



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Thomas Cocke, 'Eighteenth Century
Attitudes to Church Restoration', *A Gothick
Symposium*, Georgian Group Symposium,
1983

Eighteenth Century Attitudes to Church Restoration by Thomas Cocke

The English heritage from the Middle Ages in terms of churches was immensely rich. While it cannot be demonstrated statistically that by 1800 England retained more relatively unaltered mediaeval buildings per acre or per head of population than any other country, certain figures suggest the hypothesis is still reasonable even today after the immense losses due to the Industrial Revolution and vigorous Victorian restorations. Of the seventeen cathedrals of mediaeval foundation only St. Paul's, London, has been entirely rebuilt, with no vestige of its mediaeval fabric, while 8,500 of the 17,000 Anglican churches in the country are still substantially mediaeval.¹ In the 18th century the proportion of mediaeval churches in the total would obviously have been much higher. A glance at neighbouring countries shows that such a survival rate for mediaeval ecclesiastical buildings was exceptional, rather than the norm. In Scotland most mediaeval churches disintegrated or were completely rebuilt. They fell victim not so much to deliberate iconoclasm, which vented its wrath on fittings rather than fabric, as to war, poverty and the disinclination of the new lay holders of once clerical property to spend money on church building.² Great structures such as Elgin cathedral did not become ruinous at a stroke, but gradually. As for the ordinary mediaeval parish churches, they had rarely attained the size or quality of construction of their English equivalents and so were less attractive to retain and adapt. Those that were 'converted' to Calvinist worship had to be reordered so drastically that few of the traditional arrangements were of value. The complete redundancy of the chancel meant that this focus of the mediaeval church had to be either demolished or changed to a new use.

In France the earlier and more immediately decisive arrival of Italian Renaissance art and the Catholic triumph in the Wars of Religion had resulted in a different treatment of mediaeval buildings. The great churches wrecked by the Huguenots were often restored in Gothic but monastic living quarters were rebuilt in a classical style. In 1750 the monks of Cluny destroyed nearly all the ancient buildings of their abbey, except for the famous church, in favour of a vast contemporary design.³ New parish churches or the chapels of the new religious orders were generally in the classical style.⁴

A comprehensive analysis of the survival of mediaeval churches in England would require thousands of individual 'biographies', not only for those buildings which still exist, but also for those that have disappeared. What led people in one case to demolish, in another to restore and in a third to adapt? The answer cannot simply be chance. Buildings can rarely withstand centuries of exposure to English weather without at least routine maintenance. The evidence from which to judge contemporary attitudes to earlier building is rarely as direct as the semi-public letters by Wren and Hawksmoor on Westminster Abbey or the pleas by Vanbrugh for the preservation of Woodstock Manor and the Holbein Gate.⁴ Cathedral canons and churchwardens needed to maintain records and accounts for the work carried out on the fabrics for which they were responsible and they thus had to express to some degree their attitudes to the buildings, even if only tacitly in their degree of willingness to pay for maintenance or restoration. Otherwise signs of approval or disgust have to be sought in the vicissitudes and in the fabric of the buildings themselves. Most people were vague or inarticulate in the expression of their views on buildings, whatever their date.

Interest in the conservation of the past was often considered to be allied to political conservatism but the two cannot be closely correlated. It is possible to set a Tory mediaevalizing churchman such as William Cole against a Whig classicizing noble such as Lord Burlington, but the staunch Whig, Vanbrugh, was a pioneer of the romantic appreciation of ancient buildings and it was a Whig House of Commons that voted the

money for 30 of the 50 year long restoration of Westminster Abbey. The general association was close enough, however, for Sir Edward Turner to tease Sanderson Miller about the collapse of one of Miller's Gothic buildings: "Down is fallen, fallen, fallen the Gothick; too convincing a proof that the Church was lately in danger! Will your Toryism advise whether to rebuild or substitute something in its stead?"⁵

More dangerous was the association between interest in discarded forms of building and discarded forms of religion.⁶ In the seventeenth century the antiquary was often regarded as 'parcel-papist' and even in 1753 George Bullard could be told he was 'the only Antiquary that has given convincing proofs of his not being a Papist.'⁷ By the later 18th century mediaeval studies could again lure such different men as Horace Walpole and James Essex towards popery, even if their feelings were of aesthetic admiration, not of religious faith.⁸

The literary appreciation of Gothic must have affected the fate of mediaeval buildings. At the most basic level, it helped to give a positive interest and value to mediaeval remains. In *Il Penseroso* Milton had used the imagery of 'cloisters', 'high-embowed roof', 'antic pillars' and 'storied windows, richly dight' to evoke a mood, whose melancholy was studious and purposeful, rather than a ghoulish, 'memento mori' moralizing over ruins.⁹ Congreve invoked the very structure of an ancient church to strike 'awe and terror' in the Augustan soul.

'... This tall pile,
Whose ancient pillars rear their marble heads,
To bear aloft its arch'd and pond'rous roof!
By its own weight made steadfast, and immoveable,
Looking tranquillity ...'
(*Description of an Ancient Cathedral*, Lines 2-6)

By the end of the eighteenth century Wordsworth could find inspiration in Kings College Chapel, not as a fantastic pile of stone, but as 'this immense/ And glorious Work of fine intelligence' (*Inside of King's College Chapel, Cambridge*, Lines 4-5).

Undeniably there was a consistent current of thought that despised all things mediaeval, even in churches. James Ralph in his *Critical Review* of London buildings in 1735 poured scorn on Westminster Abbey. 'It is a fabrick of great antiquity, and challenges some kind of veneration on that account: it is besides of prodigious bulk, and fills the eye at least, if it does not satisfy it. To glance at it in the landscape, without examining its parts, it pleases tolerably well: to examine its parts, we are under a necessity of disliking the whole'.¹⁰ Inside the building, 'the enclosure behind the altar, commonly known by the name of St. Edward's Chapel, has nothing remarkable in it, but certain Gothic antiquities, which are made sacred by tradition only and serve to excite a stupid admiration in the vulgar'.¹¹ He also, not surprisingly, condemned the western towers Hawksmoor was adding to the Abbey.

Much more typical of eighteenth-century comments is a mixed reaction to mediaeval churches, on the one hand silent or reserved about their detailing, on the other impressed by their scale and venerability. Cox in his enlarged edition of Camden of 1730/31, summarized Lincoln Cathedral as 'the Glory of Lincoln, it stands on the highest Point of the Town and though Gothic work, which is the most barbarous Order, is yet a very magnificent Building'.¹² William Gunn, the late Georgian cleric and inventor of the term 'Romanesque' continued to uphold the superiority of classical architecture even in a

book on Gothic but distinguished firmly between his dislike of new Gothic building and his desire to see existing Gothic buildings 'supported in their actual form as long as one stone will remain upon another'.¹³

At parish church level the tenacity of property rights meant that the traditional division remained between the responsibilities of rector and of parish in the maintenance of the fabric and that the privileges and duties originally assumed by religious houses when they appropriated churches continued to belong to lay owners. There was, at the least, a legal obligation on them to keep the chancels in repair, and indeed lay ownership might at times result not in the neglect, but in the enhancement of chancels. The chancel of Maddington church (Wiltshire) was rebuilt about 1700 by Sir Stephen Fox, the successor to the original impropiator, Amesbury Priory. Responsibility for the maintenance of chancels and of dependent chapels and aisles was a constant subject of dispute: once established it was carefully recorded.

Thanks to the instruction in the Prayer Book, that chancels were to remain as they had done in time past, and Elizabeth's Order of 1561 which required the destruction of the rood but the retention of the screen between chancel and nave, the mediaeval multiplicity of liturgical centres and of screened enclosures had been continued for the use of the Reformed liturgy. Even in the Georgian galleried box type of auditory church, 'the mediaeval conception of a church still rules; but instead of well-defined places for the various services, there are three liturgical centres'.¹⁴

There was little enthusiasm for wholesale church rebuilding in the 18th century. Except around London and the expanding industrial towns the country was well provided with parish churches so there was no need to enlarge their number, and there were of course none of the Counter Reformation religious orders to promote new chapels and convents, as on the Continent. There were no wealthy bodies whose major centre of interest and expense was their church, although foundations such as hospitals usually included relatively ambitious chapels. Even the Chapters of cathedrals and other collegiate churches had limited means and inclination to spend lavishly on their buildings.

Financial restraints protected ancient buildings from overmuch 'modernisation'. The reverse disaster, of ruin through neglect, was averted by the institutional conservatism of the English Reformation, which had maintained the officers of the mediaeval Church and their various jurisdictions. There were still Bishops and prebends, archdeacons and vicars to occupy their traditional churches and residences, however much their doctrinal opinions and domestic arrangements might have startled their un-Reformed predecessors.

A significant change in attitudes to mediaeval churches can be detected, however, in the late eighteenth century. A spirit of rational utilitarianism was introduced, whether in the quest for domestic convenience or in the needs of divine worship. The Middle Ages were considered to have sacrificed 'comfort to splendour'.¹⁵ The rapidly rising population and prosperity of the nation increased the pressure for the alteration or destruction of earlier buildings. Major changes now seemed desirable and the technological and financial means were forthcoming to make them possible. When the old church of St. Chad in Shrewsbury collapsed in 1788, it was replaced on a different site by a building with the utterly unmediaeval plan of the oval. The need for increased seating in churches, caused mainly by population growth, but made more urgent by the great emphasis placed on sermons by the rising Evangelical movement, led to the ruthless adaptation of older buildings. In Cambridge the north wall of the partly Romanesque church of St. Giles was breached in the early nineteenth century and a large transverse north aisle attached: the late mediaeval Holy Trinity was filled to the roof with galleries to accommodate the crowds drawn by the famous preacher Charles Simeon. No less drastic but more ambitious aesthetically was the

treatment of the church at Micheldever (Hampshire) by George Dance in 1808. The sixteenth-century west tower was retained but the arcaded nave was replaced by a tall octagon.

Building work on churches throughout the Georgian period was usually financed by rates levied on the parish, or, in the case of the cathedrals or other churches with Chapters, by contributions from the share of each canon in the revenues of the Chapter. Endowments specifically for fabric maintenance were not universal and if they existed rarely yielded more than a pittance. Even amongst cathedrals, the property allocated to the fabric fund at Lichfield yielded only £25 per annum.¹⁶ At parish level the alternatives to the levying of a rate were to find wealthy outside patrons, to sell off church property or to ask for a brief. The restoration of the small church of Boscombe (Wiltshire) in 1709, which cost about £75, was largely paid for by contributions solicited by the incumbent from 'Persons of Quality ... most of them living in and near London'.¹⁷ At the end of the century, the restoration of Homington church, also in Wiltshire, was financed by the sale of the bells, and the old lead and glass. In the well known case of Tetbury (Gloucs) when the parishioners were eventually persuaded after years of litigation to rebuild rather than patch up their church, they were able to sell property worth £250 to set towards a building fund. An earlier attempt to raise money through the sale of the advowson, which was owned by the town, had led to a suit before the House of Lords, brought by the party seeking merely to repair, not to rebuild, the church. The traditional method of fund raising, the circulation throughout the country of a brief i.e. an officially sponsored appeal announced during the Sunday service, had failed miserably for the Tetbury parishioners. Their petition asked for £2,600 but only yielded £400.¹⁸

It is difficult to assess how sensitive churchwardens were to the mediaeval fabric of the churches for which they were responsible, on behalf of their parishes.¹⁹ Contemporaries were not impressed by the way churchwardens were often content to whitewash or otherwise 'beautify' the walls, inscribe their names as ostentatiously as possible and ignore any real work that needed to be done. Thomas Kerrich complained of 'these blockheads', the churchwardens of Covehithe (Suffolk), who in 1672 had inscribed their names on the north buttress of the little building they had cobbled up within the ruins of the great mediaeval church.²⁰ (Plate 1.) Since churchwardens were responsible to the parish for the money that was spent and since they would, as property owners, be contributing to the rates which produced the money, they were obviously inclined to do things cheaply or, at the least, not to spend money unnecessarily on blending the new contribution with the old. To cite two further Suffolk examples, the buttress dated 1707 on the south wall of Dedham church is in bright red brick, in contrast to the mediaeval stone of the rest of the church: in Parham not only was the flint walling of the north wall of the nave repaired in brick but the 14th-century tracery in the windows of the nave was removed and the central mullion simply continued right up to the top. But an examination by Howard Colvin and Basil Clarke of Berkshire churches in this period revealed a continuing process of careful restoration, and Berkshire was clearly not unique. As the authors commented, it is hard to believe, on reading the churchwardens' accounts at Newbury, that 'any of the visible detail is the authentic work of the mediaeval mason.'²¹

When more extensive rebuilding was needed, such as the replacement of a whole aisle or tower, the solution varied from place to place. Towers were usually built with care: 'campanilismo' was not a purely Italian phenomenon. Even in smaller and poorer parishes, when a church tower collapsed there was usually an attempt to rebuild it: the stump could be made into some sort of belfry. A wealthier parish could rebuild its tower properly but not necessarily with any acknowledgement of the mediaeval fabric of the body of the church in style or material as at Biggleswade in 1720. (Plate 2.) Yet at Berkeley in

Gloucestershire a bell tower was built in 1750-3 in a simplified but still recognisable Cotswold Perpendicular even though the tower stands well detached to the north of the church.²² (Plate 3.) 'Diamond' Pitt rebuilt the tower of the church at Stratford-sub-Castle, just outside Salisbury, in 1711, without deviating from the Perpendicular type usual in the area, in spite of his cosmopolitan life and travels.

The side walls of naves or aisles were more likely to receive a contemporary treatment since their design influenced the degree of light and comfort enjoyed by the congregation. Generous windows and plaster ceilings made the building lighter and warmer. Before they were swept away by Butterfield in 1869, the two aisles of Whiteparish church (Wiltshire) formed an interesting comparison. (Plates 4 and 5.) The early 17th century south aisle followed mediaeval precedent and had stone walling and mullioned stone window frames: the north aisle of a century later was of brick and had round headed wooden window frames. Repairing and regularizing uneven mediaeval floors and panelling the walls were other ways of improving the interior of the church. (Plate 6.)

Parish attitudes to stained glass were equally pragmatic. Mediaeval glass was now endangered, not by iconoclasm but by a genuine desire for more light by which to read and to follow the service and to avoid the prohibitive cost of artificial light. Another threat as the century progressed was the acquisitive antiquary. Even Charles Lyttelton, a Fellow and eventually the President of the Society of Antiquaries, tried to extract some glass from Milton Abbey in Dorset.²³ Yet when two of the famous windows at Fairford (Gloucestershire) were damaged by storm in 1703, a certain Elizabeth Farmer was inspired to bequeath no less a sum than £200 for repairs and protective wire frames. The benefaction, though delayed by Chancery proceedings, was executed in 1717.²⁴

The anonymity of parish church repairs is not universal. Colvin identified the work of Thomas Sumsion, one of a long established family of masons, in the church towers of Dursley (Gloucestershire) and Sherston (Wiltshire), rebuilt in the early years of the 18th century as free copies of the Perpendicular tower of Colerne in Wiltshire, the Sumsions' home village. (Plates 7 and 8.) There is no way of discovering how much the decision to rebuild in Gothic was due to the advocacy of Sumsion and how much he was simply carrying out a decision of the vestry.²⁵ Sumsion was no illiterate bumpkin but was capable of competent designs in a contemporary classical style. Perhaps he should be compared to late 17th-century French provincial masons such as Francois and Pierre Le Duc or Claude Tastevin whose conservatism kept them at ease with Gothic without hindering them in the newer styles of architecture.²⁶

Other families of mason/architects specialising in church rebuilding later in the 18th century were, in the West Country, the Woodwards and, in the East Midlands, the Wings of Leicestershire and Rutland. They refashioned mediaeval churches either in a classical or a Gothic style, but when they needed models for new details, such as windows, they sometimes chose existing examples in the building rather than simply following plates from pattern books.²⁷ It may also be significant that two of the most scholarly essays in Gothic, that by Edward Woodward at Preston on Stour and that by John Wing, the younger, at King's Norton involved dealing as much with antiquarian patrons, James West of Alscot Park in Warwickshire and William Fortrey in Leicestershire, as with the local churchwardens. (Plate 9.) The one Gothic commission James Essex received for a parish church, the design of a timber spire for Debden church (Essex), was inspired not by the parish but by the local landowner, Trench Chiswell, son of the Essex historian, Peter Muilman. It seems undeniable that as far as rebuilding parish churches was concerned, a

considered attitude to mediaeval architecture and private patrons went together. They alone could give not only the cultural background but also the financial independence necessary to escape from utilitarian repair.

The principal motive for a landowner taking trouble to rebuild all or part of a church was to provide a suitable burial place for his family. Often he chose the chancel since it was already his responsibility as patron of the living. John, second Duke of Montagu, having considered adding a Gothic mausoleum to the south-east corner of Weekley church (Northamptonshire), to be designed by William Stukeley complete with fan vaults, instead had the chancel of Warkton church rebuilt in 1748-9 in a plain Gothic, primarily to house future monuments.²⁸ The same occurred at Wilton where, after the death of the ninth 'Architect' Earl of Pembroke in 1750, his executors, besides commissioning a monument, added a further bay to the east of the existing chancel of the parish church, with a burial vault beneath. (Plate 10.) Again the Gothic detailing was not elaborate, comprising simple pointed windows and a plaster vault with decorated ribs. The Bishop of Salisbury 'personally viewed' it and pronounced that it was not only a 'great ornament and beauty' to the church but also 'of great benefit and advantage' to the parishioners.²⁹ The neighbouring Earl of Radnor was more generous to the parish of Britford fourteen years later. He added a large free-standing mausoleum to the north of the chancel, but also restored the church itself, rebuilding the west wall and the crossing tower and refenestrating both nave and chancel. Such generosity was sometimes regretted. George, Lord Lyttelton, of Hagley Hall, Worcestershire, ruefully considered that he could have had an extra garden building in his park or bought two fine pictures for the £200 he had spent on rebuilding the chancel of Hagley church, even though it was his brother Charles Lyttelton who paid for the major decoration, the elaborate Gothick ceiling of gilded ribs enclosing coats of arms.³¹

The pew, the other domain of the propertied within a church, was rather less significant in its contribution to the fabric as opposed to the furnishings of a church. When the pew occupied a whole chapel, as did the Stamford pew at Bowden (Cheshire), its maintenance in good order by its patron meant that a peripheral part of the building was ensured of survival. Most of the structurally distinct chapels, which were relatively frequent contemporary additions or adaptations, were built, however, in a contemporary style. Both the Newcastle pew in Esher church (Surrey), of 1725-6 and the King pew of ten years later at nearby Ockham were uncompromisingly classical. The design of the pew itself within a building was rarely Gothic, though some examples may have been lost since Victorian restorations were particularly hostile both to private pews and to 18th-century Gothic. The dichotomy between inside and out can also be observed in 18th-century restorations of secular mediaeval buildings where the exterior might be Gothic but internal furnishings in general not. The Shelburne pew designed by Henry Keene and formerly over the chancel screen at High Wycombe (Buckinghamshire), is one of the obvious exceptions. Another was presumably the raised pew designed by Sanderson Miller for his own use in Radway church, which was admired even by the jealous Shenstone.³¹

Was any value given to mediaeval work as it stood or was it simply either retained for reasons of economy or replaced in a contemporary style, whether classical or Gothic? As Basil Clarke pointed out, 'the 18th century was not sentimental about old churches'.³² Undoubtedly antiquarian interest came much lower in priority than convenience but preservation was aided by the over-riding principles of conservatism and economy which meant that things were left as much as possible as they were and that obsolete features were plastered and panelled over rather than obliterated. Churchwardens' Gothic was not as authentic and was rarely as pretty as Connoisseurs' Gothic but it is due to churchwardens that much of the Gothic we know today survives at all.

Notes

- 1 I owe this statistic, prepared by the 'English Heritage Monitor', to the kindness of Donald Findlay.
- 2 Dunbar, 1966, 33.
- 3 Crozet, 1949, 49.
- 4 Evans, 1964, 61-2.
- 5 Dickins and Stanton, 1910, 165.
- 6 The antiquary John Stow had been suspected of being 'an Admirer of antiquity in Religion as well as in History': Stow, 1754, iii.
- 7 Fuller, 1662, iii 19: B.L. Stowe MS 753 f 221.
- 8 'I like Popery as I do chivalry and romance': Walpole, 1937-80, ii 100 (Letter of 12 July 1778 to Cole). Essex and Tyson returned from their Flemish tour of 1773 'delighted with Popery and Popish churches': Nichols, 1814, viii 607.
- 9 *Il Penseroso*, Lines 155-160.
- 10 Ralph, 1736, 44.
- 11 *Idem*, 61.
- 12 Cox, 1720-31, ii 1441.
- 13 Gunn, 1819, 111.
- 14 Addleshaw and Etchells, 1948, 50.
- 15 malcolm, 1802-7, i 210.
- 16 Staffordshire Record Office at Lichfield: MS 020.
- 17 Memorandum in Boscombe church register.
- 18 Lee, 1857, 102-5.
- 19 Clarke, 1963, 34 and *passim*.
- 20 BL Add MS 6732 p.200.
- 21 Clarke & Colvin, 1952-5, liii 66.
- 22 As Colvin noted, this late example of provincial Gothic struck no responsive echo in Horace Walpole when he saw it: Colvin, 1948, 94.
- 23 BL Stowe MS 753 f 197.
- 24 VCH, 1981, 83.
- 25 See Colvin, 1948, 93-4 and Colvin, 1978, 798
- 26 Heliot, 1955, 159.
- 27 Colvin, 1948, 96-7: Brushe, 1976, 3 & 5.
- 28 Murdoch, 1980, 40-5.
- 29 Salisbury Diocesan Record office at Trowbridge, Faculties Volume ii, 53.
- 30 Dickins & Stanton, 1910, 291.
- 31 Shenstone, 1939, 252-3.
- 32 Clarke, 1963, 146.

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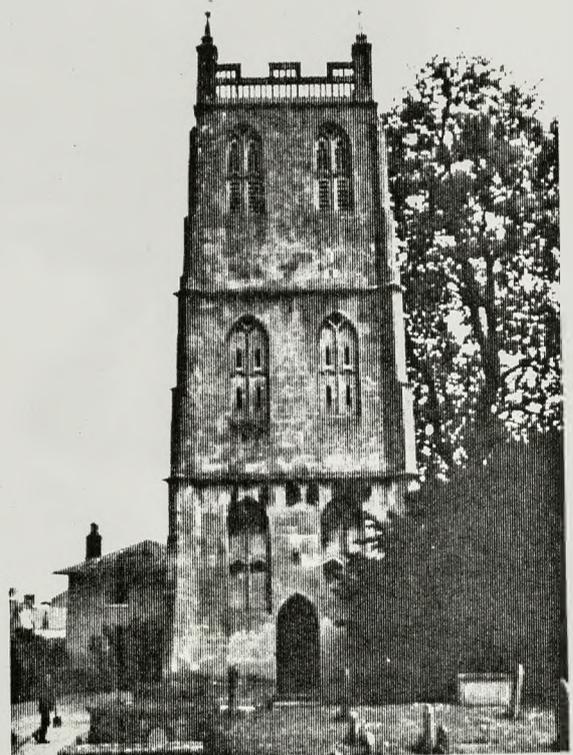
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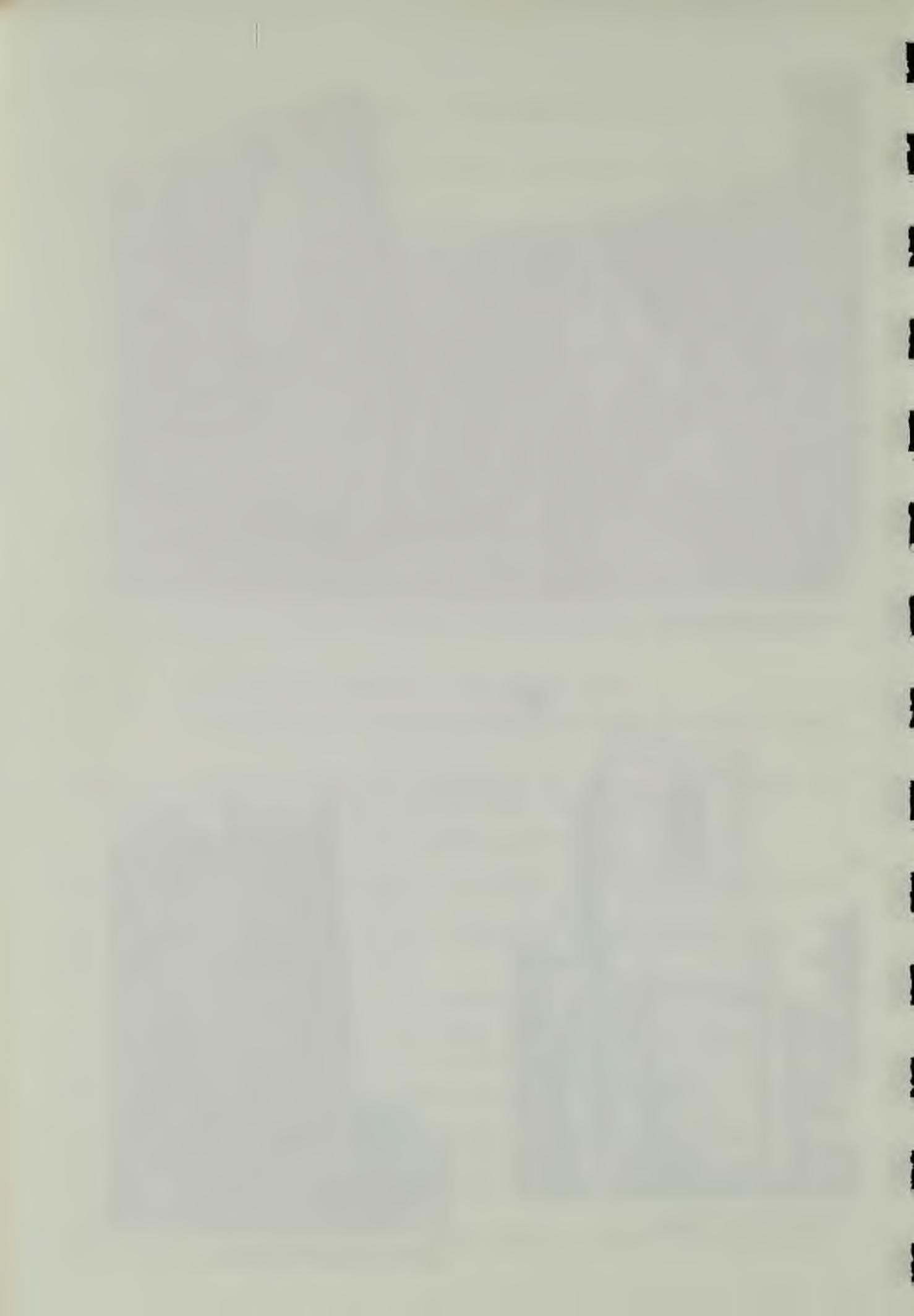
1. St. Andrew, Covehithe, Suffolk

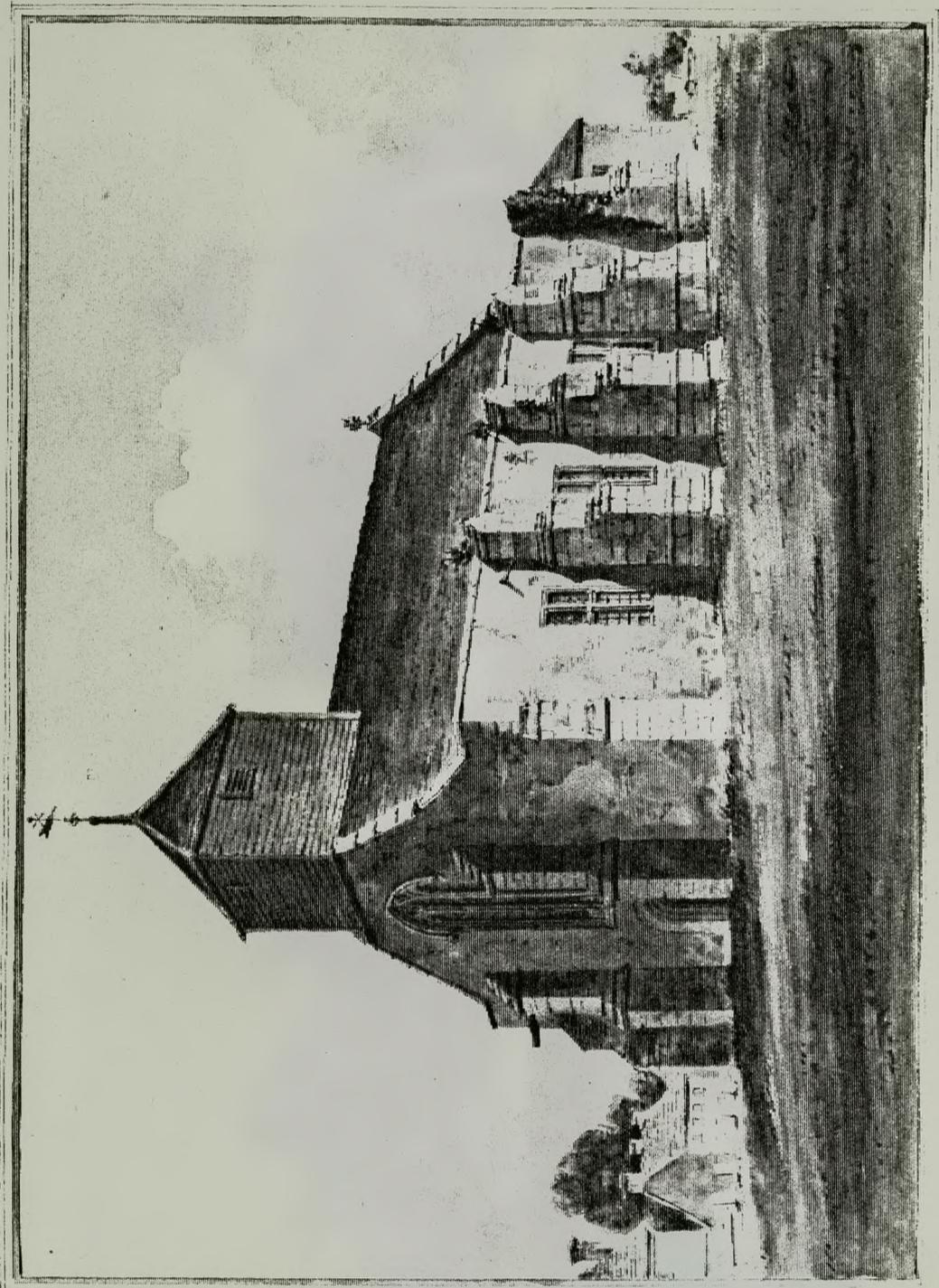


2. Biggleswade Church, Bedfordshire



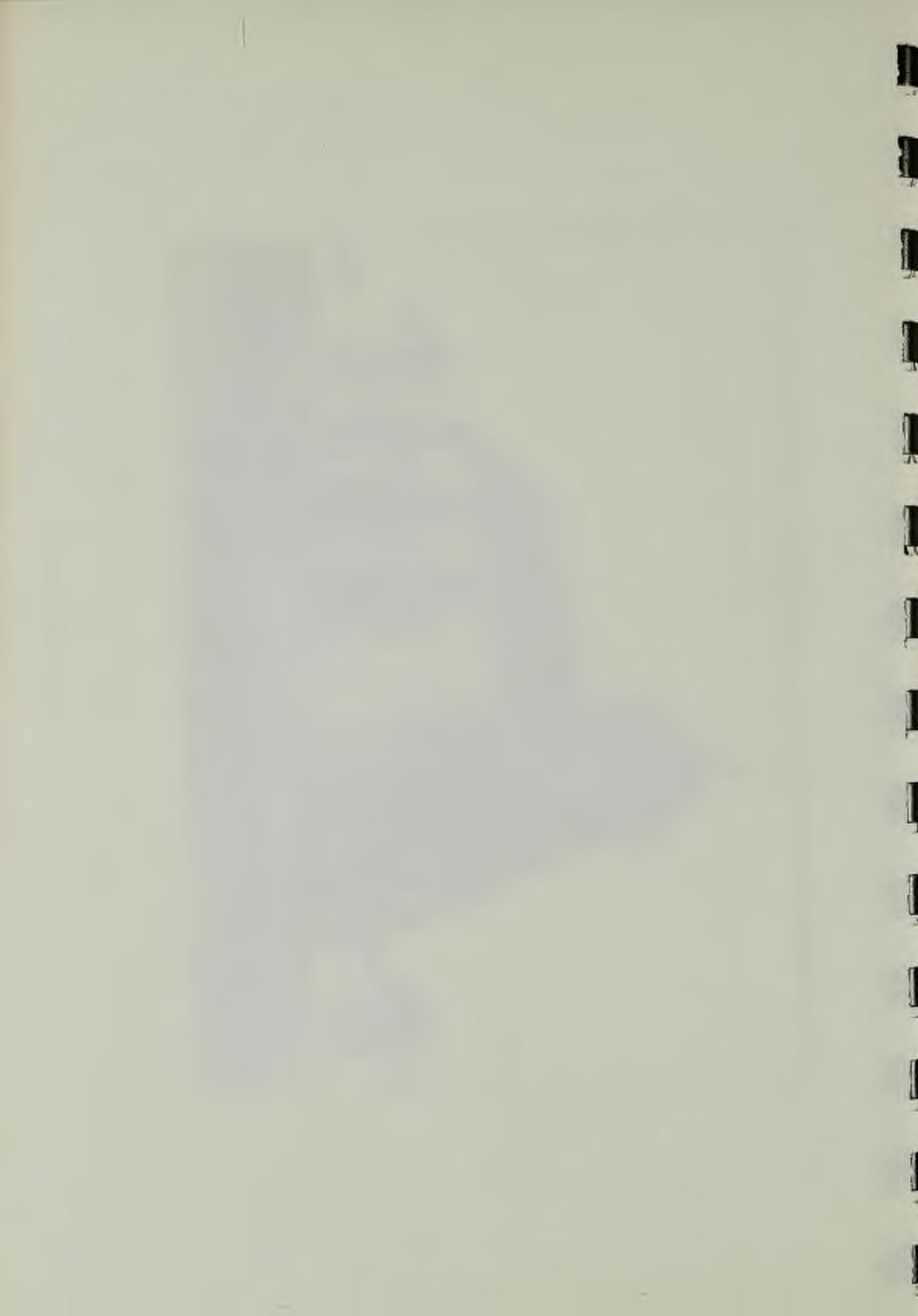
3. St. Mary, Berkeley, Gloucestershire

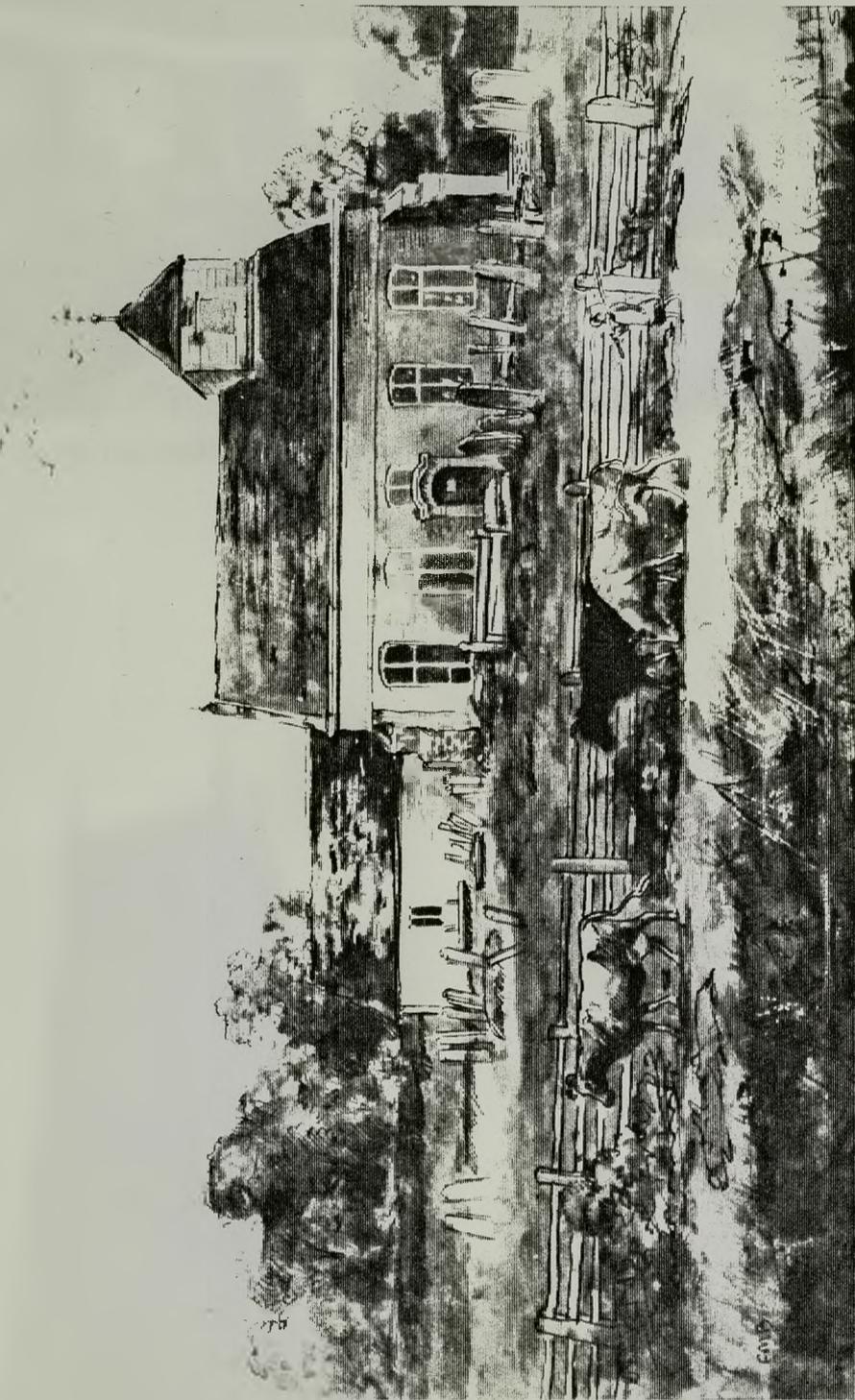




All Saints Church, Whiteparish, Wiltshire

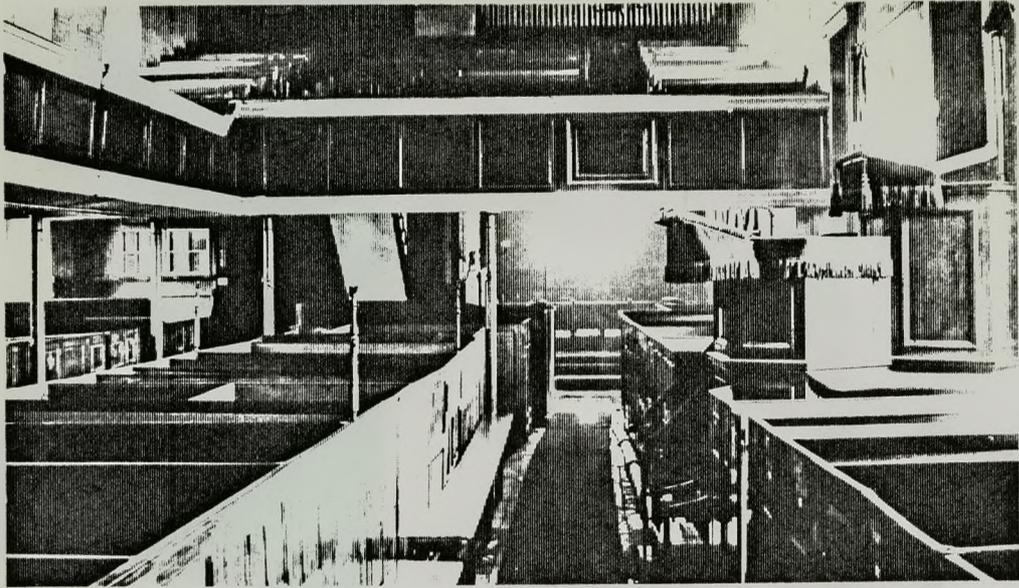
4. All Saints, Whiteparish, Wiltshire: south aisle





5. All Saints, Whiteparish: north aisle

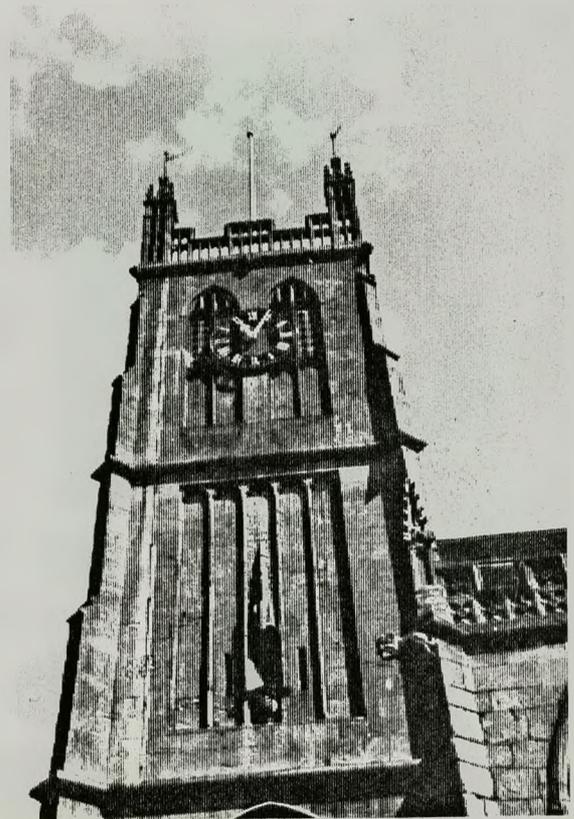




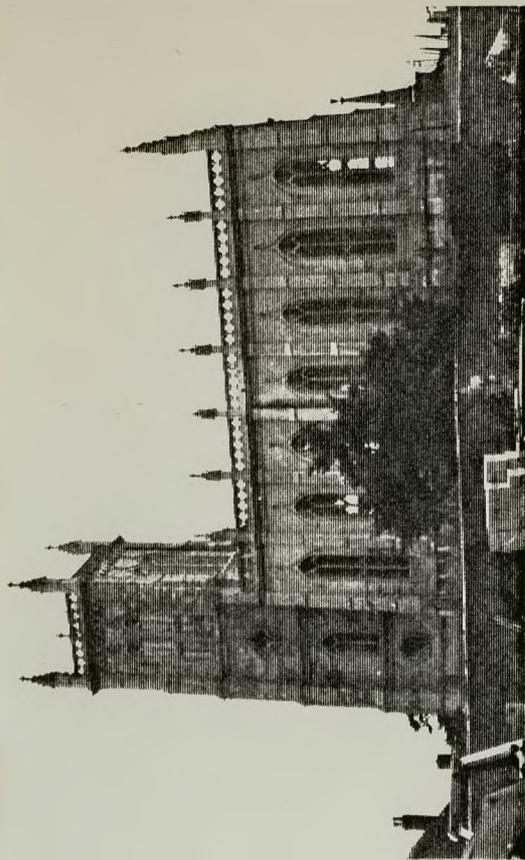
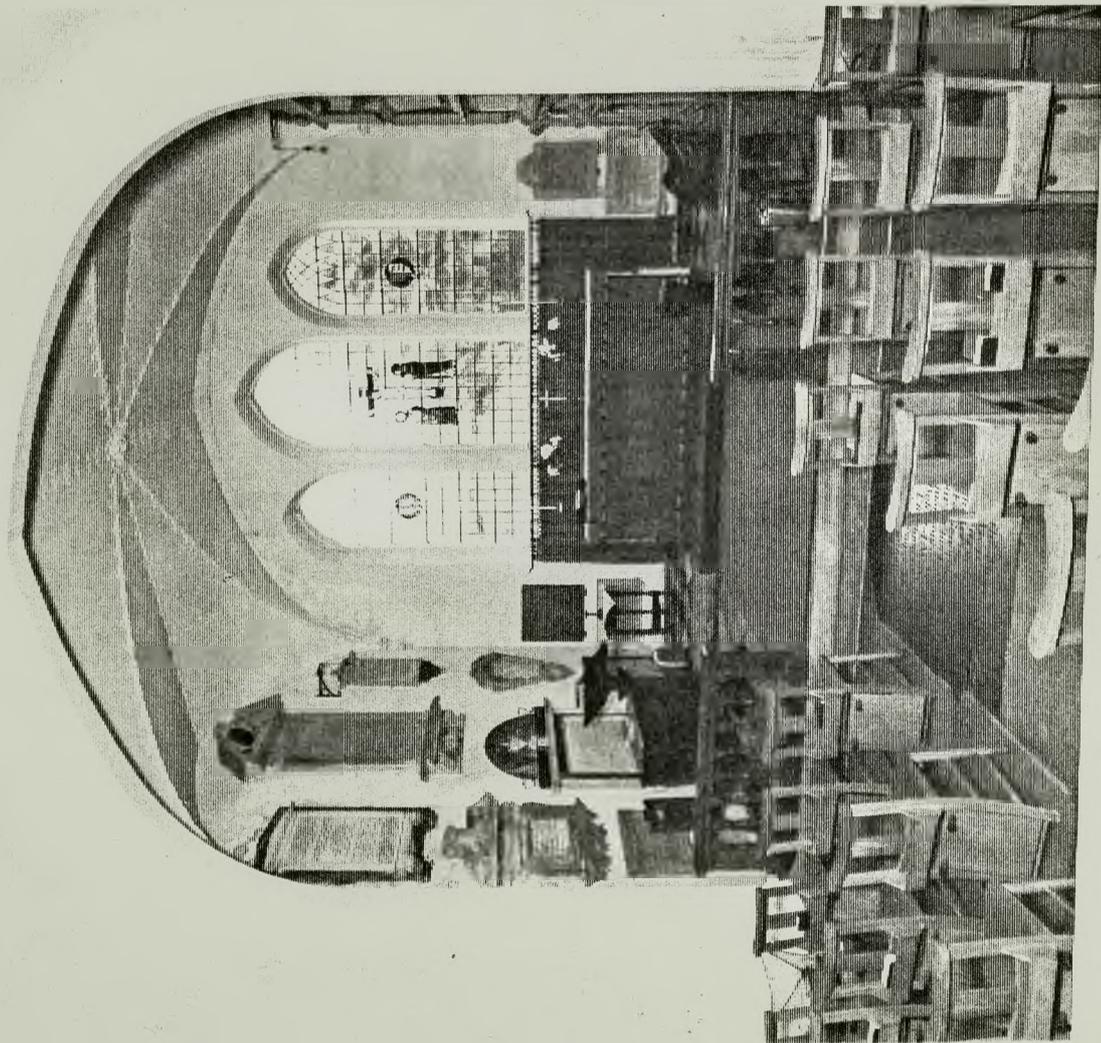
6. (top) St. Peter, Monkwearmouth, County Durham



7. (left) St. Peter, Colerne, Wiltshire



8. (right) St. James, Dursley, Gloucestershire



9. (right) St. John Baptist, King's Norton, Leicestershire

10. (left) St. Mary, Wilton, Wiltshire

