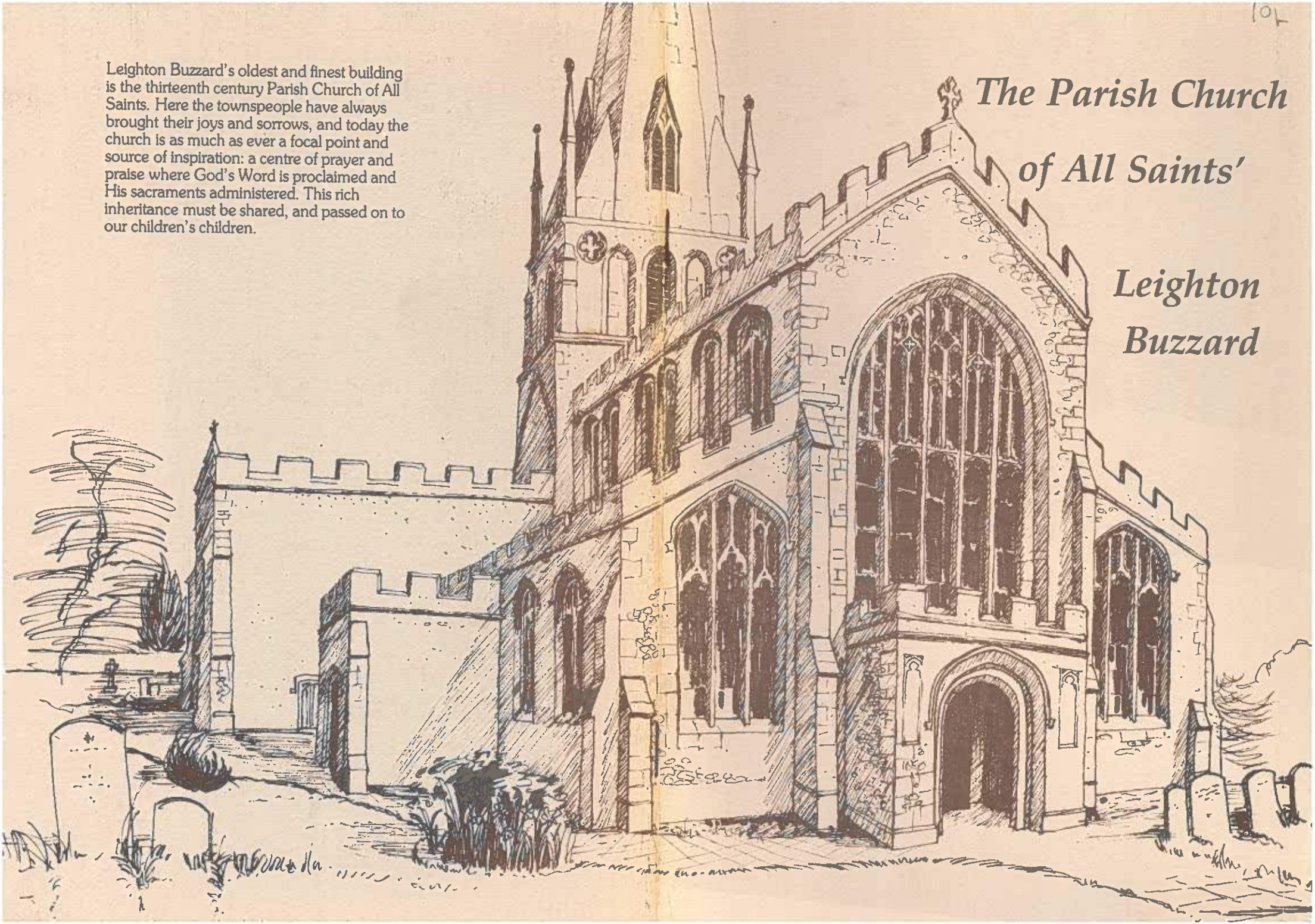
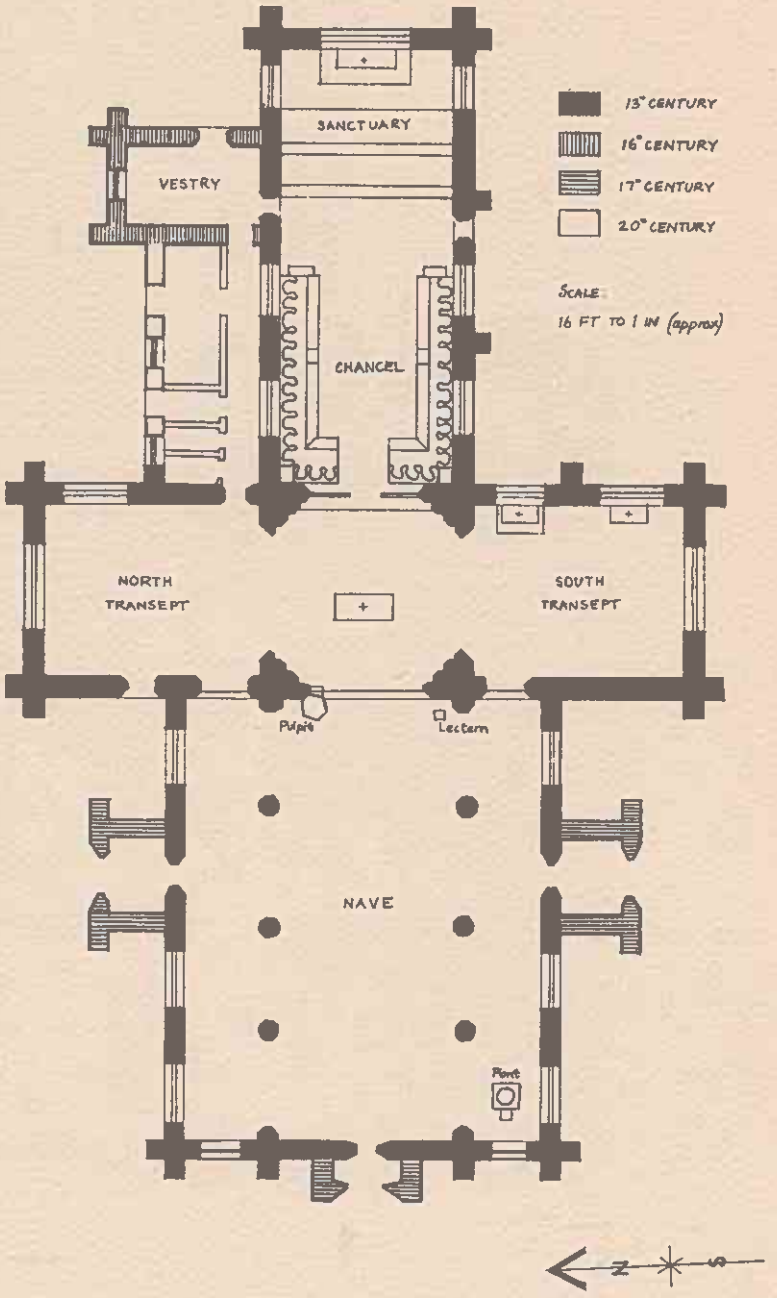
Leighton Buzzard's oldest and finest building is the thirteenth century Parish Church of All Saints. Here the townspeople have always brought their joys and sorrows, and today the church is as much as ever a focal point and source of inspiration: a centre of prayer and praise where God's Word is proclaimed and His sacraments administered. This rich inheritance must be shared, and passed on to our children's children.

The Parish Church of All Saints' Leighton Buzzard





All Saints' Leighton Buzzard

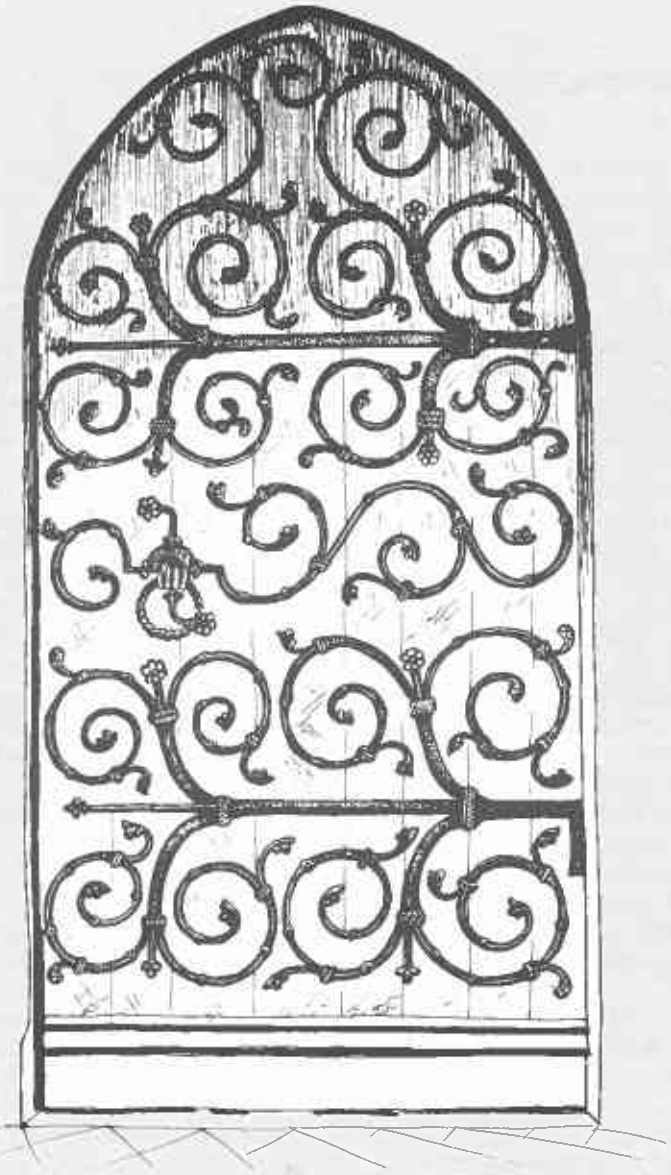
INTRODUCTION

The earliest mention of a Christian church in Leighton Buzzard occurs in the celebrated 'Domesday Book' of 1086. This document is a detailed survey commissioned by William the Conqueror of his newly acquired English territories, and it records that Leighton had had a church from the time of St Edward, King and Confessor. So we may imagine this first church as a small Saxon building built probably during the Confessor's reign (1042-66). Domesday tells us that it was already well endowed with lands, much of which was meadowland, but we know nothing more about it. Certainly no remains of the fabric of that church are known to exist today, and we do not even know whether it was constructed of wood or stone.

However, an important event in the life of this church occurred in 1189 when the great St Hugh, Bishop of Lincoln in whose diocese Leighton then was, gave the church and its lands to a prebendary. A prebendary was an officer of the cathedral church whose income was the revenue from a particular manor owned by the cathedral, and the special stall or seat of the Prebendary of 'Leighton Bosard' may still be seen in the choir of Lincoln Cathedral today. It was the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln who added the 'Buzzard' to Leighton in order to distinguish it from the other Leighton held by a Lincoln prebendary (Leighton Bromswold). Theobald de Busar, who seems to have come from a local family, was the first Prebendary from 1189 until 1199.

The Prebendaries of Leighton Buzzard became rich and powerful men, and they enjoyed many episcopal rights and privileges. Indeed no fewer than seven of them actually became bishops in due course. They built a great house for themselves in Leighton Buzzard, and it was no doubt for prestige as well as for religious reasons that they pulled down the little Saxon church, and began our splendid cruciform parish church in about 1277.

This is basically the church we have inherited today. Almost unaltered in plan since the thirteenth century, it is an exceptionally large building for what was then a very small community indeed. The central spire was the last part of the thirteenth century church to be completed. Since then all the windows of the church were enlarged in the perpendicular style, and the clerestory and angel roofs put in during the fifteenth century. The unusual two-storied vestry was added early in the sixteenth century, and the three porches were probably constructed during the seventeenth century.



Thirteenth century ironwork on the west door

THE INTERIOR

Font

The font, made from the local white limestone, dates from the early thirteenth century. It is older therefore than the present church building, and was no doubt retained from the earlier church – a common practice when churches were rebuilt. It consists of a large circular cauldron supported on five pillars. Although it has been necessary to renew the top of the font, the four flat projections were no doubt intended for the chrism and other liturgical objects used in the course of the Baptism service. Two other slightly later local examples of the same style of font may be seen at Eaton Bray and Eggington.

Stained Glass

The church is fortunate to possess a fine collection of stained glass windows by the late Victorian artist C E Kempe (1834-1907). Prevented from becoming a priest by a pronounced stammer, Kempe was particularly concerned with the presentation of church doctrine, and his work is remarkable for its fine detail. His clerestory windows illustrate saints from the church's Calendar, and there are other windows in honour of the Sacraments, and mysteries of the Christian faith. But perhaps his most memorable window is the great west window, best seen in the evening sunlight, whose main subjects are five saints particularly associated with this church: George, Etheldreda, Michael, Hugh and Alban. Kempe's trademark, a small yellow wheatsheaf, can be seen in several of the windows. The wheatsheaf superimposed with a tower was used by Kempe after he had taken his nephew W E Tower into partnership. The 'Good Samaritan' window in the north transept is a good example of earlier Victorian stained glass of 1865. The rather insipid east window is by Gibbs, and dated 1870.

Lectern

The oak eagle lectern is a great treasure. It too dates from the thirteenth century, being designed for this church when it was first built. It is older than any surviving brass lecterns, and may well be the oldest eagle lectern in the British Isles. A length of chain is still attached to it, which once secured a copy of the 'Great' Bible set up in all churches by order of King Henry VIII in 1538.

One of the many late medieval graffiti in the church. At first sight a blasphemous joke, this human face in a chalice is more probably a crude but pious expression of Eucharistic belief

Pulpit The Jacobean pulpit is made of red cedar and was given by Edward Wilkes in 1638. It is a good example of its kind and narrowly missed being thrown away during the last century. The resurrection scene on the back panel has been badly defaced. The original sounding-board was destroyed long ago, and the present sounding-board in a different style was a controversial addition in 1896. Wilkes endowed an annual sermon which is still preached from this pulpit. He also founded the almshouses which bear his name in North Street, where a commemorative ceremony takes place on Rogation Monday each year.

Graffiti In several parts of the church, and especially in the crossing area, the walls abound in late medieval graffiti, including faces, shields, birds, monsters and other subjects. The famous 'Simon and Nelly' group – which is virtually in relief – can be found in the north-west corner of the south transept. It is generally held to represent Simon and Nelly who attempted to make a special dish for the visit home of their children on Mothering Sunday. Alas, all they could find was a little dough and an old piece of Christmas pudding. They decided to make a cake by wrapping the pudding in the dough, but then disagreed violently as to how it should be cooked. Simon asserted that, being a pudding, it should be boiled. Nelly, fetching him one with her wooden spoon, declared it to be dough and therefore in need of baking. The eventual happy compromise of first boiling, then baking it, is reckoned to be the origin of the Sim-Nel cake. But, truth to tell the graffiti are really a mystery. No one knows why they are there, or who made them.

Image Niche The large image niche in the south transept, now occupied by the figure of Mary and her Child, may have been designed for the display of St Hugh of Lincoln's tunic, which was venerated here as a precious relic during the middle ages. There was a fierce controversy over its acquisition in 1240, between Dunstable Priory and John de S'Edigio, Prebendary of Leighton Buzzard. The Dunstable Chronicle records that "for peace sake we retained one sleeve of the Tunic, and surrendered the rest to him . . ."

Bells There is a fine peal of ten bells in the tower, two dating from 1906 and eight from 1787-8. Some of the latter appear to have been recast seventeenth century bells.

They are still rung twice every Sunday. An eleventh bell, called 'Ting-tang', is an early Sanctus bell of about 1150. It must therefore come from the earlier church, and it is the oldest bell in the Diocese of St Albans.

Rood Screen The rood screen, which separates tower from chancel, is fifteenth century and is adorned with carved birds and dragons. It also retains some of its original painted decoration of cock-like birds on a red ground. The screen was evidently somewhat higher than it is now, and was originally surmounted by a loft, access to which was from the doorway now leading into the organ loft. The loft in turn supported the great 'rood' or crucifix with attendant figures of Mary and John. Some evidence of the fixings of these figures may still be seen in the arch above.

Choir Stalls The late fourteenth century choir stalls retain 27 'misericords' (the hinged tip-up seats), but there are clear signs that they were not originally made for this church. Recent research based chiefly on the shields and some other details makes it almost certain that they are the monastic stalls from the choir of St Albans Abbey, thrown out from there some time after the Dissolution. There is no question of All Saints' ever having been a monastic or collegiate church. The stalls exhibit some very fine carving, especially the kings' heads in the corners, and alternate saints and angels on the arm rests.

Roofs The fifteenth century angel roofs throughout the church are very fine. The transept roofs, which are the earliest, carry angels dressed in feathered tights, derived from the medieval mystery plays. The apostles are clearly identifiable in the chancel roof, which has recently been well restored. But most splendid of all is the great nave roof which is all of a piece with the contemporary clerestory below it. Both were built at the expense of Alice de la Pole, Duchess of Suffolk, who held the manor from 1467-1475. They are in the East Anglian style of perpendicular gothic, and unique in Bedfordshire. The roof itself with its angels and saints is supported by carved stone corbels of angels carrying shields with the symbols of the Passion.

Sedilia The sedilia, three wall seats for the officiating clergy at High Mass, in the sanctuary, are original to the thirteenth century church, though heavily restored. The shafts are of Purbeck marble. Adjacent is a contemporary double piscina or basins for washing the priest's hands and the eucharistic vessels.

Reredos The magnificent reredos behind the high altar was designed by G F Bodley, though some of the figures were actually made by local people. Bodley (1827-1907), a very prominent Victorian architect and designer, was responsible for the restoration of the church at the beginning of the present century, and the wall panelling and the present floor levels are his arrangement.

High Altar The High Altar is a very good example of a seventeenth century communion table, with an arcaded front and heavily carved cornice. The altar rail which extends across the sanctuary matches the altar and the riot of detailed carving repays careful examination.

Choir Organ The choir organ retains some ancient pipework, but is most noticeable for its fine case of 1888 designed by Bodley in a fifteenth century Flemish style. Bodley also prepared a similar design for the encasing of the great organ under the tower, but this was never executed for lack of funds.

Matrix Stone In front of the vestry door is a large Purbeck marble matrix slab, which once contained the memorial brass of a late medieval Prebendary of Leighton Buzzard. It quite probably marks the grave of John Prophet who became Dean of Hereford (1393-1407) and Dean of York (1407-1416). He died on 8 April 1416 and wished according to his will "to be buried in the Chancel of my Prebendal Church of Leyghton Bosard." This is the only medieval monument to have survived.

Monuments Whilst none of the monuments is outstanding, those retained in the chancel are the most interesting, and good examples of their types. Note particularly the mural monuments on either side of the high altar. Visually less important monuments have been gathered from various parts of the building into the north transept, and some of them make interesting reading. A series of seventeenth and eighteenth century black slate ledger slabs are preserved in the floors of the chancel and the south

transept, and some of these have beautifully designed and executed armorial reliefs which should not be missed.

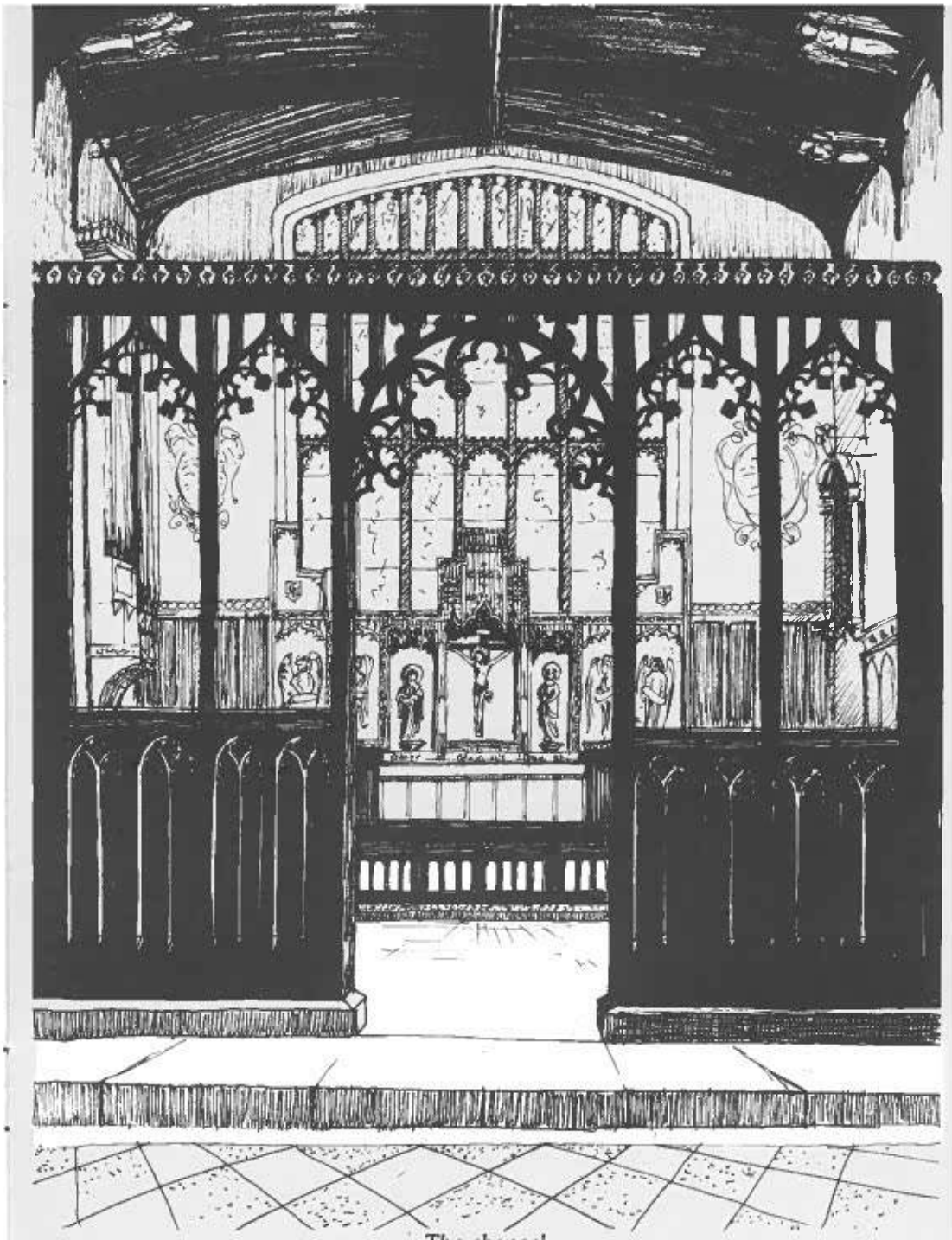
Vestry Door — This small door has iron work which has recently been identified as by Master Thomas of Leighton. It was originally on the outside of the south chancel door which is now blocked, and it was probably brought inside for safe keeping by Bodley. The small foliage carving to the right of the door may well be the only thirteenth century carving to have survived in the church. Other stone carvings are of the fifteenth century.

THE EXTERIOR

Spire — The splendid broach spire is built of oolitic limestone, and rises to 191 feet. Dominating the town from almost every direction, it has drawn both local inhabitants and interested visitors to the building which it crowns ever since the end of the thirteenth century. The massive tower which supports it was designed to be a bell tower, and has unaltered lancet openings, of no doubt similar design to all the windows in the church when it was first built. The corner pinnacles were surprisingly only added in 1842. The spire itself suffered severe damage by lightning in 1857, and was again repaired in 1952.

Vestries — Medieval vestries are rare. Leighton Buzzard has a two storey vestry attached to the north side of the chancel, and it is probably early sixteenth century. Originally enterable only from inside the chancel, there is no evidence whatsoever to suppose that it was ever a hermitage or a dwelling for a priest. A church of this size is likely to have needed an extra secure place for the safe keeping of vestments, plate and other valuables. The choir vestry dates from 1906, and has been modified in recent years.

Porches — The porches, which are architecturally undistinguished, probably all date from the seventeenth century, although they may replace earlier ones. Three interesting image niches, two of which are original fifteenth century work, are to be seen over the door inside the north porch.



The chancel

Gargoyles The ferocious gargoyles, fantastic creatures and faces which lear down on the visitor all round the church are all of fifteenth century date. Their practical use of course was to act as waterspouts, conveying rainwater from the roofs to a safe distance away from the church walls below. But they also serve as consciously symbolic reminders of the dangers awaiting all who remain outside the church, whilst only the saints and angels keep guard on the inside!

West Door Although the woodwork of the great west door is itself modern, it has, remounted upon it, the original ironwork and hinges of the thirteenth century west door. This is especially notable as the work of Master Thomas of Leighton, who received the royal commission to make the wrought iron grille for the tomb of Queen Eleanor in Westminster Abbey in 1294. The Leighton ironwork is probably a few years earlier than that, and it has been suggested that it was on the strength of the newly completed door at Leighton that Thomas got his royal commission. There are two more hinges by Thomas inside the church, which until 1982 were thought to have been destroyed.

Sundials Visitors often remark on the sundials around the church walls. There are no fewer than five of these, and one is surprisingly on the north transept wall, which means that it can only register just after sunrise or just before sunset during the summer. But none of them is of any great age.

Stone Coffins Against the south wall of the nave are two seventeenth century stone coffins, removed from the floor of the south transept. The lids which belong to them, and which bear the memorial inscriptions, can still be seen embedded in the west wall of the south transept inside. It seems a pity that they were ever separated.

The church from the south-east

The Prebendal Mansion

We do not know for certain when the prebendaries of Leighton Buzzard first built their mansion house here. The earliest documentary evidence dates from 1344 when a rather serious theft from the house was recorded. But clearly the prebendaries would have needed some residence within the parish from the thirteenth century. Because they were not always continuously resident here they were required to appoint vicars who were to be permanently resident, and the first vicar was appointed in 1217.

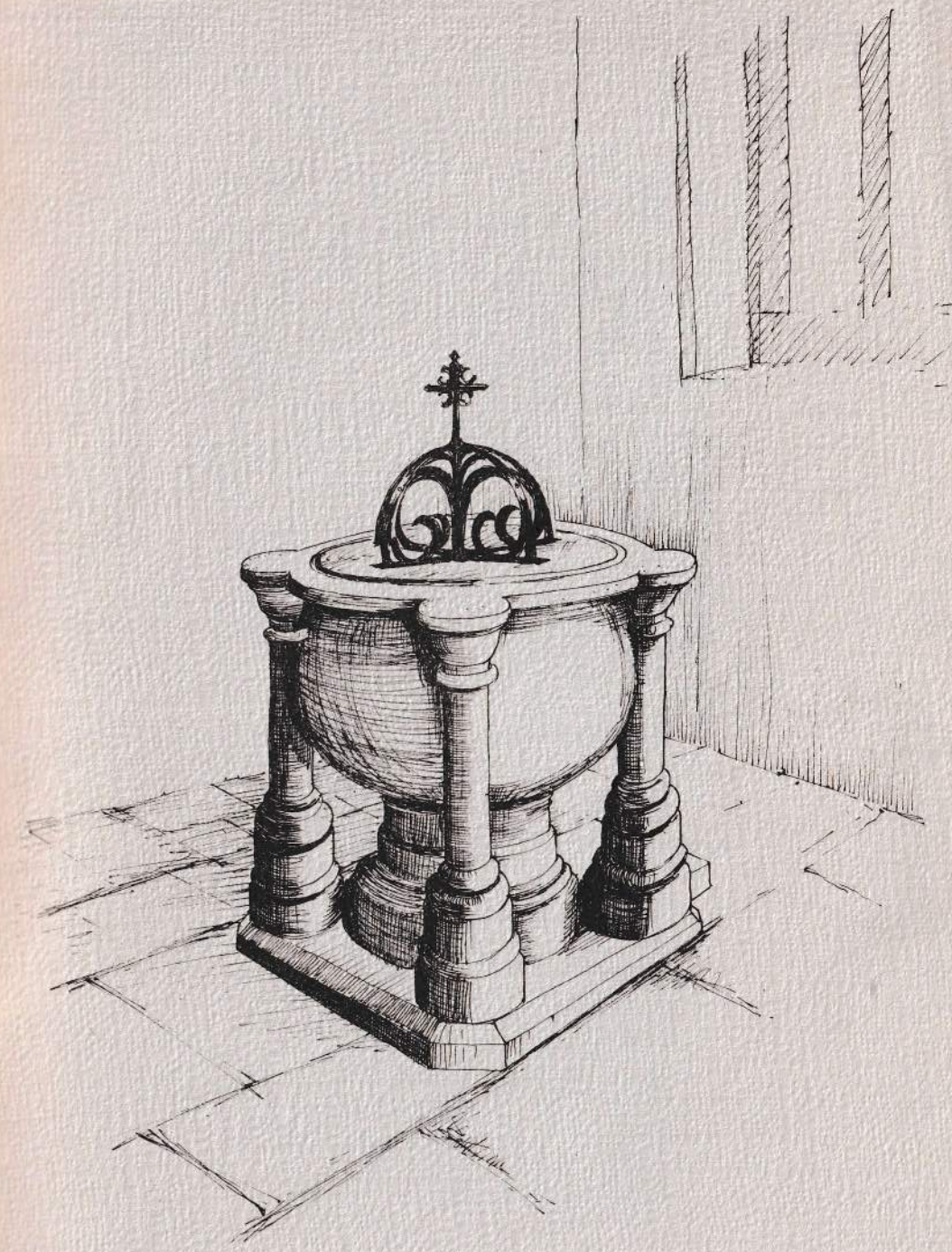
The unusual plan of the town seems to be at least in part due to the Prebendal park occupying a considerable area south and west of the church, bounded by the River Ousel and the Clipstone Brook. Some of this area is still parkland today.

The house itself seems to have stood more or less due west of the church, and a watercolour of a post-reformation Queen Anne style house in its grounds is preserved in the church. The prebendaries themselves ceased to live in the house soon after the Reformation, and it was let, first to the Johnsons and then to the Leigh family. Although the house itself and most of the ornamental buildings of the park have disappeared, some of the outbuildings including a refined neo-classical 'temple' are still used by the Leighton Middle School which occupies the site.

The ancient powers and privileges of the prebendaries were all discontinued with the abolition of peculiars in the 1850s. The old title of "Prebendary of Leighton Busard" is still used by the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln, but it is now only honorary, and the holder has no connection whatsoever with the town. All real ties between Leighton and Lincoln are now severed, and the town and church are served by a resident Vicar and curates, who are subject in the usual way to the diocesan bishop, who since 1914 has been the Bishop of St Albans.

Research and illustrations by Keith Robinson, BA, BD, AKC, Assistant Curate.

Printed by Waterlow Ltd., Dunstable. Member of the BPCC Group.



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