



**THE GENERAL CHARACTER OF
SUSSEX CHURCHES
J Hannah, D.C.L**

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THE GENERAL CHARACTER OF SUSSEX CHURCHES.

(A Paper read at the General Meeting of the Sussex Archaeological Society,
at Brighton, August 27, 1879)

**By J. HANNAH, D.C.L.,
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I SHOULD feel great diffidence, but for two considerations, in addressing myself to the subject of Sussex Churches before an audience containing many who far surpass me in the technical acquaintance with the details of local architecture and history. The two considerations, from which I venture to draw a little encouragement, are – first, that in this Eastern Division of the County, to which I shall chiefly confine myself, if their knowledge is more precise, it can scarcely be more extensive or more appreciative than my own; the second, that we are happy to see before us this evening a more varied assembly than one consisting purely of scientific Archaeologists. On the one hand, it has been my official duty to make myself familiar with the present condition of all these sacred fabrics throughout the Eastern Archdeaconry; and I have now been able to pay personal visits, within the last three years, to nearly every one¹ of about 240 churches or chapels included in that charge. On the other hand, we should bear in mind that gatherings like the present are meant to bring together representatives of the general public, whom we are all specially delighted to welcome to our meeting; persons whose antiquarian and architectural knowledge is, perhaps, comparatively slight, but whose sympathies we wish to enlist in our pursuits and objects. In what I have to say, I shall be much influenced by the presence of this latter class; and I hope that those to whom my remarks may seem commonplace and familiar will forgive me on the ground, that a meeting like the present affords an opportunity of trying to arouse an interest in these questions through a wider circle. We should all rejoice exceedingly if we could this evening succeed in strengthening the ranks of the Association by inducing some of the strangers present to join our Society, and to take a practical interest in our objects.

To begin by marking out briefly the principles we go on. It is from the point of view of an Archaeological Society that we have to approach the consideration of Sussex Churches. Architecture is, on one view, a branch of Archaeology – one of its oldest and most important departments. But it is a branch of pure art, as well as of Archaeology. It is itself one of the first and noblest of the arts; and as having always tended to promote the cultivation of painting and sculpture and wall and window decoration, we may call it the parent, or, at all events, the foster-mother of them all. To raise buildings to shelter him from the heat and cold, was one of man's earliest and most obvious necessities. But building is not called architecture till men have learnt to ornament their constructions, so as to make these fabrics pleasant to the eye and satisfying to the taste, as well as useful. To trace through their historical development the laws by which man has sought to beautify his houses and his temples is at once a profitable study for our own guidance and a duty which the present owes to the past. It is most instructive to work out the principles on which the mere necessity of providing shelter has learnt to ally itself with forms of beauty; under which construction it has availed itself of the aid of decoration, and bare walls and roofs have become varied, rich and complex, till they grew out into the full development of stately palaces and shrines.

Now, how much can we learn from our Sussex Churches, as regards either the antiquarian or artistic aspect of architecture? More, perhaps, of the former than the latter, yet let us not begin by making light of our inheritance. We must yield the palm to other counties if we are in search of

¹ I am glad that I can now say, to all of them. – Sept. 19, 1879.

nothing more than stateliness and splendour. It is only in part, for instance, that we can venture to vie with the churches in the Eastern Counties. The uninteresting fen country, it has been said, "has always had a great name for its churches. Built by monks, from great tithes, with oak from Norfolk and Suffolk, and stone from across the sea, they are the largest, and longest, and loftiest churches in England. They are the successors of more ancient buildings, or the remains of large, perhaps an aisle rescued, when nave and chancel are gone; perhaps rebuilt with Norman materials in a later style – with priests' chambers and odd chapels – with isolated towers and underground ways, and features that still puzzle antiquaries. Half-a-century ago, before the great revival, people used to say – 'If you want to see real churches, go to the fens.'" ² Well, people find in the old forest land of Sussex scenery more attractive than the fens; but let us not think they have to pay for it by losing every trace of beauty in the churches.

Again, I say, let us not begin by despising our inheritance. The old County historians too often committed this sin by speaking with contempt of Sussex Churches, as if they were mean, unhandsome, homely shrines. "The generality of the churches in Sussex," wrote Mr. Horsfield, "are rude and mis-shapen buildings; humble indeed in their pretensions, and not seldom" – which was only too true in 1835 – "bearing the appearance of blameable regret." His text, I am sorry to tell you, was the dear old church of St. Nicholas, which you have been inspecting to-day. "Generally speaking," he says, in another work, "the churches are a disgrace to the county," where he makes a special *exception* for the church of Glynde.³ Let us turn to another witness of a different kind. Mr. Street speaks as follows when addressing a Dublin audience, and with no necessity to pay compliments to the distant Sussex. He says: "You must not imagine that it is only in great abbeys and cathedrals that the age (of the 13th century) was so fertile. On the contrary, little village churches in all parts of the land illustrate the same possession of power on the part of the country architect or mason that we see in those who built the former." "I know no examples," he proceeds, "more interesting than these, whether you take the Sussex village church, with its intensely simple lancet windows, its coved wooden roof, and its shingle spire, - or, whether the Northamptonshire churches, the pride of the whole country," which he goes on to describe. Mr. Stephens uses similar language, when he is speaking of that typical and most historic village church of Bosham: the "grey church with a high-pitched roof and somewhat massive tower, capped by a shingle spire." "The small village church," adds Mr. Street, is "the especial glory of England;" and nowhere will you find it in more primitive perfection than among the downs or woodlands of this favoured shire.⁴

If we are asked, then, What can we learn from the churches and other ecclesiastical buildings of Sussex? I reply that they will teach and illustrate the origin and the development of Gothic architecture almost as clearly and completely as those of any district in England. Thus, to refer only to a single period: Among the best and most instructive English specimens of the second transition (early in the 14th century), Sir G. Scott enumerates from Sussex the Gateway of Battle Abbey, the Hall of Mayfield, the Choir at Winchelsea, and the Lady Chapel at Chichester. (Lectures, i., 343.)

² From an article on a meeting of the British Archaeological Association, in 'The Times' of August 30, 1878. Compare Sir Gilbert Scott's Lectures on Mediaeval Architecture, i., 300, for attractions in those churches belonging partly to a later age – "In the Eastern Counties who may visit the fine churches of Suffolk and Norfolk, with their noble timber roofs, their beautiful seating, and in many cases their richly and artistically coloured and embossed screens; or you may follow the noble course of churches of Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire, with their charming towers and spires," &c.

³ History, &c, of Sussex, 1835, i., 141; History of Lewes, ii., 125. Even Mr Hussey thought it necessary to apologise for the inferiority of our churches, to the better appreciation of which his useful work contributed very largely. – Churches of Kent, Sussex, and Surrey, pp. 172-3.

⁴ Street, Architecture of the 13th Century, Afternoon Lectures in Dublin, 4th series, 1867, p. 14; Stephens, See of Chichester, p.7. On the lessons to be learnt from English village churches in general, compare Sir Gilbert Scott's Lectures, i., 21, 123, 160, 193-4, 297-7.

The General Character of Sussex Churches

There are many points of interest in the Ecclesiastical history of Sussex – the early seclusion of our county, the late date of its conversion to Christianity – three generations later than that of the neighbouring kingdom of Kent; the removal of the Bishopric, after some centuries, from Selsey to Chichester; the coincidence in the boundaries of Kingdom, Shire and Diocese, from the very earliest of the latest times; the close relations which existed from very ancient days between the Diocese and the Archdiocese of Canterbury, which are recorded by the long chain of peculiars, formerly stretching right across the county, and in many cases connecting with us, as at Mayfield and Malling, with great names and events in the history of the archiepiscopal see; the powerful religious houses and Lewes and Battle, with the numerous less prominent foundations at Michelham, Bayham, Robertsbridge, Wilmington, and other places; the occasional connexion of our Ecclesiastical establishments with religious houses across the Channel. But it is often only through the medium of scattered and comparatively insignificant ruins, that we can spell out the records of a great historic past. Moreover, Sussex has suffered many things at the hands of both man and Nature. Her churches have been sometimes burnt by the Frenchman, sometimes swallowed up by the sea. You will look in vain for the remains of the original foundation at Selsey, or the older parishes of Hastings; and it has been thought, that can still trace the scorching of the hostile flames on the stones of the churches of Rye and Rottingdean.⁵ In large towns their very novelty tells against us. There could be few old churches where there was scarcely any ancient population; and hence a town like Brighton affords but a barren field for the antiquary, as compared with even the smallest of our oldest cities. But, in spite of all these qualifications and drawbacks, I venture to maintain that, by the number of ancient examples which the county still can furnish, by the curious complexity of some of its churches, and the primitive simplicity retained by others, Sussex is almost as good a training school for ecclesiastical architecture as any county in the land.

I will not now detain you with the more obvious proofs which we could gather from our more important churches – such as the Cathedral, or the Great Church at Rye, or the noble fragments of other large structures that we still possess at Winchelsea, New Shoreham, and Boxgrove. The excellent monographs of Professor Willis, Mr. Petit, and Mr. Sharpe⁶ would enable you to trace out minutely, from one style to another, the successive stages in the erection of three of these fabrics – the Cathedral, Boxgrove, and New Shoreham. I can attain my present object better by presenting you with a few less conspicuous examples, by the help of which I shall hope to arouse your interest in our Ecclesiastical inheritance, and lead you to assist us in both watching and working for the preservation of the sacred relics of the past.

I will take my first instances from cases where the architectural interest is mainly concentrated on a single style. There are many fragments of primitive construction to be found in other Sussex Churches; but we have two examples especially, those of Sompting and Worth, where the tower of the one, and the walls and ground plan of the other, are specially instructive relics of that archaic style which preceded, and slightly overlapped, the date of the Conquest – what people call the Anglo-Saxon, or the primitive Romanesque, or, at all events, the Prae-Norman architecture. Both these churches will show you good specimens of the long-and-short work, and the timber-like, flat pilasters, and the small, ancient windows, and the masonry of a rude and primitive character, which passed out of use under the influence of the wealthier and more ambitious Norman builders.

At Sompting, besides a number of instructive details, and excellent examples of both pilasters and long-and-short work, the tower has the advantage of retaining the original top, each side ending in

⁵ Hussey, *Churches of Kent, Sussex, and Surrey*, p.377.

⁶ Published in one volume by Mason, Chichester, 1861, 4to. Many papers of great value on other important churches are scattered through the volumes of the *Sussex Archaeological Collections*. Mr Hussey's work is excellent as far as it goes; but a new and enlarged edition is greatly needed.

a gable, and the gables being roofed together in a point above, like the churches we have so often seen upon the Rhine.⁷

The church of Worth may detain us a few moments longer, if it were to renew the protest which was made by this Society, at its meeting in 1870, against the misrepresentations by which its restorers had been assailed.⁸

I am sorry to observe that the author of Mr. Murray's valuable handbook for Sussex tells us that Worth Church was "subjected to a *destructive* resoration in 1870."⁹ A remark of this kind, the mere echo of a charge which has been thoroughly refuted, occurring in a popular book of considerable circulation and real utility, is enough to arouse a keen sense of injustice. If any one is still unconvinced, let him take the train to Three Bridges on his first leisure morning (Worth Church is little more than a mile from the station); let him carry with him the eighth volume of the Sussex Archaeological Collections, and compare Mr. Walford's excellent article on the church, as he saw it in 1855, with the structure as he now will find it.¹⁰ Mr. Walford had to make out his description under difficulties – to feel his way to uncertain conclusions through the boards of pews, through thick layers of whitewash and plaster, through brick-kilns of buttresses, through the accumulated abominations of ages of neglect and ignorance. I have seen other accounts, which complained of the low, depressed ceiling, the atmosphere of decay, and the mildewed and the mouldering walls. The present state of the church you may learn from your own inspection. I will only repeat what was urged at the time,¹¹ that "the original foundations have never been in the slightest degree disturbed – the greater part of the old walls still remain, and, in the parts that have rebuilt, the old stone-work has been carefully and jealously utilized." The old wooden tower, which Sir Gilbert Scott was disposed to regret,¹² appears to have been simply the late erection of a dovecote-like belfry, on the top of the north transept, supported by four trunks of chestnut trees, which intruded on the area of the church; and this "wooden structure was partly rotten." Some singularly curious features of the original fabric were actually disentombed from the walls. In a word, instead of being destroyed, the church was rescued from destruction – from the crushing effect of pews, and intrusive windows and doors and clumsy piles of alien masonry. It is now an excellent example of the way, in which a regard for the requirements of the living can be combined with the utmost care and reverence to preserve the substance of the workmanship of a long-departed age.

But let us next pass to cases where a village church can be made a sort of Primer of architecture, because its walls have been altered and amended in the style of each succeeding age in turn. There is Bosham, for example; I have already referred to it. The little village round that church, as Mr. Stephens says, "was connected with important, sometimes tragical, events in the reigns of Cnut and Eadward the Confessor, and in the lives of Earl Godwine and Harold. It is one of the four or five places which alone are marked in the oldest maps of Sussex. It is depicted in the Bayeux tapestry as the place whence Harold embarked on the ill-fated voyage which ended in his wreck on

⁷ Sompting Tower has been frequently engraved and described. Sufficient details may be found in Rickman's *Styles of Architecture*, 5th ed., appendix, pp. xxvi-ix; Parker's *Glossary*, pp. 406-7, and plate 210; Sir G. Scott's *Lectures*, ii., 53-6.

⁸ See the Report of 1871, in XXIII., S.A.C., "It was the unanimous opinion of the members present (at the meeting of Oct. 6, 1870) that this repair had been conducted in a judicious manner, and with a due regard to the preservation of the ancient characteristics of the edifice."

⁹ *Handbook for Travellers in Sussex*, 1877, p.28.

¹⁰ VIII., S.A.C., 235-249. Details of Worth Church may also be found in Sir G. Scott's *Lectures*, ii., 19, 37, 38, 44-46.

¹¹ In contemporary reports of the restoration and re-opening, for the use of which I have been indebted to the Rector of Worth, the Rev. G.W.Banks.

¹² *Lectures*, ii., 46. note. In his text he notes it "as a curious commentary on the fashionable opinion that the Anglo-Saxons nearly always built of timber, and their successors in aftertimes of stone," that at Worth was found "a timber tower of the 15th century added to the stone church of Saxon date."

the coast of Normandy and his detention at the court of William.” But centuries before the days of Cnut and King Harold, “it demands our attention as the one spot where Christianity had a home, when all the rest of Sussex was wrapped in heathen barbarity and ignorance.”¹³ My excellent friend, the present Vicar of Bosham, has given reasons for believing that his church stands on the site of a Roman Basilica: bases undoubtedly Roman have been discovered at the foot of the piers of the chancel arch; “the remains of a Saxon window may be seen in the north wall;” and other traces of an Early Saxon church may be found in various portions of the fabric. An Early English character was given to the church at the end of the 12th century, by Bishop Warlewast, of Exeter, who lengthened the chancel, added north and south aisles, and introduced Early English Windows.¹⁴ A church like this reminds us of a Palimpsest, in which one style has crossed out and obliterated another, till modern skill has read the riddle, and re-interpreted the stratified records of the past.

Now traverse the county from west to the east, and let us go to Battle, that fairest of historic scenes. Gaze, if you have the opportunity – I have enjoyed it myself to the utmost through the happy spring holidays of the last three years – gaze across the pleasant landscape which was once the field of flight and disaster, crowded by Saxon fugitives through the night of sorrow, when the English standard had gone down before the Norman host. Visit the groups of buildings which still crown that summit of that memorable hill. Analyse carefully the well-restored St Mary’s church at Battle. You will find a Norman arch built into the south wall near the chancel, looking like part of the preparation for a central tower, which was not erected. The nave is later Norman. The clerestory is Early English; there is some beautiful Early English arcading in the chancel. The north aisle is Perpendicular. The west door is Early English, beneath the inevitable Perpendicular west window of the late tower.

Then pass on, if you will, from Battle to Rye, and study the same stages in their unrestored form. I think you will scarcely hesitate to join me in the conviction, that if the same care is used at Rye which Mr. Butterworth bestowed on Battle, there is no reason to look with dread on the much-needed restoration.

And here let me digress a little to say a few more words to our friends the Anti-Restorationists, who seem to suspect us of looking at our old churches in a destructive spirit, like that in which Mr. Nathaniel Hawthorne maintained, that all old towns would be much the better for an occasional burning.¹⁵ I may take as my text a very interesting book by Mr. L. J. Jennings, “Field Paths & Green Lanes, being Country Walks, chiefly in Surrey and Sussex.” It is an excellent example of the way in which good taste and common sense will prevail over mere theory. I gather from the book that Mr. Jennings would in theory declare himself an earnest Anti-Restorationist, He “fled in horror from the scene” of the commencement of the works at Westham Church, as if you could possibly repair an ancient building without a temporary removal of the fittings, and some *interim* confusion of mortar, scaffolding, and stone. He says that “the restorer has been at work” at Salehurst, and that “that work is of the worst kind.” He “read with great sinking of the hear” of the “sad news” of the restoration at Alfriston, and said that when he entered the church his “worst anticipations were confirmed.” He calls Lindfield church “another example of the mischief wrought by those architectural wreckers, the restorers,” as if “the whitewash and plaster,” which, he says, “have done their worst” there, were the favourite appliances of modern restoration.¹⁶ In fact, this confusion between the methods of the present century and those of the last meets us throughout his pleasant volume. He complains at Bexhill of the “heavy and clumsy galleries,” and

¹³ See of Chichester, pp. 7, 8; compare p.63.

¹⁴ XVIII., S.A.C., 3, &c. I find that Mr. Mitchell is now disposed to substitute the word “Saxon” for “Norman” in some sentences of that account.

¹⁵ Transformation, p.258, ed. 1865

¹⁶ Field Paths, &c., pp.52,60,76,105.

would now, I suppose, complain still more loudly because they have been swept away. And yet on the other hand, he calls Hurstmonceux “a church which has been restored with reverence and care, and therefore looks the better rather than the worse for the process.” He says that Goldston church (in Surrey) has been restored by Sir Gilbert Scott – “restored in the best sense of the word, not defaced and ruined.” He says that the church at Penshurst, in Kent, “has been wholly restored, but the work was done with care, and, if the edifice has lost much of the look of antiquity, it has gained in durability, and will probably now stand for generations to come.” He is delighted with the restorations of the great house at Penshurst, the famous historical home of the Sidneys, and he cries out loudly for the restoration of the church at Hever, and hopes the Rector will succeed in getting subscriptions to effect it; “for otherwise,” he says. “the old church will come tumbling about his ears one of these days.”¹⁷ Mr. Jennings turns out in fact, to be a friend in disguise. His theory would induce him to ban the restorers, but his candour compels him to ‘bless them altogether.’

But, to return to our Sussex Churches, let me take a hint from Mr. Jennings, and recommend all of you, who are still young and strong, to make walking expeditions for yourselves, and study church architecture on the spot, from the examples which the county furnishes of every age. I will not trespass on the province of those who have guided you to-day to Ovingdean and Rottingdean, and, had the weather permitted, would have taken you to Telscombe. There are many other expeditions quite as interesting, which you could take without any long absence from Brighton. A walk along the valley of the London Road northwards will conduct you past the three village churches of Preston, Patcham and Pyecombe, each with some points of interest; and you can go on, past Clayton and Keymer, to the remarkable and instructive church of Ditchling. From the Dyke you can drop down on the cruciform 14th century church of Poynings, the Rector of which will, I am sure, be much obliged if you will help him to restore it. On the road to Shoreham you pass the Norman tower of Southwick, and at Shoreham itself there is a rich store of instruction in Norman and Early English to be drawn from the two Parish Churches. Or you can take the train to Three Bridges, as I recommended to you before, and take a short walk round which will lead you to Worth, Crawley and Ifield. Go thence a little further eastward, and you will find it a charming walk or drive, past West Hoathly, to the decidedly unrestored church of Horsted Keynes, with its memories of the low, sweet voice of Leighton. From thence, again, if you have two or three days to spare (for the distances are long), you can wander on, from church to church, through lovely broken forest land, till you emerge from the county at Tunbridge Wells, whence you can again turn southward and eastward, to find perfect treasures of church architecture in that end of the county, including the late decorated church of Etchingham, once “among the noblest of baronial churches,”¹⁸ down to Icklesham, and Rye, and Winchelsea. From thence the railway will bring you back to Brighton, past Hastings and Bexhill and Pevensey and Westham, with their ancient fortresses and churches, and their stirring reminiscences of invasions and wars. Another expedition could be made by taking the railway to Eastbourne to examine the old church there, and walking back over the Downs, where you will find many an old village church nestling in their combs, here and there one of higher pretensions, like Alfriston or Seaford. From Seaford you can turn inland towards Lewes by the side of the Ouse, taking particular note of the beautifully kept churchyard at East Blatchington and the tower at Bishopstone, and then pass across the river to inspect the three round towers of Piddinghoe, Southease, and St. Michael’s, Lewes – the relicts of an economical antiquity.

I may add that there are plenty of collateral points of interest suggested by our Sussex Churches. The daughters of kings repose at Bosham and Southover. The highest literary associations are connected with the churches of Horsted Keynes and Fletching, through the graves of Archbishop

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 56, 243, 267, 269, 264.

¹⁸ M. A. Lower, *Compendious History of Sussex*, i., 165.

Leighton and Gibbon. Many a pilgrimage has been made to the last resting-places of Archdeacon Hare at Hurstmonceux and Bishop Wilberforce at Lavington. There are many remarkable monuments to be noted, like those of the Jefferays at Chiddingly, of the Shurleys at Isfield, of the Gages at Firle, of the Alards at Winchelsea, of the Dacres at Hurstmonceux, and of the Dorsets at Withyham. You will often meet with good brasses also. The best of them is one at Cowfold, which belongs to Lewes;¹⁹ but we cannot grudge it to our friends at Cowfold, who have repaired it (a most delicate and difficult task) with care and skill. The iron slabs in many churches record the most important of the ancient industries of Sussex. The oldest is at Burwash;²⁰ the most numerous, if I remember right, at Wadhurst. You will also be rewarded for careful observation by finding many an ancient font and piscine and screen, and many relics of old painted glass and carved woodwork – the latter sometimes with the purest linen pattern, and sometimes belonging to the Jacobean age.

But it is high time that I should bring these remarks to a close. Let me finish them by urging you to join us in the work of studying our old churches with a view to their better preservation. And, if I might venture to give a word of advice to those who will be called on to deal with church restoration when we have passed away, I would earnestly beg them to prepare themselves for the duty by acquiring accurate and discriminating knowledge. Above all things, avoid the dangers of *half-knowledge*, and the conceit by which it is too frequently accompanied. The uncertain cross-lights of partial knowledge are often more perilous and misleading than the honest darkness of ignorance. Do not criticize, and do not seek to interfere, till you have learnt to *know*, and have acquired the right to judge; and let reverence always be present as the sister of knowledge. And do not suppose that general rules are equally applicable to the special cases. It may be wrong to destroy a late Perpendicular window; but it may be more wrong to restore it exactly as it stood, if its mullions are all decayed and wasted, and if you find genuine fragments and traces of an older window embedded in some neighbouring wall. It is a grave error, however, to obliterate any stages in the real architectural history of a building. Make it your principle, then, neither destroy any genuine, honest work that can be retained without public detriment, nor to try to impose a crude, raw novelty by mending some time-worn form of interest and beauty. In short, reverence for ancient work, and modesty in repairing it, are the plain and simple rules that would protect you from any serious error in completing the restoration of our SUSSEX CHURCHES.

¹⁹ That of Thomas Nelond, Prior of St. Pancras, Lewes, who died in 1433. See a paper on Sussex brasses by the late Mr. Turner, in XXIII., S.A.C., 129. On the Cowfold brass, see p.151.

²⁰ With the inscription in rude ancient characters, "Orate p. annema Jhone Colline," XXI., S.A.C., 112. See it engraved in II., S.A.C., 178, and in Boutell's Christian Monuments, p.105. Mr. Jennings complains that this "forlorn old slab" "is now nailed up in an out-of-the-way corner, like a bat to a barn door." (Field Paths, &c., p. 47) On the other hand, Mr. M. A. Lower had complained, more justly, that the inscription had been "much injured by long exposure to the attrition of human feet" (II., S.A.C., 178), which is surely a sufficient justification for those who have removed it from the floor to the wall.