

Two Churches

Saturday afternoon, 26 July

St Peter's Church, Plemstall, is found in the meadows around the river Gowy, formerly marshes and originally, when St Plegmund lived in his cell, on the 'Isle of Chester'. He became Archbishop of Canterbury, and crowned Edward the Elder on King Alfred's death in 901. The church was rebuilt in the 15th century in rose-coloured sandstone. There are two naves, divided by an arcade of six arches, a through church with no architectural division between nave and chancel. The medieval roofing is still intact, of hammer-beam design, displaying a good example of solid simple carpentry. The beauty is rather spoilt by the remnants of brown paint and whitewash. A 19th century tower replaced a wooden bellcot. The north screen is of 15th century design and a fine 17th century canopied church warden's pew is found at the back of the church; there is also a three-tiered pulpit.

A former rector, the Reverend Joseph Hooker Toogood, 1907-1946, devoted his ministry to enhancing the wood furniture and fittings with his own carving, using his workshop next to the church. Over his long incumbency he produced various screens, a new altar, reredos and many figures, baptistery, choir stalls and canopy, sanctuary panels, box-shaped pews with linenfold panelling and much more. In 200 years all these will have blended, and his magnificent efforts will be recognised and preserved!

St John the Baptist Church, Chester, was changed in Elizabeth I's reign from the collegiate to a parish church. It stands without the city wall on a cliff of red stone overlooking the Roman amphitheatre, and was founded by Ethelred, King of Mercia in the 7th century. What now remains is a fragment of the great company of religious buildings. The interior is impressive, with a high roof and large stained glass windows east and west. In 1881 after the west tower collapsed, a new clock tower and belfry were built. The massive Norman arches rising from 17ft girth pillars with impressive round capitals and square bases are a tribute to the masons. The triforium arcading and clerestory add to the magnificence of the internal structure.

Unfortunately, through the ages, much of the furniture and fittings have perished, but some ironwork grills with fleur-de-lis designs are interesting. There are two fonts, and the reredos was damaged and rebuilt with a scene from the Annunciation replacing the Adam and Eve panels. There are numerous heraldic memorials and many effigies, but now rather poorly treated and difficult to interpret. Several of the monuments were painted by members of the Randle Holme family, made famous by the *Academy of Armoury*, first published in 1688 and an important source for furniture historians.