

PLAYFORD CHURCH

The visitor who makes his way up the steep ascent to Playford Church along the tree-shaded path, the sharp rise broken by wide brick steps, cannot fail as he emerges at the top to be charmed by the cheerful brightness of its sunny churchyard, where the ox-eye daisies stand in the high grass at hay-season, clothing burial places, many of which are contemporary with the Church itself.

The Church tower and porch facing the wayfarer were built by Sir George Felbrigge, who died in 1400, and whose armorial bearings, with those of his two wives, are sculptured round the entrance. Two features on the face of the tower may meet the enquiring eye. The small gracefully canopied niche — empty — that housed a stone statue of St. Mary, the patron saint, pulled down and destroyed by Dowsing, the Cromwellian iconoclast, who, with his men, despoiled such a number of the beautiful churches in this part of England. Above the niche is a cross, well and decoratively worked in faced flints. The whole church is a good example of the old art of building in knapped flint and mortar, common to these Eastern Counties, which boast no building stone in their light land, but afford a very copious supply of flints! The nave of the church appears older than the tower, and the chancel was rebuilt in comparatively modern times. In the churchyard on the left of the entrance door, is a granite obelisk, raised to the memory of Thomas Clarkson, "the friend of slaves" who, with the Parliamentarian Wilberforce, was largely responsible for the abolition of slavery. One of the "few friends" who sponsored this tribute was a leading Quaker, and as the obelisk savoured to him of "graven images" he declined to subscribe, but apparently satisfied the tenets of his creed and everyone else by bearing the entire cost of hauling the stone from Ipswich dock and placing it in its present position! Clarkson, born at Wisbech, spent the later part of his life as tenant of Playford Hall, and his remains rest, with his son and grandson, in an enclosure close to the chancel door.

Thomas Clarkson was an early friend and influence on the subsequent career of a man distinguished as the foremost mathematician and man of science of his

time, Sir George Biddell Airy, K.C.B., Astronomer Royal at Greenwich Observatory for nearly 50 years, who rests with six members of his family in the enclosure next that of his lifelong friend. Bas-reliefs of both are placed in the church. Many headstones outside testify to the Biddells, an old farming family, several of whom became noteworthy characters in the county of Suffolk.

Upon entering, the visitor feels at once the bright lightness of the interior and can enjoy the main, indeed the only architectural feature of note, the chancel arch, so beautiful in the utter simplicity of its perfect proportion. In a pious but fussy Victorian age the present writer remembers that arch surrounded from capitol to capitol by a curved board covered with crimson flannel, bearing in white paper letters the admonition "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness"! Happily Time has taken vengeance on vandalism.

Advancing up to the chancel we come to our crowning possession, the brass representing the figure of the builder of the tower, Sir George Felbrigge, Esquire-at-Arms to Edward III, owner of Playford and large estates in Norfolk still bearing his name. This brass, one of the most famous in the country, and known to all archeological experts for the beauty and exactness of the rendering of the complicated details of the armour of that early period, was originally placed on the floor of the nave over his grave, but an incumbent of the parish at a period when country livings, so-called, provided but a mere pittance, was detected picking away the Latin inscription and canopy surrounding the figure and selling it as scrap metal at four-pence per pound. Sir George Airy was instrumental in obtaining permission to remove the brass figure with the remains of the canopy and inscription, and place it in its present position, firmly cemented into the wall, where picking and stealing is more difficult and the brass is more easily available for inspection. Other memorial stones are to be seen in the floor of the chancel, commemorating the Sampson family, to whom the Playford properties descended by marriage with Sir George Felbrigge's daughter, and the Feltons by intermarriage with the Sampsons, which

are worthy of notice by those interested in work of the period.

Until the early part of the 1800's a wooden gallery ran across the west end of the church to accommodate the "singers" and a village musician who played a kit. This band of talent called every Sunday at Sir George Airy's house in the lane close by the church, for loan of a metal tea-tray "to get the key-note", which unusual form of pitch-pipe was duly returned to the kitchen dresser after service! East Anglia is not generally considered as the most musical part of England. Later, as civilisation proceeded, a portable "hurdy-gurdy" which played six hymn tunes, was introduced with but limited success, as the mechanism jammed and the machine could not be silenced but, madly repeating the Old 100th, was removed to the churchyard to play itself out! In course of

time the present organ was installed and the services proceed with decency.

To bring this retrospect up to the present time, our latest acquisition is the very tasteful small oak reredos behind the altar, the gift of Captain C. E. Boyle, Inn, of the United States Army, a charming gesture from one whose forbears claim early connection with Playford.

When all is said, the greatest reward to the visitor may be the mellow brightness of this little, quiet, very old place of worship, bringing nearer the realisation of that "peace that passeth all understanding".

A. AIRY

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