

ELSTOW

The present church is a fragment of the nave of the church belonging to Benedictine nunnery founded by Judith, the niece of William the Conqueror, in about 1075. The first three bays from the east are Norman, and the two western ones are of c.1220 in the Early English style.¹ After the suppression of the foundation in 1539 the remaining parts were adapted for parish use, the east end and the west window being completed in 1580. The monastic remains include the so-called Chapter House, a vaulted chamber at the south west of the church now used as a vestry. The detached tower or belfry to the north of the church is said to be of C15th date.²

Apart from a certificate of the completion of repairs in 1733,³ there is little evidence regarding alterations carried out to the church before the early C19th. Bonney indicates that extensive repairs were undertaken between 1823 and 1828. No further information about this work is available, but contemporary illustrations (Plate 56) suggest that it included the removal of the timber-framed north porch⁴ and alterations to the west end of the south aisle.⁵ There was formerly a vestry on the north side of the church abutting the second bay of the north aisle. It was demolished in about 1860, and pre-restoration photographs



Plate 56. Elstow: NE view of the church and detached belfry, showing the timber-framed porch, the vestry, and the blocked windows in the clerestory and east wall. By 1837 the porch had gone and the vestry roof had been altered.
(Watercolour: Thomas Fisher c.1815)

show its roof-line on the masonry blocking the window where it had been situated.⁶

The church was thoroughly restored between 1880 and 1882 by Thomas Jobson Jackson,⁷ the Bedford architect, mainly at the expense of the Whitbread family of Southill.⁸ The south aisle was virtually rebuilt and greatly altered, parts of the nave and clerestory were taken down and rebuilt, and the church was completely re-roofed and reseated. A stair turret was erected at the west end of the south aisle. The scale of the work is illustrated in a series of contemporary watercolours by the architect (Plate 58).⁹ There is also a group photograph of the workmen, of whose reverence and conduct a visitor during the course of the restoration was critical.¹⁰ The restoration was completed with work on the tower in 1888 which included increasing the height of the spirelet.¹¹

Between 1882 and the end of the C19th several stained glass windows were introduced including the Bunyan windows (by T.W.Camm of Smithwick 1883 and 1885) in the side windows of the east wall and the three central windows (by Mayer & Co of Munich 1887).¹²

1. Extract from glebe terrier, 24 June 1822

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Church yard. The Church-yard, measuring from East to West on the side adjoining the Green about two hundred and forty six feet, and from North to South (measuring from the Church door to the opposite boundary wall) about one hundred and eighty two feet, is claimed by William Henry Whitbread of Southill Esquire as his freehold property, upon what grounds it is not said.¹³ The boundary Walls and Fences of the Church-yard on the North and West are kept in repair by the parish but the wall and fences on the Eastern side are being claimed as the Patron's. It is presumed that they are by him to be kept in repair. This however is not certain.

Church. Inprimis, the Parish Church, a very ancient Building, containing in length, (with the Chancel) ninety three feet, and in breadth, forty nine feet. The Steeple is a detached building on the North side of the Church, by the West end, and measures within the walls fifteen feet by twelve feet, and in height sixty six feet.

Furniture and ornaments of the Church. Within the Church and belonging to it, are, one communion table, one linen cloth for the same, one napkin, one silver cup with a cover, weighing together about nine ounces and has engraven on it "Elvestow Com. Bedd. 1639", one silver paten, weighing about nine ounces, having a coat of arms engraven on it.¹⁴ One oak chest, one iron chest for the safe keeping of the Parish Registers, one oak table (in the Vestry), one Pulpit and reading desk,¹⁵ one pulpit cushion covered with crimson cloth, one Bible of the last translation, two large common prayer books, one book of Offices. The King's Arms,¹⁶ The Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the ten commandments, one Pall very old and very little fit for use, and one surplice.

Bells. In the steeple are a Clock and five Bells with their frames, the first or least bell is two feet three inches in diameter and has this inscription on it, "Christopher Graie made me 1655", the second bell measures two feet five inches and a half in diameter bearing date "1602", the third measures two feet seven inches in diameter with this inscription "God save our King 1631", the fourth is two feet eleven inches in diameter, the fifth is three feet two inches in diameter with this inscription "Be it known unto all that doth me see, that Newcombe of Leicester made me 1604".

Parish Registers. Item, belonging to the said Parish, are, first, one parchment register book, containing entries of baptisms, marriages and burials in the Parish of Elstow. The entry of baptisms begins in the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and forty two and ends in the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy seven. The entry of marriages begins in the year one thousand six hundred and forty one and ends in the year one thousand seven hundred and fifty four. The entry of burials begins in the year one thousand six hundred and forty one and ends in the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy seven. Item, one other Parchment register book containing entries of baptisms and burials in the said Parish from the year one thousand seven hundred and seventy eight to the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twelve. Item, one other register book (paper) containing entries of marriages in the said parish of Elstow from the year one thousand seven hundred and fifty four to the end of the year one thousand eight hundred and twelve. Item, three other register books of baptisms, marriages, and burials in the said parish provided according to Act of Parliament, the entries of which said register books respectively begin in the year one thousand eight hundred and thirteen and are continued to the present time.

Seats in the Church. The pews and seats in the said parish church have from time immemorial been repaired at the public expence of the parish: but whether the seats in the chancel are kept up by the Patron or the Parishioners does not appear.

Churchwardens. The Churchwardens are chosen yearly in Easter week at a Vestry meeting, one of whom is chosen by the Minister, and the other by the Parishioners.

Parish dues to the Minister. There are no tithes whatever belonging to the Minister of this parish, no House, nor trace of House, nor any land in lieu of tithes, nor any other dues further than those hereinafter mentioned [fees payable to Minister listed]. Easter offerings have not of late years been paid to the Minister, though it has been decreed in some cases that Easter offerings are due of common right, and not by custom only.

Parish Clerk. The Parish Clerk is always appointed by the Minister the certificate of which is entered in the Register books of the parish.¹⁷ The salary allowed by the Parish is two Guineas annually. The accustomed fees to the Clerk are as follow, for every churching of women sixpence, for every wedding by banns two shillings and sixpence, for every wedding by Licence five

shillings, for every burial of a person from another parish five shillings, for every burial of a person belonging to the Parish three shillings which includes digging the grave and ringing the knell, for every burial within the walls of the Church ten shillings, for setting up a gravestone in the Church-yard one shilling. There is also due to the Parish Clerk at Easter yearly for every family keeping a separate fire fourpence.

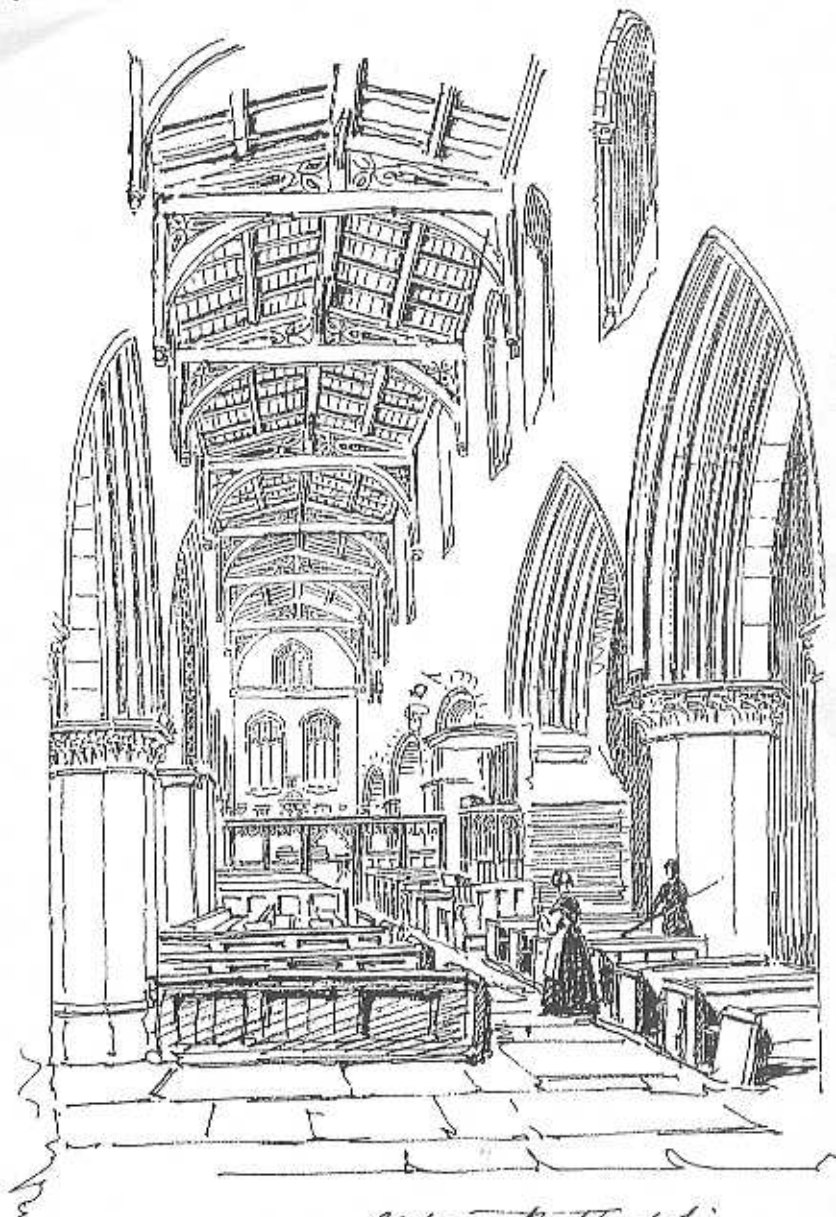
2. *Archdeacon Bonney's historical notices of churches, c.1820-1840*
ELSTOW.

This Church consists of the Nave and Aisles of the Ancient Priory Church, Great part of which is coeval with the Countess Judith's foundation, in the reign of the Conqueror. The Piers are some cylindrical, some octagonal; & support, for the greater part, plain semicircular Arches. Those towards the West are Early English & have mouldings. The North Door is Norman, the West early English. The Font is octagonal with panels & of the perpendicular Style. The Windows of the Aisles are insertions with perpendicular tracery. The Clerestory retains the Semicircular character with alterations in the Tracery. The Tower stands separate from the Church on the North West, & is perpendicular & embattled. Over the North Door rudely Sculptured is Christ with the Gospel in his left hand & his right in the attitude of benediction. St. Peter with his Keys is on the right also in the attitude of benediction & St. Paul (probably) on his left.¹⁸ There is a rich foliated Corbel supported by the bust of an aged Male at the East End and a perpendicular Chancel Screen.¹⁹ Several Brasses are upon the floor. The West Door has elegant early English Mouldings & Piers, and attached to the South West corner of the South Aisle is an ancient groined passage leading formerly from the Church into the Priory;²⁰ which after the Reformation became a Mansion. The Church Yard is spacious and opens into a large close, in which stands the Ancient Market-house.

3. *Archdeacon Bonney's visitation notebook, 1823-1839*

ELSTOW. This Church consists of a Nave, North and South Aisle. The Chancel is of the same height and width of the Nave, and the Aisles are continued on each side of it. A Tower stands on the north of the North Aisle towards the West.

At the Visitation of 1823 the following order was given: that the Tower be thoroughly repaired and restored; the North and West entrances be repaired and restored according to the Ancient Architecture; the Walls be repaired throughout; the muntions, Cornices and Tracery of the Windows be restored; the Battlements be restored; all these to be done either with stone or Parker's Cement, as there is occasion. The Time for doing the above – as follows: the Tower before Easter 1825; the North Door and Aisle before Easter 1824; the South Aisle before Easter 1826; the West Door and End before Easter 1827; East End and Nave before Easter 1828.²¹



*Elstow, Bedfordshire.
J.S. May & Helen.*

Plate 57. Elstow: Interior looking east showing the old benches in the nave, the screen, and the pulpit and tester in their pre-restoration positions.
(Line drawing: Bradford Rudge c.1835)

At the Visitation of 1826. The North side, East End, and the East and North sides of the Tower were compleated. An order was then given to the Church Wardens to make progress in fulfilling the remainder of the Order.

At the Visitation of 1833 the following Order was given: that the Bible be newly covered with Leather but not new bound; the Leaves be smoothed; the Pulpit be oak grained; the Communion Rail be oak grained; a new Cushion be purchased for the Pulpit. Advice was given to the Parishioners as to the repewing of their Church. The Order concerning the repairs of Pews was therefore postponed till a return be made to the Archdeacon of the determination of the Vestry.

At the visitation 1836 ordered the plaster to be repaired in S. Aisle; also the Open Seats to be taken up and refitted and more commodiously arranged; a Pew at the West End to be brought forward and placed opposite the Pew on the North side.

At the Visitation 1839 Ordered the Churchwardens to repair the Wall under the N. West Window of the North Aisle; the Seats to be repaired and regularly arranged and for this purpose to submit a plan to me before Michaelmas next; to procure a new Table Cloth.

4. Article on the Church by W.A. (no.54), NM 10 April 1847

ELSTOW, Virgin Mary and St. Helen. In the neighbourhood of Elstow Church are to be seen ruins indicating the existence, at some time, of a building of very considerable extent and importance. A stranger, not by enquiry on the spot, but by research amongst books, will learn that these crumbling masses mark the spot where once stood an abbey for Benedictine Nuns, dedicated in honour of the Holy Trinity, St Mary and St. Helen, founded by Judith, Countess of Huntingdon.

'Here man more purely lives, less oft doth fall,
More promptly rises, walks with nicer heed,
More safely rests, dies happier, is freed
Earlier from cleansing fires, and gains withal
A brighter crown.'

Whatever of truth there may be in the above lines, we can very well imagine to apply with double force to females at a time when all ladies of any pretensions to wealth or beauty were sold, stolen, or made a present of to the suitor who, from his power, would be the alliance most in accordance with the ambitious plans of the lady's relatives, she herself never being consulted in any way. Again, the manners of the age were exceedingly gross and repulsive to female delicacy, and what we understand by domestic life, utterly unknown.

Though we are far from desiring the restoration of monasteries, we condemn the brutal ignorance which destroyed so many beautiful buildings; we shudder at the impiety which seized property devoted to the cause of religion, and secularised it. Moreover, we think that in these noble piles might have been

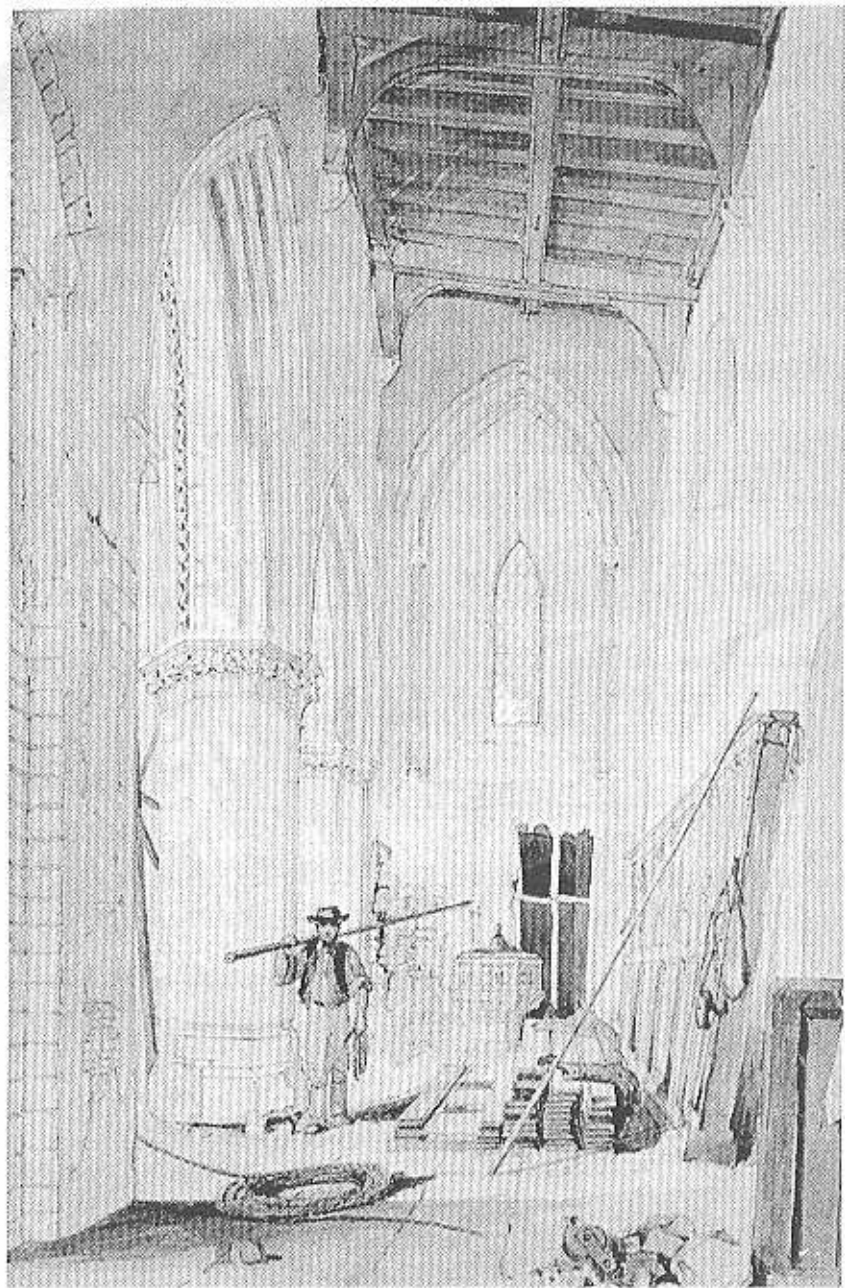


Plate 58. Elstow: One of a series of watercolours done by the architect during the restoration in 1881-2. This view inside the north aisle shows the font and cover with the old chancel screen leaning against the north wall.

(Watercolour: Thomas Johnson Jackson c.1881)

maintained, with the revenues attached to them what we want so much in this age — 'Holy orders of men and women freed from the sin and snare of perpetual vows.'*

Still, as we lingered among the ruins, we felt that the ground we trod, the air we breathed, were hallowed with the steps of many holy feet walking barefoot in penance for such sins as we should never have noticed in ourselves, with the chants of repentance and thanksgiving. And, as on our departure the last of these relics so fertile in romantic association faded from our view, we thought with the poet —

'Once were ye holy, ye are holy still,
Your spirit freely let me drink and live,'

The abbey church, now used as the parish church, has not escaped the hands which destroyed the buildings already described; and those into whose hands the care of it has descended have lamentably neglected their duty. It exhibits all the faults of Churchwardenism. The chancel is coloured white and yellow; a wretched altar-table, with a shabby covering of green baize; on the railings were suspended a pall and a dirty bag.

In the south aisle, close to the altar-table, a row of leather buckets was arranged.²² The damp state of the church would appear utterly to preclude any chance of their ever being required. The injuries this church has suffered externally are too numerous to be particularly dwelt upon. Part of the wooden screen remains; on one side it is painted green, on the other yellow. A good pulpit remains, but surmounted by a vile sounding board.²³ The western door exhibits a most discreditable appearance; it would disgrace a barn. The paving is in a very dilapidated state; common bricks, with some broken bits of stone. A corner of the church has been lately converted into a vestry; it resembles a bad modern sarcophagus. The font is so placed that an entire view of it cannot be obtained. The lead, however, remains. Near it are the remains of an ancient stone coffin, rifled by some sacrilegious hand, and was used, when we saw it, as a receptacle for a dirty candlestick and snuffers. The columns were coloured half white and yellow. A more miserable appearance than the whole exhibited we have rarely witnessed. Nearly adjoining the church, amid the desolation surrounding it, is a very beautiful circular room, in tolerable preservation.²⁴ It is used as a Sunday school; better here than in the chancel.

The stump of the churchyard cross may be seen. We should be delighted to see it restored; and as we shall have the bugbear of Popery dinned in our ears for expressing such a wish, we will say at once that the Reformed Church has sanctioned the cross as a desirable symbol, by its presence in those of our ancient churches, where it has escaped destruction in times of unbridled fanaticism, by its introduction in all those recently erected, and by the fact that the only cathedral we have built since the Reformation is of a cruciform plan, and surmounted by a cross which, when gilded by the rays of the sun, is the first object which greets the stranger as he gazes at a distance on the vast metropolis.

and we think it would be very difficult to say why a cross should be orthodox in Leighton market and Popish in Elstow churchyard; and with regard to the reason for its restoration, we would say that the almost only visible indication that we have ever met with that the Christian burying-ground was not a Pagan cemetery has consisted in the presence of sheep and cattle; a piece of heartless disrespect which the deep solemnity of the rites which the heathen paid to their dead, according to the light which they possessed, forbids us to suppose they would ever be guilty of; and we think the distinction might better be marked by a cross than by grazing animals.

April 5, 1847

W.A.

* Dr. Arnold, *Preface to Sermons*.

5. *Sir Stephen Glyme's Church notes, n.d. [before 1840] (Vol. I, pp. 21-24)*

ELSTOW. This noble Church formerly belonged to the Priory [and] is in a tolerably perfect state. It is very lofty & consists of a nave & Chancel with side aisles, partly of Norman work, & part Early English, but both of very excellent character. There is a handsome Rectilinear Tower standing entirely detached from the Church on the North West side, & resembles in character those of the neighbourhood, with double belfry windows, battlement, & octagon turret at the corner.

The other buildings belonging to the Priory were as usual situated on the South side, & some portions still remain. The exterior of the South side has been much mutilated. On the North side the windows are mostly, if not all, Rectilinear insertions. The Aisles are embattled, but not the Clerestory.

The North door is a remarkably fine Norman one, with deep mouldings with chevron ornament, & shafts. Above it is a niche of the same character, with the knob ornament in the mouldings, & within it a good piece of sculpture of the period, representing Christ between Peter & John.¹⁶ The Clerestory windows in the Western portion are Early English, in the Eastern Norman. The Interior is very lofty & grand. The aisles are coextensive with the body & chancel. The nave has 3 arches on each side, of which the two Western are pointed with fine deep mouldings, some of which have the toothed ornament. The piers of these arches are octagonal, very massive & with foliated capitals. The remaining 3 arches, (one in the nave & 2 in the Chancel) are Norman, rude & plain, with piers flat faced & of square form. The Early English Clerestory windows have mouldings & shafts, but the Norman ones are quite plain. The West door has the arch opening to the interior of contracted form but with shafts clearly Early English. There is a wood screen separating the nave from the Chancel,¹⁷ & the pulpit has good wood carving.¹⁸ The Font is Rectilinear & handsome, of octagonal form, each side enriched with a quatrefoil containing a rose. The East wall of the Church has two equal sized Curvilinear windows, of 3 lights, & in the stage above them another smaller one of the same character now stopped up.¹⁹ Between the two windows is a very beautiful pedestal enriched with

elaborate foliage & supported by 2 figures bearing a shield. There is also another very elegant pedestal under the northern window of the two. In the South Aisle is a niche with piscina. On the North side of the Chancel is a vestry of Rectilinear date, with a handsome label'd doorway.

There are in the Chancel two very fine brasses, both with female figures. Of one the inscription is much mutilated & runs thus "Margeria bis viduata filia Radulfi ... de turre Ricardi, hic jacet in fossa data ... ut alta petat loca florida pace perenni. Spiritus ista videns ... [?]pirlalem Amen. Obiit autem anno domini ... in vigil Sancti Michaelis Archangl..."

The second commemorates the last Abbess of Elstow. "Orate pro anima domine Elizabeth Hervey quondam Abbatisse monasterii de Elvestow que obiit die mensis ... anno domini millesimo quingentesimo ... cujus anime et omnium fidelium defunctorum ..." The date has obviously never been inserted.

At the West end of the South Aisle is a stone coffin. The whole of the arches & pillars in this Church are covered with whitewash of the thickest & coarsest description, whereby the effect is sadly injured. Indeed the whole Church is neglected & out of repair, the pews old & ruinous, in fact most of the seats are open, but there is no good wood carving.

The burial ground as usual in conventual Churches is entirely on the North side.

Notes 1. The arcades in the north aisle are nicely illustrated in a sketch made by the Rev.D.T.Powell in 1811 (BL Add.Ms. 17456 f.78); 2. *VCH* I pp.353-8 (Abbey) and III pp.282-3 (church), Pevsner pp.83-7; 3. ABE 3/107; 4. This is shown by Fisher c.1820 (slide 713 - Plate 56) but not by Buckler in 1835 (BL Add.Ms. 36356 f.40). It is illustrated in early C19th engravings (X 254/88/110b - incorrectly captioned south porch, and slide 6662); 5. An engraving of 1803 by Thomas Hearne (X 67935/16) shows a tiled roof rising above the west end of the south aisle. This is also shown in a crude representation of the church in *GM* Aug.1826 p.105 (X 171/230), but Buckler's view of August 1837 shows (BL Add.Ms. 36356 f.39) a continuous lean-to roof covering the whole aisle from east to west; 6. e.g. photograph of c.1865 (Z 50/43/67); 7. The work is wrongly attributed by Pevsner to Sir Thomas Graham Jackson; 8. Correspondence in the Whitbread family papers (W 3985-6), and newspaper report of the reopening of the church in *BM* 20 May 1882; 9. Slides 1261 (interior - Plate 58), 1118 and 1335-6 (exterior); 10. Photograph 1881 (P 128/28/2). Letter from S.P.E.S. of Stevenage originally published in *Church Times* referring to one of the workmen seen "calmly smoking his pipe in the sacred edifice" reprinted by F.A.Blaydes in *BNQ* Vol.I (1886) pp.19-20; 11. Date 1888 on parapet; 12. The Bunyan windows (south) described in *BT* 2 June 1883, and (north) in *BT* 26 Sept.1885. The two Wigram memorial windows are mentioned in *BM* 19 Feb.1887, and the Jubilee window (top centre) in *BT* 14 Jan.1888; 13. The Whitbread family acquired the Hillersdon estate at Elstow in 1792; 14. The plate listed here was replaced by a new communion service "of Flagon Chalice & Plate ... the bequest of Miss Sarah Farrer Hillersdon ... A.D. 1840" (ABE 5); 15. The mediaeval pulpit stood on the south side of the nave until 1880, when it was relegated to the back of the church as a relic. It was transferred to the Moot Hall by faculty in 1969. See "The Elstow Pulpit" by Keith Robinson in *B.Mag.* Vol.13 no.98 (Autumn 1971) pp.51-3; 16. The arms, dated 1775, are over the west door (see Pardoe); 17. The first register (P 128/1/1) contains entries concerning several parish clerks from 1589-1777. For William Cirket, clerk 1825-1834, see *BHRS* Vol.72 pp.85-94; 18. Illustrated by Fisher in 1820 (X 254/88/111); 19. The screen separated the nave from the chancel. It was removed in 1880 and not replaced, but it is shown in a temporary position in the middle of the last century in a sketch by the Rev.D.T.Powell.

This refers to the so-called Chapter house; 21. This work is not documented as no churchwardens' accounts or Vestry minutes for the period have survived; 22. This doubtless refers to the leather fire buckets bearing the initials "D.F.H." and "Elvestow 1782" later noted as being in the tower in Wigram's *Chronicles of the Abbey at Elstow* (1885) p.204; 23. This window, clearly shown as blocked in several early views, was opened up at the restoration and filled with stained glass to commemorate Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887.