

The elaborate alabaster memorial to Sir William Clarke, who died in 1624, was cleaned and repainted in 1964. Opposite this is a sixteenth-century monument to one Roger Alford, showing him with his wife and family. In the floor of the chancel there are some old glazed tiles, and the brasses include one, under the carpet, in memory of Nicholas Clarke, father of Sir William, and his second wife, Elizabeth Ramsey, who was lady of the manor in Hitcham.

The oak chest is also of interest. It bears the date 1684 and the letters R. C. (Rex Carolus). Perhaps it may have been given to the church by Edward Nicholas, principal Secretary of State to Charles I and Charles II. Lord of the manor of Hitcham, he died and was buried here in 1696. His relatives honoured him with a linen shroud. The law said that all shrouds must be made of wool (to help the wool trade), so they were fined five pounds, half of which went to the informer and half to the poor.

Lastly, the two helmets high up on the walls are worth mentioning. Above the Clarke memorial is a funeral helm of the sixteenth century, with a carved wooden crest; it was restored by a member of the staff of the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1964. This helm was part of the funeral furnishing of those days and was not meant to be worn. The other is a genuine piece of seventeenth-century armour of the kind worn by soldiers in the Civil War.

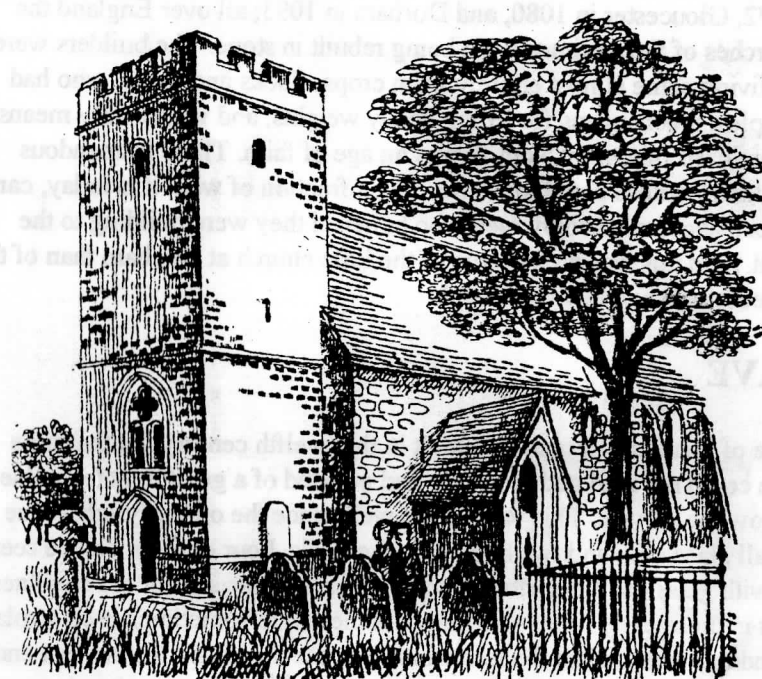
THE TOWER

This was built in the sixteenth century. It contains a peal of six bells, presented by Colonel L. H. Hanbury and his wife in thanksgiving for the safe return from France of himself, his son and daughter at the end of the First World War. Colonel Hanbury, a local resident, was a great benefactor of Hitcham Church. He made possible the restoration of the chancel windows and also built the vestries.

After pausing, perhaps, to reflect on the eight hundred years of worship that have hallowed this beautiful little building, we leave it by the massive oak door with its fine ironwork designs. Just outside, on the right, is a tomb with an icon, or sacred picture, let into the stonework at its foot. This is the burial place of Prince Alexis Dolgorouki of Russia and his English wife; they lived at Nashdom, near Hitcham.

And so we make our way into the world outside the low, red-brick wall which for nearly three centuries has marked the churchyard boundary.

ST. MARY'S CHURCH



HITCHAM

The first recorded Rector of Hitcham was called John the Clerk. He came to the parish in the year 1167, when Henry II, great-grandson of William the Conqueror, was King of England.

John lived in the great age of church building. Canterbury Cathedral had been begun in 1072, Gloucester in 1080, and Durham in 1093; all over England the wooden churches of Saxon times were being rebuilt in stone. The builders were men whose living came almost entirely from crops, flocks and herds, who had only the simplest mechanisms for lifting heavy weights, and whose only means of transport were carts drawn by oxen. It was an age of faith. These tremendous tasks, in a country whose population was only a fraction of what it is today, can only have been accomplished by men who believed they were building to the glory of God. And this was no less true of the little church at Hitcham than of the mighty cathedrals up and down the land.

THE NAVE

The nave of Hitcham Church was built in the twelfth century. At that time most people could not read and therefore had no need of a good light to enable them to follow the service. This was just as well, since the only daylight came through small glassless windows high up in the walls. Four of them can be seen, now filled with glass, on the north and south sides. One reason for the smallness of windows in those early times was that churches were sometimes used as places of refuge under attack, and so the less window space the better. At the east end of the nave are two two-light windows, one near the pulpit, one opposite; these were added in the fourteenth century.

The diamond-shaped frames containing armorial bearings are called hatchments - the word is a corruption of "achievement". A hatchment used to be hung outside the house of someone who had died. It remained there for some months, sometimes for a year, and was then removed to the parish church. The various devices all have their meanings; experts in heraldry can tell from a hatchment the sex and rank of the dead person, whether they were married or single, possibly even their name. The use of hatchments persisted until quite modern times; one was shown in a London street in 1928.

The pulpit and its sounding-board are seventeenth-century work as were the oak box-pews, removed a hundred years ago. Parts of them were used for panelling the church porch; hinges from the pew doors can be seen in the panelling.

THE CHANCEL

A fine Norman arch divides the chancel, built in the fourteenth century, from the nave. Above this, on the chancel side, is a small pillar, possibly placed there to support the west end of the roof of an earlier chancel. This is a very rare feature, of great interest to antiquaries.

On the right, by the rector's stall, are a small window, very low down, and a circular one, high up. Windows like this appear in many churches, and various reasons for them have been given. The most likely explanation is that the low window was put in to give more light for the rector to read by, while the high one illuminated the rood, or crucifix, which hung at the entrance to the choir in medieval churches.

The most interesting and valuable possession of the church is the painted glass in the chancel windows. It dates back to the reign of Edward III (1327-1377), whose son, the Black Prince, was lord of the manor of Hitcham. This was the time, too, of Chaucer, the great English poet of the Middle Ages.

Most of this ancient glass is in the four two-light windows on the north and south sides. Each window has a quatrefoil tracery light at the top, containing a figure of one of the four evangelists holding a scroll of his writings. St. John is missing. In the eight main lights are figures of angels; each has six wings and stands on a winged wheel. The winged wheels are unusual; no doubt the artist wanted to illustrate the words of Ezekiel 1, verses 19 and 20: "When the living creatures were lifted up from the earth the wheels were lifted up for the spirit of the living creatures was in the wheels."

The fourteenth-century glass in the east window is in the tracery lights. The central panel at the top shows a seated figure of Christ. Around this are traces of the symbols of the four evangelists, the remains of the eagle of St. John (*right*) and the angel of St. Matthew (*left*) being still visible. One more bit of old glass in this window is the triangular piece in the centre, containing a stag's head in gold.

Over the centuries these windows fell into disrepair, and a restoration was carried out in 1906. Where pieces were missing the restorer replaced them with plain glass. Though this weakens the rich colour effects of the original designs, it adds to the historical interest of the windows by calling attention to the genuine fourteenth-century glass that remains.