

CHAPTER IV

OUR CHURCH : ITS DEDICATION, ALTARS, SCREENS, ETC.

ACCUSTOMED as we are to speak of our parish church as the "Church of the Holy Cross," it seems strange at first to regard it as being dedicated to St. Helen. Such, however, is the case.

The earliest reference to the church by name occurs on the Coroner's Rolls for 1321 (see page 143), where it is called the Church of St. Helen. In pre-Reformation Wills it is referred to by the same name, as the following extracts show :

John Byllyng, 1526, " My body to be beryed in the churchyarde of Sayncte Ellyns in medelton aforesaid."

William Bowye, 1528, " My body to be buried in the churchyard of Seynct Hellyn in medylton malsor."

It was called St. Helen's Church as late as the middle of the eighteenth century, because it appears under this name in the *Thesaurus Rerum Ecclesiasticarum*, page 495, published in 1742 by John Ecton, late Receiver-General of the Tenths of the Clergy. Browne Willis, in his *Survey of the Cathedrals*, etc., page 534, in the editions published in 1730 and 1742, also gives it as the Church of St. Helen. Hence it cannot

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for very long have been called the “ Church of the Holy Cross.” The mistake in the name was undoubtedly due to the evil days of sloth and indifference through which the Church passed during the latter part of the eighteenth century and to sheer carelessness on the part of bishops’ secretaries about a century, or less, ago, there being a chapel of the Holy Cross at Milton, near Peterborough, with which our church probably got confused. It is true that Milton Feast is not held on August 18th, St. Helen’s Day. This is probably due to an order of the time of Henry VIII that owing to the numerous feasts or wakes in connection with the annual festivals of the dedication of churches, many occurring at short intervals in the same neighbourhood during busy seasons, they were to be transferred to Michaelmas or some date near it. What new date near Michaelmas would be fixed on for the Feast, in obedience to the Royal decree ? It would be most natural to choose a day near the Festival of Holy Cross, which falls on September 14th. Hence Milton Feast has been kept for centuries on the Sunday next after Holy Cross Day, so that it can be as late as September 21st. This is borne out by the following extract from our old register :

“ Sarah Lister, baptized Sept. 21st, 1707, which was Milton Feast day.”

A similar change occurred in the date of Collingtree Feast, which is held in October, although the festival of St. Columba, the patron saint, falls on June 9th.

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Why, if the feast had to be changed from St. Helen's Day, would it be natural to choose a date near Holy Cross Day? The reason is not far to seek. According to tradition it was St. Helen who discovered the Holy Cross on which Our Saviour died. As she is our patron saint it would not be amiss to give here a short account of her life, or, rather, the traditions surrounding her name.

Flavia Julia Helena was born about the year 248-50 and died in her eightieth year about A.D. 328-30. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth she was of British birth, being the daughter of a chieftain named Coel, the "old King Cole" of the nursery rhyme, who founded Colchester. She became the wife of Constantius Chlorus, Emperor of Rome. Her husband died at York in A.D. 306, and there her son Constantine was proclaimed Emperor, to be known for all time as Constantine the Great, the founder of Constantinople, which he named after himself. About the year 325, after being warned in a vision, she journeyed to Jerusalem, which she found in ruins, and proceeded to search for the Holy Sepulchre. On the most likely spot there was a huge mound on which stood a temple to Venus. She demolished the temple and caused the mound to be removed, thus bringing to light the sepulchre. In it she found three crosses, the two on which the thieves died and that on which Our Lord suffered, together with the tablet on which Pilate had written in Hebrew and Greek and Latin, "This is the King of the Jews." There was nothing to

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distinguish the crosses, for the tablet was lying loose, so how could she tell which of the three was the Cross of Christ? Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, came to her aid and asked of God a sign. There was a woman lying at the point of death, and one after the other the crosses were laid against her. The first two had no effect, but when the third touched her, although she was in the very act of yielding up the ghost, yet, as an old historian tells us,

“she recovered and regained her former strength. After this sort was the Cross of Christ found out. The Emperor’s mother built over the sepulchre a goodly and gorgeous Church and called that new Jerusalem which she had founded over against the old and waste. The one half of the Cross she locked up in a silver chest, and left there to be seen of such as were desirous to behold such monuments, the other half she sent unto the Emperor.”

Such is the narrative related by Socrates Scholasticus in his *Ecclesiastical History*, I, 17, about A.D. 450. Other historians, Sozomen and Theodoret, who wrote about the same time as Socrates, but evidently independently of him, tell us much the same story, except that the former states that the true Cross restored a dead man to life. Eusebius, however, who was contemporary with Constantine the Great and evidently a privileged spectator of the events he describes, tells us plainly that it was Constantine who overthrew the temple of Venus and discovered the Holy Sepulchre when the mound was cleared away. He says nothing about the

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discovery of the Holy Cross. Eusebius began writing his Life of Constantine at the death of that Emperor in A.D. 337, so that we could wish for no better authority.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, the next authority in point of time, states in a letter dated May 7th, A.D. 351, written to Constantius the son of Constantine, that the "saving wood of the Cross" was found at Jerusalem in the time of his father.

St. Ambrose, in A.D. 395, states that St. Helen found at Golgotha the three crosses and the nails, and that Our Lord's Cross was known by the title thereon.

After him we have St. Chrysostom who, in A.D. 407, mentions the discovery of the Holy Cross and states it was known by Pilate's tablet fixed to it. He says nothing about St. Helen.

Further than this it is not necessary to follow the story or the evidence, except to say that in course of time supposed portions of the Holy Cross found their way as relics throughout Europe and very likely a small piece was kept as a relic and venerated at Milton.

The church being the Church of St. Helen, the High Altar was dedicated in her honour. This of course stood at the east end of the chancel and close to it was a statue of the saint or else her picture on the wall. She is usually represented crowned, holding the cross in her left arm and with the nails in her right hand. Before the image, or picture, votive lights would be burning, for the maintenance of which money or goods were bequeathed.

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Jayne Garnytt, 1532: "To Seynt Helen light ijd."

Henry Davy, 1536: "To Sent Hellyns lyghtt halfe a pownde of waxe."

Closely associated as St. Helen was with the story of the discovery of the Holy Cross, it is only natural to find that the Rood, or Crucifix, was especially honoured in her church here, for we find that Milton had the distinction of possessing not less than two Rood-screens. One, the High Rood, was in the usual place across the chancel arch. This was probably of wood with a door or gate in the centre through which communicants would pass to reach the altar rails. Above the screen stood the Crucifix, flanked by figures of the Blessed Virgin and St. John. The Crucifix stood immediately over the door in the middle of the screen, thus symbolising that the Blessed Sacrament was attained through the Cross of Christ. The second Rood-screen, or "Lesser Rood," was across the west end of the Lady Chapel in the north aisle, and is now represented by the vestry screen.

An examination of the ancient Wills in the Northampton Probate Office proves that here existed two Rood-screens.

Thomas Basse, 1521, in his Will mentions the High Rood, i.e. the one across the chancel arch, in the following bequest:

"To the hye rode lyght a stryke of barley."

Wm. Garnett (1531) mentions the Rood across the north aisle:

"To the rode in ye north yle ijd."

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And thus Henry Davy, 1536 :

“ To the roode lyghtt in the north ylle halfe a pownde of waxe.”

Thomas Rage, 1523, who was a great benefactor of his parish church, refers to both Roods in his Will :

“ To the hye rod a stryke of barley, also to ye rode yn the north hyle ij powndes of waxe in too torches.”

Sometimes no particular Rood was specified, the bequest being simply to “ the Rood,” or, as in the case of Robert Stewynnys, 1518 : “ to the crucifyx ij stryk of barley.”

So the evidence proves conclusively that there were two Rood-screens in our church, though now, alas, not a trace of them remains.

Either on the narrow platform that formed a canopy above the High Rood-screen, or on the floor of the nave close to the screen, stood the Rood Altar. That it existed is proved by the Will of William Bowye, 1528, which runs thus :

“ I gyve and bequethe to the lyght before the rode alter a stryke of barley.”

The Rector at certain services would ascend to the top of the Rood-screen, and so would the sexton every night and morning for the purpose of extinguishing and rekindling the lights. In some churches, as at Blisworth, may still be seen the staircase in the wall used by the priest and sexton, and high up in the wall is the door through which they came out to the Rood-loft across the chancel arch. The walls in Milton

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Church show no trace of such a staircase built in them, nor do they appear to be thick enough to allow of one. How then did the Rector of Milton climb up to the roods? Evidently by a wooden staircase fixed in such a position as to serve both the High Rood-screen and that across the north aisle. That position would be somewhere near where the pulpit now stands, and an examination of the demi-shaft or half-pillar between the chancel arch and the north aisle will provide evidence that such a staircase had once been fixed there. Scattered here and there on the shaft and that part of the wall close to it, will be found no less than eleven small square plugs let into the stone, the lowest one being near the floor and the highest near the capital. These plugs are very significant, for they are pieces of stone let in to fill up holes in which small wooden beams were once fixed. It seems conclusive that in this place, between the two roods, a wooden staircase must have been fastened to the wall for stability, hence the holes in which the supports were held. To confirm this theory, one of the topmost plugs is between the demi-shaft and the chancel arch, as if to support a platform by which the High Rood could be gained.

The Lesser Rood, we have said, stood before the Lady Chapel, at the eastern end of the north aisle. This was the usual position for the Lady Chapel, except when it was built to the east of the High Altar. In this chapel was an altar, with a statue of Our Lady or a painting of the Madonna and Child on the wall, before which candles would be burning. In the south wall of

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the chapel still exists a rather large piscina, the drain where the altar vessels were cleansed. Bequests were made to this altar, as for instance :

Thomas Rage, 1523 : “ It. to our lade awter¹ a stryke of barley.”

And for the lights that burned before the statue :

Henry Davy, 1536 : “ Unto our Ladys lyght a pownde of waxe.”

At the east end of the south aisle there is another chapel, which, if the “ wheel window ” is a sure indication, was originally dedicated to St. Catherine. Here again stood an altar, with a statue or picture of the saint, while the piscina still remains in the south wall.

Thomas Rage, 1523 : “ It. to Seynt Cateryns awter a quarter of wax.”

Lawrence Davey, 1526 : “ Item to Saynte Nicolas and Seinte Katerins altarez in the same church to eiche off them oone stryke Barley.”

Again, for the lights before the statue :

Wm. Garnett, 1531 : “ To Sent Katheryn light ijd.”

As her chapel is now in frequent use, a brief life of this saint may be given here.

The festival of St. Catherine, or St. Katharine, falls on November 25th. She was a Virgin and Martyr, but there is very little reliable information respecting her. It is said she was

¹ Our Lady's altar.

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of royal descent and was born in Alexandria in the early part of the fourth century. Being a Christian, she was brought before Maximin the Emperor, and in his presence had to dispute her case with heathen philosophers. However, she was of such great learning and ability that she not only confuted her heathen opponents but was the means of their conversion. The Emperor, when he knew that the philosophers had confessed Christ, ordered them to be burnt to death, but reserved St. Catherine for a further trial. Steadfast in her faith, she refused to sacrifice her chastity to the tyrant's lust and was condemned to death. She was first torn to pieces on four revolving wheels to which sharp spikes were fastened, and then what little life remained was mercifully ended with the sword's keen edge. In the eighth century her body was taken by holy monks to the monastery of Mount Sinai, but mediæval legends say she was borne there by angels. St. Catherine is the patron saint of secular learning and her name was highly venerated in East and West. In statues or pictures she is represented crowned, bearing in her hand either the martyr's palm, a book, or a sword, and having the spiked wheel by her side.

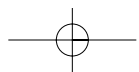
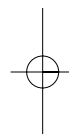
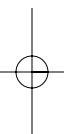
The positions of four altars in our church have now been identified. These are the High Altar, dedicated to St. Helen, the Rood Altar, Our Lady's Altar and St. Catherine's Altar. There was a fifth altar, that to St. Nicholas, as we see from Lawrence Davey's bequest above, and also from others, e.g. :

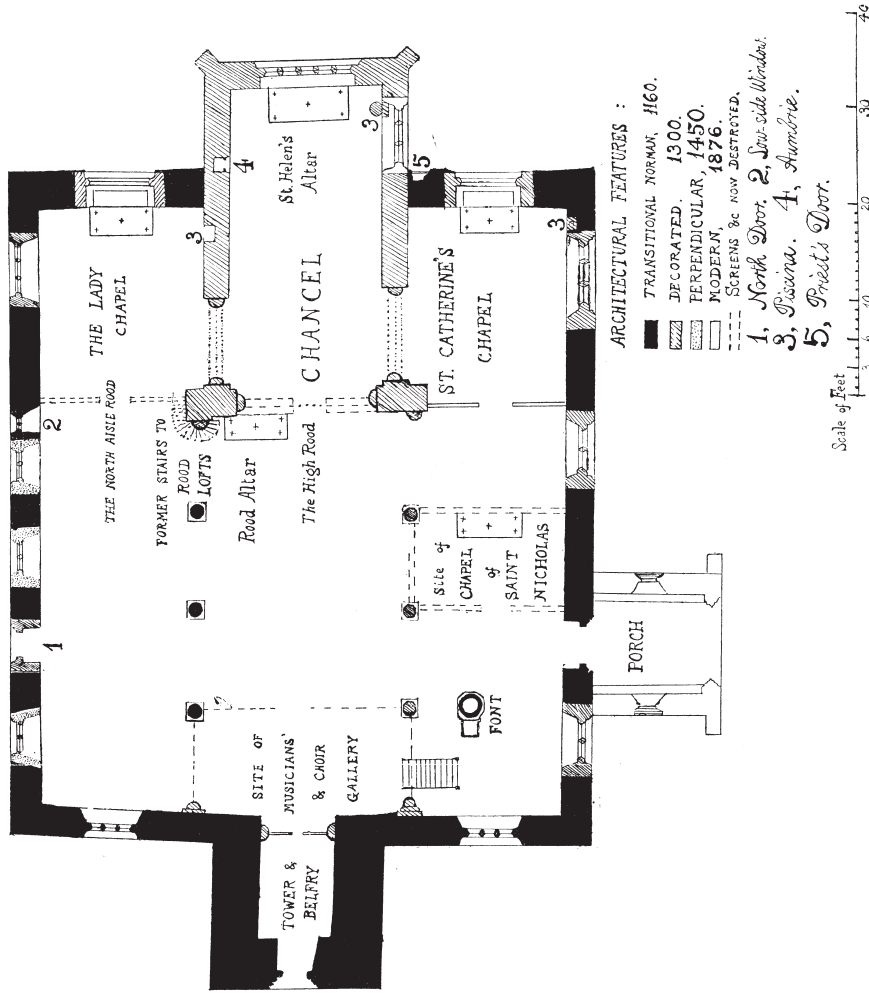
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Thos. Rage : “ Also to Seynt Nycolas awter a stryke of barley.”

Where, then, was the chapel of St. Nicholas ? Speculations as to whether a small chantry chapel once stood here between two pillars, led me to examine carefully the stonework of the columns. Evidence was soon forthcoming. In the south arcade, in the two pillars to the east of the porch, are several stone plugs, inserted in holes that once very probably held wooden beams. In the aisle wall may be seen, directly opposite these two pillars, the places where holes for two beams have been plastered up. The positions of these plugs and plastered holes seem to indicate that a screen stood between the two pillars, and between each pillar and the wall of the south aisle, thus setting apart a portion of the aisle as a chapel. A position near the font would be very appropriate for this chapel, as St. Nicholas is a patron saint of children, for this reason. We are told that one day he heard a man say he would have to sell his three little daughters as he was too poor to keep them. So St. Nicholas threw three bags of gold that night through their window. Here we have the origin of hanging up our stockings on Christmas Eve, for St. Nicholas is better known, perhaps, by the popular title of Santa Claus. This change of spelling easily came about, because there is very little difference in sound between Sant Nic’las and Santa Claus. His Festival is on December 6th.

In his chapel stood his altar, with his statue or picture, in front of which were lights.





GROUND PLAN OF MILTON CHURCH.
 Showing ancient features.

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Wm. Garnett, 1531: "To Seinte Nicholas light ijd."

Wm. Bowye, 1528: "It. I gyve and bequethe to Seynct Nicolas Lyght a stryke of barley."

Though probably extinguished at night for safety, lights were burning every day before images of saints. From bequests made in old Wills for the maintenance of such lights we find that there were other saints specially venerated in Milton Church, although there was no altar in their honour.

There was a statue of St. Christopher, or probably a painting of that saint, on the wall of the north aisle and, as near as possible, opposite the south door. This position was usually chosen because this saint was the protector of travellers, and it was considered of great benefit merely to take a peep at the saint's picture through the open church door when passing by.

Lawrence Davy, 1526: "Item to Sainte Christoferus lighte the oone strike off Barley."

Richard Knight, 1529: "Item to Seynt Xrsfer lighte a stryke of Barley."

There were at least two more statues in our church. They were of St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist. The statue of St. John the Baptist was probably attached to the pillar close to the font, and that of St. John the Evangelist either on the wall of the north aisle or one of the pillars in the north arcade, the north side being the Gospel side of the altar. Before these statues votive lights were kept burning.

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Thos. Rage: "Item to Seynt John the Baptyste and to Seynt John Eva'gelyst a pownde of waxe."

From the testamentary extracts already quoted we see that bequests were made for the maintenance of lights to be kept burning before various images, altars and roods in Milton Church. There was another light, that before the Easter Sepulchre, about which a few words of explanation may be given here.

The Easter Sepulchre was in use only between Maundy Thursday and Easter morning. After the Mass on Maundy Thursday, the Host, i.e. the consecrated wafer, was placed in a silver pyx, or box, together with a small cross, and "buried" in a small wooden chest or some other receptacle. This was the Easter Sepulchre, and in some churches there still remain beautiful specimens elaborately carved in stone. That in Milton was most probably of wood, since nothing remains to show that one of stone ever existed here. The usual place for the Easter Sepulchre was against the north wall of the chancel, near the altar. After the Host was deposited therein on Maundy Thursday, lights were kept burning before it day and night until dawn on Easter morning. Then the Rector took the Host out of the Sepulchre, and after carrying it in a joyful procession round the church, replaced it upon the High Altar. This was a dramatic way of impressing upon the minds of the people the death and burial of Our Lord and His glorious Resurrection.

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Bequests were made for the light burning before the Easter Sepulchre.

John Byllyng, 1526 : " To the sepulker lighte ij stryke of barley."

Wm. Harbord, 1532 : " It. to Seyntt pulcar's lygt xjd."

A curious bequest to the Sepulchre light is made by Robert Stewynnys in 1518, which is as follows :

" It. to the sepulcur lyght of the churche of mydulton a cowe."

In this case it is obvious that the cow was intended to be sold and the money used for the benefit of the light before the Easter Sepulchre, but this bequest recalls an interesting fact that cattle were very often given to the church and were added to the stock that the Rector let out to the poor for hire.

In the same way, of course, the strikes of barley bequeathed to various lights or altars would be sold and the money disposed for their maintenance. On the other hand, the wax bequeathed would be given to the parish officials, who would make it into candles for the altar or statue mentioned in the Will.

The " strike " was a measure of two bushels, according to an old table of measures. It is interesting to know that the name " strike " was also given to a stick, commonly used up to fifty years ago, to level the grains heaped up at the top of the bushel measure. This stick, or strike, was drawn across so that the superabundant grains were swept off. The late Mr.

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James Asplin, Lord of the Manor of Milton, informed me that it fell into disuse because dishonest persons had their strike thicker in the middle instead of straight, so that it swept away more than was just.

Another favourite bequest was for the maintenance of a funeral custom. This was for the burning of "torches," or "serges," as the great candles were called, at the side of the coffin during the funeral service in church and at the Requiem Mass. People who could afford to do so provided their own torches for their funerals, but the poor had to depend upon those belonging to the church, for the maintenance of which the rich gave wax or money in their Wills. The torches were very big, and each would be several pounds in weight. Bequests towards torches for Milton Church are frequently found, some giving the price to be paid for them.

Robert Stewynnys, 1518 : "It. to the forsayd church (Milton) a torche prise vjs viijd."

John Lawrence, 1530 : "To helpe to by a torche xxd."

Thos. Rage, 1523 : "Also too torches of iiijjs a pece, a torche to Medylton and a nother to Colentre church."

Though not in itself a benefaction to any particular altar or light, the "obit" is of great interest and demands a brief notice. It was a bequest made to a church either in a lump sum of money or in rents of houses or lands, usually for the purpose of providing a curate and for charitable purposes at the disposal of the Rector in return for an annual Mass. A lamp was kept

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perpetually burning in church to symbolise the constant prayers of the faithful for the soul of the donor. In connection with this, the Will of Lawrence Davy, 1526, is most interesting, but unfortunately is in a torn condition. However, in the following extract I have attempted to fill up the blanks, the words or letters in italics showing where the page was torn.

“ Then I will that the foresaid Johanne my wife if she supervive my said *decease* haveyng no issue shall have the said messuage in middelton aforesaid for the term of her live and *with it* to make and kepe yerely an obbett in Medelton aforesaid to the value of XVID, and after the *decease* off the seide Joh'ne my wife then I will my seide *assigns* shall stande and be seased off and in the said messe (i.e. message) and lands with there *appurtenance* to the use of the parish church of Medilton aforesaid for ever and the church wardens of the same for the tyme *being* to kepe yerely for my fay (i.e. father) and mother my *soul* and all Xren sowles an yerely obbett in the *said* churche and the same obbett yerely to be keppid *for* ever and off the profetts and issues of the same I will VIs. viiid. sterlyng to be distributed yerely *to* pr'ste, clerks and among the parishioners there. The residue off all my goods &c.”

This was in the reign of Henry VIII, but that money does not now belong to Milton. Towards the close of his reign an Act was passed (37 Henry VIII, cap. 4), in 1545, by which all grants for religious uses, if considered superstitious such as chantries, obits and so forth, were vested in the Crown. An inventory of all such was

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made, and the parchment rolls may be seen at the Record Office. From the list for Northamptonshire I have copied the following :

Lands & Rents	{	Given by dyvers persons to churches to maynteine certeyne Obits, Lights Lampes & such like things, bying in dyvers townes viz. in Welton xiij <i>d</i> , Grendon viij <i>d</i> . Milton iiij <i>s</i> iij <i>d</i> & Blysworth vid. vjs vij <i>d</i> .
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