

The Historic
PARISH CHURCHES
of Leicestershire and Rutland

Leonard Cantor

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Front cover: St Mary and St Hardulph, Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire

Back cover: (top row, left to right): St Michael, Hallaton; St Mary, Melton Mowbray;
St Mary Magdalen, Stapleford; St Nicholas, Leicester; St James, Twycross
(bottom row, left to right): St Edward King and Martyr, Castle Donington;
St Luke, Gaddesby; St Peter and St Paul, Tickencote; St Thomas a Becket, Tugby.

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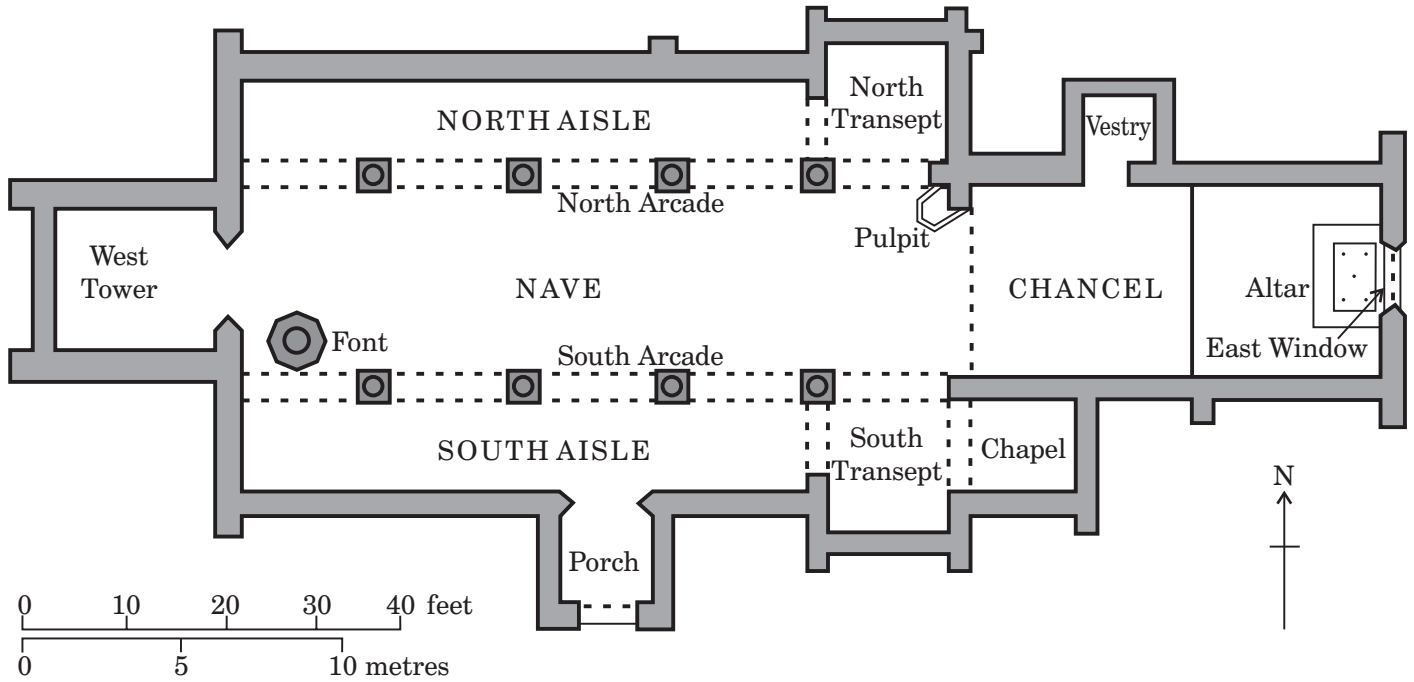
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Diagram 1: The Main Features of a Typical Gothic Parish Church



Part One

The History of Parish Churches in Leicestershire and Rutland

Before The Conquest

The beginnings of the English parish church are essentially to be found in the shadowy period after Saint Augustine's arrival in A.D.597 to reconvert the country to Christianity. In the more than 450 years from then until the Conquest, three types of churches were constructed: early cathedrals, monastic and collegiate churches for monks, and churches built by secular lords to serve villages and hamlets. It was this last type of church which formed the prototype of the parish church.¹ As, over most of the country, stone was in short supply, the majority of these early churches were built of wood and, where available, of rough rubble and other convenient material.² However, it was not until the tenth century, and especially its second half with the arrival of Benedictine monks from the Continent, that the majority of pre-Conquest churches were constructed. In Leicestershire, for example, minsters, or mother churches, were established at *Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicester, Misterton* and *Buckminster*. These were usually the centres of large estates at which people from the surrounding areas worshipped. In other parts of the county, and in Rutland, the newcomers set about rebuilding many of the existing wooden churches with stone and, doubtless, building others. Even so, by the time of the Conquest probably fewer than one in five settlements possessed a church.³ Nevertheless, so substantial was the part played by the Church in pre-Conquest England that, from about the seventh



Figure 1: An Anglo-Saxon panel of a human figure holding a book and giving a Byzantine blessing, St Mary and St Hardulph, Breedon-on-the Hill, Leicestershire.

Spires

In the Norman period, churches had relatively simple towers with pyramidal cappings, like the reconstructed ones at Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire. From the Early English period onwards, spires were added to many of these towers. As spires were exposed to the weather, and were difficult and expensive to repair, they were constructed of hard-wearing materials which in the two counties was limestone or, in a few places, grey sandstone.¹² Thus, despite the considerable cost of transporting stone to parts of Leicestershire where it was not locally available, spires are to be found throughout the two counties, This contrasts to most of the rest of the country where they are relatively rare.

To add a spire to the Norman tower from which it rose directly it was necessary to convert the square base into an octagon. This was achieved by means of a *broach spire*, using triangular faces, half pyramids of masonry leaning against the face of the spire at each corner of the tower, as at *St Mary, Barkby*, Leicestershire. To lighten the appearance of broach spires, *lucarnes*, or spire lights, and sometimes *crockets*, leaf-shaped projections placed equidistantly along the angles of the spires, were added. These began to appear in the thirteenth century and one of the best examples of this period in Leicestershire is the spire of *St Michael, Hallaton*, though that at *St Andrew, Great Easton*, a few miles away to the south east, is little inferior. However, what Pevsner describes as “the locus classicus” of broach spires is that of *St Dionysius, Market Harborough* with its



Figure 17 (top left): A typical broach spire rising from the tower by means of half pyramids of masonry, *St Mary, Barkby, Leicestershire*.

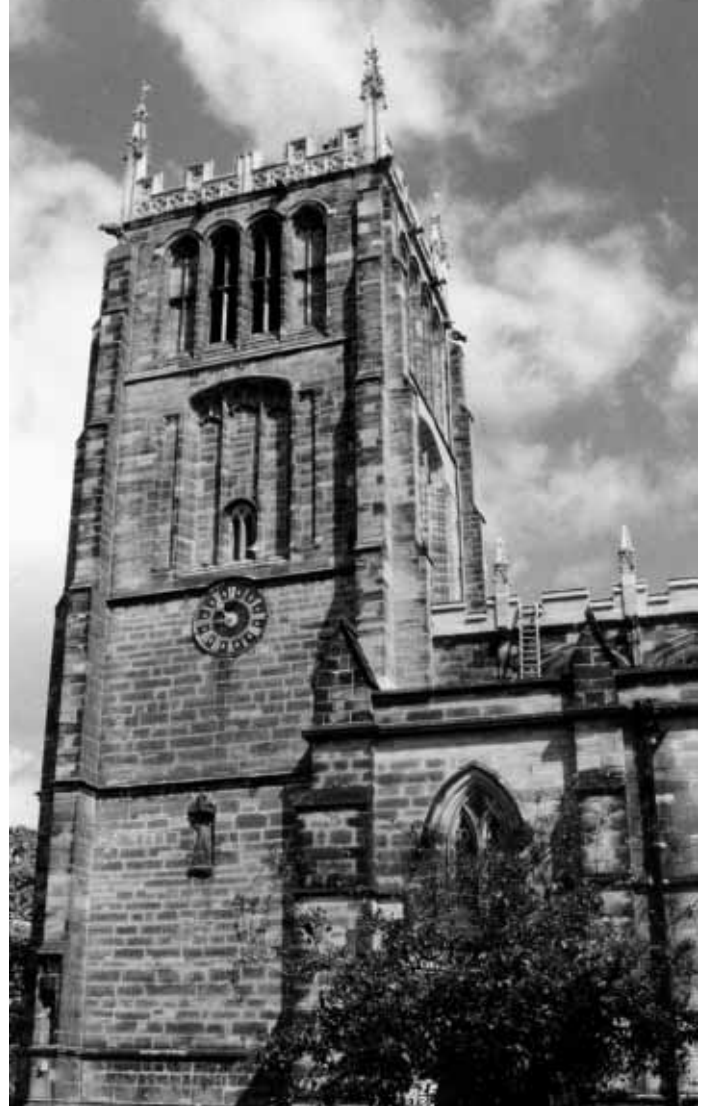
Figure 18 (left): The fine broach spire of *St Michael, Hallaton, Leicestershire*.

Figure 19 (right): The slender crocketed broach spire of *St Dionysius, Market Harborough, Leicestershire*.



Figure 36 (right): The Perpendicular clerestory of *St Mary, Queniborough, Leicestershire* rises above the nave and its windows flood the nave with light.

Figure 37 (below): The splendid Perpendicular tower of *All Saints, Loughborough, Leicestershire*.



and taller, giving a characteristic impression of height and lightness. This impression of height is enhanced by the addition of a clerestory, which became very common during the Perpendicular period, often with large windows.¹⁹ Within the windows of both aisles and clerestory, tracery became more rigid and less fanciful. Externally, spires were now succeeded by towers and among the most prominent and grandest in Leicestershire are those at *St Margaret, Leicester*, *All Saints, Loughborough*, and *St Mary, Melton Mowbray*.²⁰

Although many churches in the two counties were enlarged in the Perpendicular period, few were built from scratch. Among them in Leicestershire are *St Helen, Ashby-de-la-Zouch*, built in the late fifteenth century, and the beautiful early Tudor chapel at *Withcote*. Also, some, like *St Peter and St Paul, Syston*,

Stained Glass

First introduced into England in the twelfth century, stained glass windows reached a peak of excellence in the thirteenth and especially in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the introduction of large Perpendicular windows gave ample scope to the glazier, who filled the church with fine colour. However, as glass was not manufactured in this country until the late sixteenth century, it had to be imported from the Continent, mainly from France. The windows in medieval churches were used, like the wall-painting and sculpture, as a form of what Foster calls “the unlettered Man’s Bible”⁴⁴, so that scenes from the life

of Christ and figures of the Evangelists and the Saints predominated. Later, in the sixteenth century, heraldic glass began to be introduced.⁴⁵

However, as a consequence of the Puritan Revolution, wholesale destruction of stained glass occurred, described by Clifton-Taylor as “the greatest calamity that has ever befallen English art.”⁴⁶ Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, there is no doubt that much splendid glass was lost and, as a result, relatively few churches have substantial amounts of pre-Reformation glass. In Leicestershire and Rutland, for example, probably fewer than forty churches contain old glass, most of it consisting of fragments reset at a later period. The most noteworthy medieval stained glass in the two counties is in the east window of *St James, Twycross*, described by Pevsner as “of the finest quality available in the whole of Europe”⁴⁷ and by Clifton-Taylor as “the most beautiful of any village church in England”⁴⁸ Installed in 1840, it



Figure 86 (top left): The thirteenth century French stained glass installed in the east window of St James, Twycross, Leicestershire in 1840.

Figure 87 (top right): The fifteenth century stained glass in the north aisle window of St Peter, Stockerston, Leicestershire, showing St Christopher carrying the Christ Child and, below him, two kneeling donors.

Figure 88 (bottom left): Pieces of fifteenth century stained glass in the north aisle east window of St Peter, Allaxton, Leicestershire.

Castle Donington, Saint Edward King And Martyr

This large church, set in a small close-like square to the east of the main street, dates mainly from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The oldest parts are the arcades which are Early English, as is the chancel with its lancet windows. The tower is Decorated Gothic, to which was added a tall recessed needle spire, as is the aisle whose windows display characteristic reticulated tracery. Also dating from this period are the piscina and sedilia in the chapel inside the church. Later, a Perpendicular clerestory and battlements were added. In the late nineteenth century, the church was restored as was the chancel east window into which was placed, in 1902, glass by C.E.Kempe. The fittings include an alabaster pulpit constructed in about 1852 of medieval slabs of the material. Among the monuments in the church are a fifteenth century tomb chest with brasses to Robert Staunton and his wife who died in 1458, and a sixteenth century tomb chest with alabaster effigies to Robert Hazylyrygg, died 1529, and his wife.



Figure 106 (above): The Decorated Gothic exterior of St Edmund King and Martyr, Castle Donington.

Figure 107 (below): The fourteenth century piscina and sedilia in the chapel of St Edmund King and Martyr, Castle Donington.

Church Langton, Saint Peter

There was originally a Norman church here, four miles north of Market Harborough, of which only a few stones remain. The present church, built of ironstone with grey limestone dressings, dates mainly from a major thirteenth century rebuilding, with additions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Unusually tall, with a west tower, it dominates the

surrounding countryside. The chancel and aisles date from the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, the latter having characteristic Decorated Gothic windows. There was another major rebuilding in the fifteenth century when the new Perpendicular nave arcades were built, a clerestory was added, as was the massive west tower which rises in four stages to an

Figure 129 (left): The fine interior of the nave of All Saints, Leicester, with arcades with pointed arches supported by octagonal pillars with plain capitals.



Figure 130 (right): The late seventeenth or early eighteenth century Mayor's chair in All Saints, Leicester, the only one of its kind to survive in the city.



fifteenth century wooden pulpit, one of the relatively few left in Leicestershire churches; and extensive Perpendicular work in the north, south and west doorways. Other interesting features are the beautifully decorated early thirteenth century font; in the north aisle, a mayor's chair which dates from the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, the only one of its kind to survive in Leicester; at the south-west corner of the south aisle over the doorway, a wooden clock-case with early seventeenth century Gothic detail; and a rather crudely drawn set of Elizabeth II

Royal Arms at the east end of the north aisle. Among the monuments are one in the chancel to Matthew Simons, High Sheriff, who died in 1714, consisting of a bust framed by two columns with a putto on either side and topped by a swan-neck pediment and curtains; and in the nave one to Alderman Gabriel Newton, died 1762, the founder of Greencoat School. Finally, in the west window of the tower are fragments of fifteenth century stained glass.

References: Geoff Brandwood, *Leicester, All Saints*, 1991; and *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, Vol. 4, 1958, pp.342-3.

Leicester, Saint Margaret

Situated just back from the corner of St Margaret's Way and Burleys Way and praised by Betjeman as being "the most handsome of the city's churches", St Margaret provides a quiet sanctuary from the roaring traffic outside. It has been suggested that on this site was erected in A.D.653 the first church to be consecrated for Christian worship in Leicester. There was certainly a Norman church here, but the oldest part of the present church-which consists of chancel,

nave with clerestory, north and south aisles, west tower and south porch- is the south side of the nave which dates from a rebuilding in the thirteenth century. More rebuilding took place early in the fourteenth century from which time dates the nave north arcade. In the middle of the fifteenth century, the church was largely rebuilt once more when the chancel was extended, the magnificent Perpendicular tower was erected, a clerestory inserted above the

Tickencote, Saint Peter And Saint Paul

Situated just off the A1, nine miles east of Oakham, St Peter is celebrated for its astonishing Norman chancel arch (see figure 7, p.13). The present building, which consists of a vaulted chancel, nave, north vestry and south porch, was rebuilt in 1792 for Mrs Eliza Wingfield, member of a local family, by Samuel Pepys Cockerell. Though far from being an exact copy, St Peter and St Paul was built in imitation of the old Norman church which, by the end of the eighteenth century, was in a dilapidated state. The former church had an aisleless nave, probably rebuilt in the late

Middle Ages, and a chancel and a bell-cote which was probably added in the thirteenth century. Its successor, built of fine limestone ashlar, is a late eighteenth century version of Norman architecture with a completely new nave which, in Jenkins' view at least, makes the exterior look artificial. Certainly, the round-headed windows with their shafts and abstract beak-head decoration look somewhat fanciful, as do the south door with its four arches and shafts and, rising above it, the tower with its pyramidal cap.

Although Cockerell rebuilt the chancel, he left the chancel arch untouched and it remains, in Pevsner's words, "a tour de force of shafting and decoration, wildly overdone and in addition incompetently constructed, hence the depressed shape of the arch". Dating from about 1160 to 1170, it consists of 6 elaborately moulded and enriched orders, each of which is differently decorated, including beak-head, zigzag, and animal and human heads. The chancel beyond it is of two bays combined into one by a sexpartite rib-vault rising to a Norman boss with three heads and lighted on each side by round-headed windows and by one at the east end. Among the furnishings and fittings are a square font of about 1200 with intersected arches and small heads at the corners (see figure 42, p.29 and, below the south-east window of the chancel in a flat-arched recess, a defaced oak effigy, said to be that of Sir Roland de Daneys who died in 1363.



Figure 205: St Peter and St Paul, Tickencote, was rebuilt at the end of the eighteenth century in an imitation Norman style.

Tixover, Saint Luke

Situated in the extreme south-east corner of the county by the Northamptonshire border, St Luke is an isolated church well away to the south-west from the present village, doubtless built there to serve an earlier village just to the north of the church. As one approaches it, one sees a low, grey stone building with a

massive early twelfth century Norman tower of three stages with unusual and beautiful bell-openings (Figure 206). Internally, the tower arch is of the same date. The rest of the church, consisting of nave, chancel, and north and south aisles, was rebuilt in the thirteenth century and a south porch was added in the