the work was completed, but the original design seems to have been persevered in to the end. When the work was fully completed (before the close of the 14th century) there were no subsequent additions (except portions of the north porch), and the exterior has not been materially altered since its erection, more than five hundred years ago.

Its mutilations are also comparatively small. I venture to say that few churches have been handed down to us so little damaged by time, by iconoclasts, or by so-called restorations, as this.

My object in describing this fabric is not only to point out its various beauties, and its architectural history and details, but to show you the use for which its various parts in the history of the church were built and adapted, so that a new interest may be given to you in exploring your parish church.

We are very apt to speak of this building as a *fine old church*. The first epithet is quite correct. It is a *fine* church, but it is by no means an *old* one—that is, of course, by comparison. As a matter of fact, it

is one of the latest of the old parish churches in this neighbourhood. Compared with Weston, Moulton, and Whaplode on the west, and with Fleet, Gedney, and Long Sutton towards the east, it is, at least in its foundation, a hundred years later than any of them. Mr. Foster has shown in his interesting account of Whaplode Church how a sort of rivalry existed between the Abbots of Croyland and the Priors of Spalding, resulting in each of these religious houses vying with the other in the erection of the series of beautiful churches which adorn the road from Spalding to Long Sutton. This church was no doubt beneficially affected by this rivalry, but it probably owes more to the then resident family of Littlebury, and to the Bishop of Lincoln—the latter had, in 1332 acquired by purchase the advowson, and in 1340 a vicarage was ordained, which entailed upon him the obligation of finding books and vestments, and *building the chancel*.

It is singular that no account has been preserved of these formidable undertakings. When we consider the condition of the Fen roads in those days, the distance the stone would have to be brought, the difficulty of quarrying without blasting powder, and the magnitude of their works, we are filled with admiration at the pluck and perseverance of the old builders, who knew not the meaning of fatigue, and whose resolution and steadfastness of purpose must have been indomitable. In these days of railroads, and steam lifts and hoists and cranes, and every mechanical appliance which the ingenuity of modern science can devise, we fail to build the mighty temples which our forefathers, unaided by any of these adventitious auxiliaries, raised for the worship of God, and which still remain—the admiration and wonder of the world.

I think, however, our old river played an important part in this building work. We know that in the time of Stukeley's father it was navigable, and that barges came up as far as the bridge. Since the 14th century much marshland has been reclaimed from the sea, and I have little doubt when the Church was building, the river would join The Wash somewhere near the old Roman Bank, and thus form a very convenient tidal waterway for the conveyance of stone from the Northamptonshire quarries.

I am glad to think that at some period of its history this wretched sewer, which we still dignify by the name of the *old river*, may have had its unsavoury banks washed by the salt sea waves, and has, perhaps, borne upon its bosom the very stones now reared into that grey tower which stands "sternly watching" through the centuries, and no doubt looks down with pitying eyes upon its quondam friend and benefactor, now, alas, a plague spot and a by-word!

The finest view of the Church is that which is obtained from the N.E., by standing on the pavement in the High Street. Here the entire length of the edifice is seen at once, and a magnificent pile it is—a perfect mountain of stone. The lofty and spacious chancel, the long and effective range of clerestory windows, the domestic-looking turrets of the north porch, the gable of the nave with its sanctus bell-cot, the long line of embattled parapets on nave and aisle,

and

and rising above all in grand perspective the massive tower, crowned by the highest and largest spire in Holland, form a view of great architectural beauty.

Unfortunately, it is only at certain seasons of the year that this very satisfactory view can be obtained—the churchyard adjoining being crowded with trees, the foliage of which completely shuts out the view during the summer months. A very picturesque view can be obtained from the first milestone on the Spalding Road. From this point the spire soars in tapering gracefulness above the surrounding trees, and on a clear day is seen beautifully reflected in the adjacent pool. As thus seen mirrored in the water, the optical illusion is most perfect—by stretching out your hand it appears as though you could touch it. The whole masonry of this noble structure is uniformly good and worthy of the design, scarcely any crack or settlement being perceptible.

I wish I could convey to your mind some idea of the splendour and magnificence of the internal decorations of this grand church in the olden time, with its six altars, its rich tabernacle-work, and its high altar—placed far from irreverent gaze—its sculpture, its painted glass, its curiously worked screens, its sepulchral monuments in marble and alabaster and metal, its fretted woodwork, its elaborate altar frontals of various hues, its jewelled cross—emblem of the Christian's brightest hopes—its precious books with their costly bindings, its rich embroidery, its exquisite vessels in silver and gold, its gorgeous vestments apparelled in finest needlework, and all its dainty and variegated ornaments, which appealed so strongly to the evidence of the senses, and formed the accessories to the sacrifice of the Mass. Such were amongst its artistic appointments, until the Dissolution came and swept them all away. Then followed the reaction from the ornate ritual to the bald and naked service of the last century. Although the fittings and the decorations have been destroyed or transformed by this reaction against the old ceremonial and the requirements of congregational worship, the fabric still remains, unchanged, when all around has changed so much.

Let me then point out its main architectural features. It may be described in general terms as a late Decorated church, gradually merging into Perpendicular, consisting of a chancel, a nave of seven bays with clerestory, north and south aisles, uniform in length with the nave—the former being 20ft. and the latter 21ft. wide—north and south porches, and a canopied western entrance, above which rises a spire-capped tower. It exhibits that character common to nearly all parish churches of this period in being plainer inside than out. The orientation—that is the precise position of the building with respect to the East—is in this instance quite in accordance with the practice of the Church from the earliest period. The chancel faces due east, and this is the only position in which a church should be placed, so that the worshippers face the east whilst at prayer. There are very few examples of any deviation from this rule, although occasionally we find the orientation varying from N.E., to nearly S.E., and

