

Swymbridge.

Parish Church of St. James.

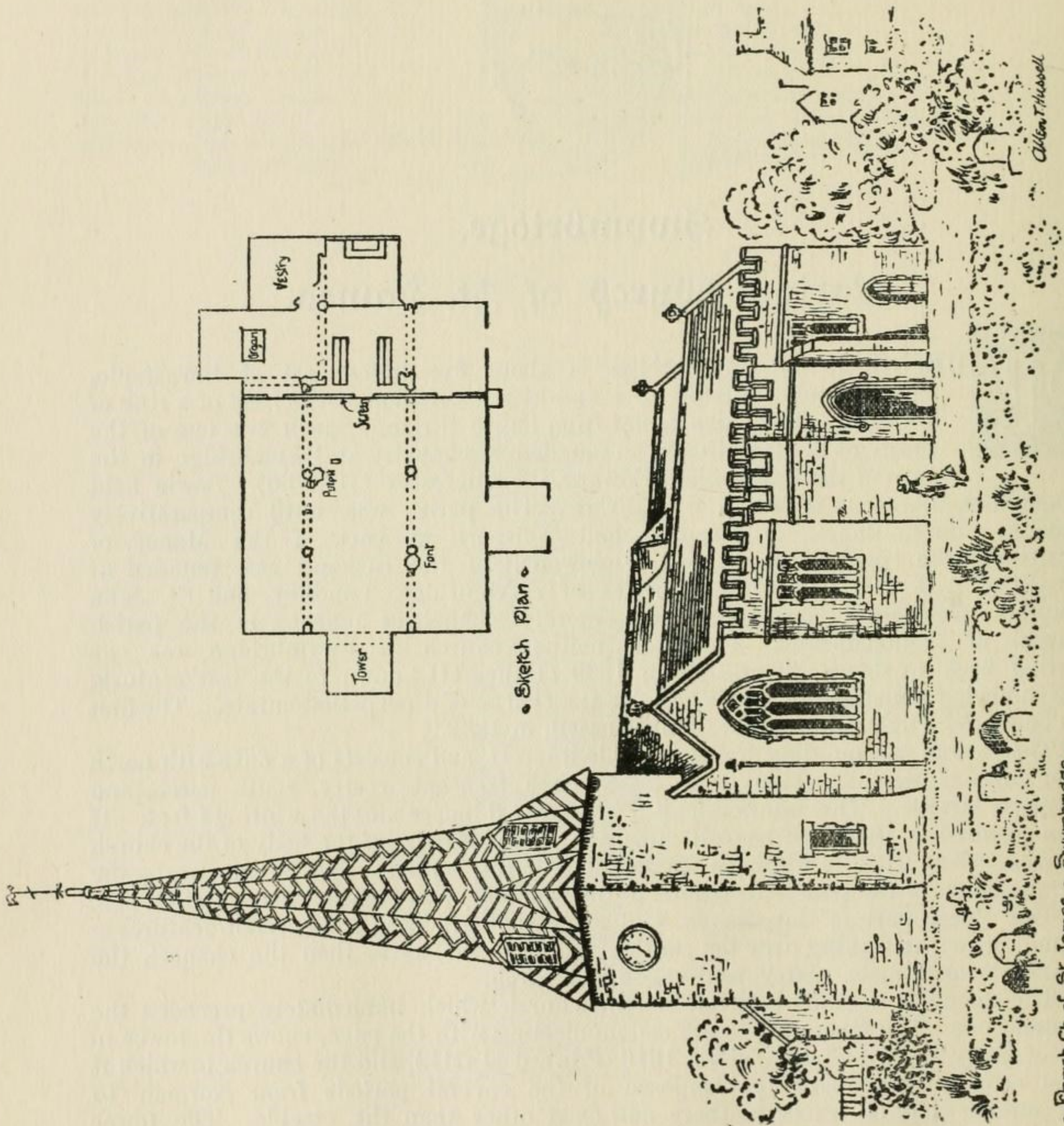


THE village of Swymbridge is about five miles east of Barnstaple, picturesquely situated in a cup-like depression at the base of a ring of low hills. The name comes from Sawin Birige. Sawin was one of the clergy of Southmolton, who founded a chapelry at Swymbridge in the days of the Saxon king, Edward the Confessor (1041-66). Sawin held lands here, the name of which was Birige. The parish was, until comparatively modern times, linked to Landkey and Newport as part of the Manor of Bishopstawton (part of the original endowment of the Bishop's See founded at Crediton A.D. 909); and the churches of Swymbridge, Landkey, and St. John Baptist, Newport (Barnstaple) were merely chapelries annexed to the parish church of Bishopstawton. Thus the mother church at Swymbridge was one dating back to Saxon times. From 1269 (Henry III.) down to the last century, Swymbridge remained a chapelry, under the charge of a perpetual curate. The first to be styled Vicar was the Rev. John Russell, in 1832.

The church is a building of considerable interest, and consists of a nave with north and south aisles, chancel and south aisle, north transept, vestry, south porch, and western steeple. The interior length is 71 feet 3 inches and the width 44 feet. It was restored in 1880, and has 250 sittings. The shortness of the body of the church in comparison with its width, is accentuated by the screen being so far west—the arrangement of the plan with regard to the sanctuary and transept necessitating this.

The oldest part is the steeple, and after that—judging from certain features—would come the walling over the south arcading of the nave, then the chancel, the transept, north aisle, vestry, south aisle and porch.

The steeple is the only part left of the church which immediately preceded the present one. The form of the arch communicating with the nave, shows the tower to be of Early Decorated date, about 1310 (Edward II.-III.), and the church to which it was attached was possibly composed of the several periods from Norman to Decorated—but no traces of these now exist other than the steeple. The tower portion is of one stage only, very plain, the only noticeable features being the large interior arch and a small south window. It is possible that in the tower there was originally either a western entrance to the church or a window. It carries a lead-covered broach spire—loftier than the Braunton spire, but not so ornate and striking as that of Barnstaple. The rolls are very regularly spaced, and the spire was re-leaded a few years ago, as the lead had decayed considerably, and, at the same



St. James's Church, Swymbridge.
 from the S.W. April 1908

Allen Russell

time, the oak framing was repaired and strengthened. The spire contains a peal of six bells, and the tower has a clock with dial showing on the western face. The height of the steeple is about 90 feet.

In the Perpendicular or 15th century period, when so many of the Devon churches were rebuilt, Swymbridge Church was evidently taken in hand, the work carried out then being probably only the nave, chancel and a north aisle. In the Late Perpendicular period, about 1480 (Edward IV.), would probably have followed the construction of the transept. This, known as the Chapel of St. Bridget, and now used as the organ chamber and choir vestry, is said to owe its origin to a member of the Mules family, formerly seated at Ernesborough (now corrupted into Irishborough). It contains an old piscina of a plain description in the east wall.

After the building of the chapel, the rebuilding and widening of the north aisle would have followed. As a proof of this, there is an old canopied niche or shrine in the west side of the pier, behind the chancel screen, almost blocked up by the pier of the aisle arcading, and about two feet of plain masonry shows on the chancel pier south of the niche. This indicates that the arcading of the north aisle was originally further south, joining the chancel pier where the plain surface now is; and at that time the niche would have been exposed, and in full view of the worshippers in the aisle, as it then was. When, as is assumed, the aisle was rebuilt, the nave was widened by rebuilding the arcading further north: in consequence of which, the niche coming in the way, was uncerimoniously blocked up to make room for the eastern pier of the arcading; and, at the same time, the north wall was extended outwards, and the arch between the east pier and the west wall of the transept was built, reducing this west wall to only eight feet in length. The destruction of the niche and of the figure contained in it, and the discontinuance of the transept as a chapel, would place this alteration in post-Reformation times, about 1600-50; and the vestry, with its south-west corner cut back at an angle (forming a "squint" to give worshippers in the transept a view of the altar) the arches adjacent, and also the large arch forming a recess in the north wall of the chancel, were all probably carried out at the time of the work to the north aisle. Fig. 1 shows two of the caps of the aisle piers, which are of Perpendicular conventional designs.

The south aisle, judging from the detail of the piers, was opened out soon after the north aisle was first built—possibly about the same time as the transept: but as the exterior of the walling of the south aisle is of an entirely different description to that of the rest of the church, it is evident that the walls of this aisle have been rebuilt—and that within comparatively modern times. They are faced with local sandstone, in large squared "ashlar" blocks, and are finished with an embattled parapet, the style being in debased Tudor, and the work (including the porch) possibly of eighteenth century date.

The roofs throughout the church are exceptionally good. They have been

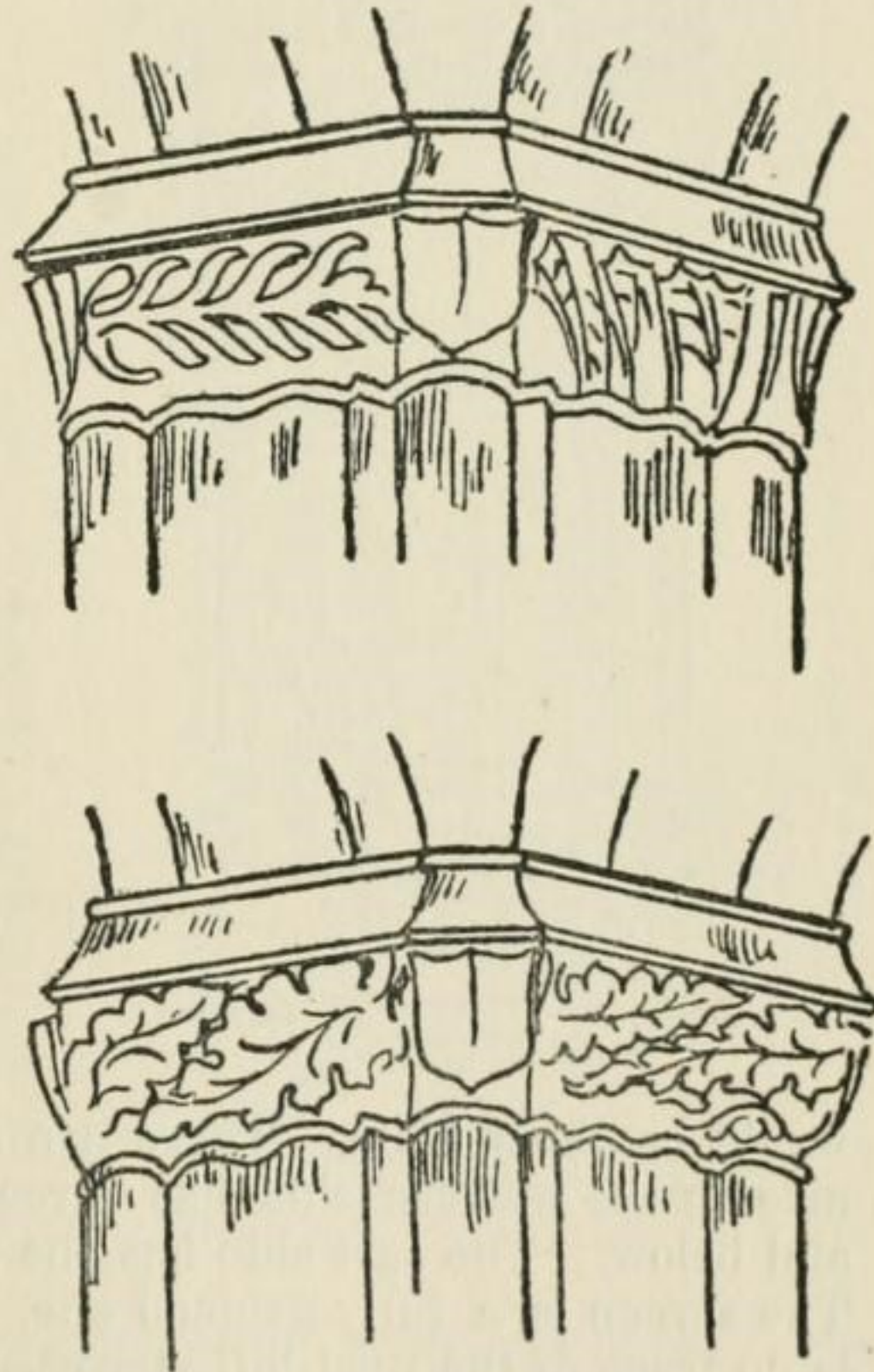
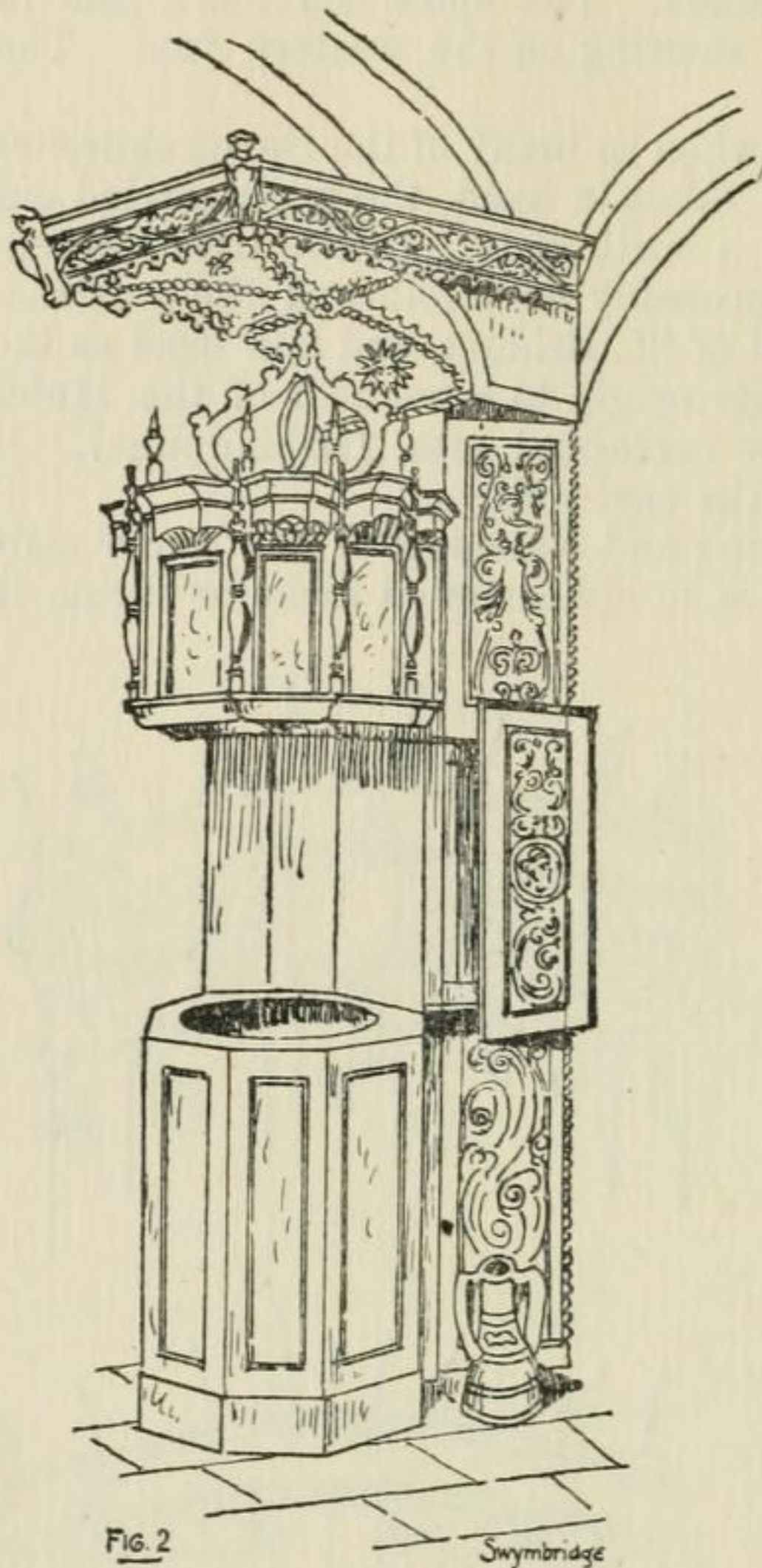


FIG. 1

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would be about 1500. There are seven complete bays and six half bays. The cornice on the western side has three rows of vignette enrichment, with cresting above and below. The east side has one row of vignette, the cresting above being modern. The screen is a fully groined one, the ribs rising from carved angel figures. There is no trace of the rood-loft staircase, but possibly it went up in the south wall, where the large buttress stands. Where the screen crosses, or comes in front of the piers of the north and south aisle arcading, rectangular openings occur above the panelling (see rough sketch, fig. 4), having panelled and carved coved hoods springing from the top of the openings, and finishing under the main cornice. These two unusual openings were apparently "squints," of sufficient size (clear of the masonry piers at the back) for the clergy to have been seen when turning to the congregation during parts of the service; and it is improbable that they were intended for retables to side altars, as in that case the open rectangular panels would have been filled in. The interruption caused in the continuity of the bays of the screen by these openings is detrimental to its appearance as a whole, producing a loss of symmetry and breadth. In the little Welsh church of Partrishow (or Patricis), up in the Black Mountains of Brecknock, there is a fine screen which has similar openings to those in Swymbridge screen.

The oak canopied font (fig. 2) is peculiar, and in quite a mixture of styles. The font is of lead, encased in plain panelling down to the floor, above which are hinged

restored in some parts, and are of cradle form, except that of the north transept. This is a roof of a description somewhat unusual in North Devon churches. It is a flat, panelled roof, with moulded main and diagonal ribs, having boldly carved and decorated bosses—some with coats of arms of the D'Abernon, Denys, Cary, Mules, and Orchard families. The nave roof is open-timbered as far as the arches next to the chancel, and has carved ribs, forming small panels, with carved bosses. The wall plates are also elaborately carved with vine leaves and bunches of grapes, of conventional design. This roof has boarded panels for a distance of one bay back from the chancel; the ribs having margins of carved cresting, which also cross the panels diagonally. The nave aisles have similar roofs, but of later date. The oldest roof is probably that of the chancel—open-timbered, quite plain, without ribs or carving.

The rood screen, which has been considerably restored, is 44 feet in length, stretching across the full width of nave and aisles, and is 10 feet 3 inches high. It has not the grandeur of the splendid 15th century rood screen of Hartland Church, nor has it the wonderful delicacy of touch displayed in the carving of that earlier screen. Its chief characteristic is the remarkable amount of carving on the western side—no plain surface having been left except the sill. A slight touch of Renaissance design in the carving indicates that the date of the screen

doors forming a cupboard; and these are surmounted with an elaborate cover, in a combination of Queen Anne and Gothic styles. The canopy contains some remains of Gothic cresting and cable moulded ribs. The side panels, running up from the floor to the canopy, and the doors, are excellently carved in very refined Italian Renaissance designs.

The stone pulpit (fig. 3) is perhaps the best thing in the church, from the point of view of effectiveness of design and purity of style. Its detail shows it to be of Early Tudor date, about 1490 (Henry VII.), and appears to have been very little restored. Quite distinct traces of the old colouring and gilding can be seen. Each side has a canopied and crocketed niche, in each of which are figures of saints; the niches having floral margins, finished between with slender shafts rising from carved angel figures, acting as corbels. The pulpit stands on a slender stem, the base of which is cleverly brought out to the square at the floor level. The carving is very free and bold in execution, and very effective. The reredos is of alabaster and marble—a beautiful and elaborate specimen of modern work, in Gothic style. The seating throughout is also modern, in oak, with traceried ends, some of which have old work inserted.

There are several old monuments on the walls.

One on the south wall of the chancel aisle is to Tristram, son of Tristram Chichester, of Swym-

bridge, who died in 1654, at the age of 30. Two others are to John and Lewis Rosier, attorneys of the Courts of Common Bench and Common Pleas. The former died in 1658, and the latter in 1676. A memorial window in the east end of the south aisle is to "John Russell, 48 years vicar, buried on Ascension Day, 1883, aged 87." This was the famous hunting vicar, "Parson Jack Russell," who held the living at Swymbridge, kept his own pack of hounds, and was an intimate friend of our King, H.M. Edward VII. He was, as is before stated, the first Vicar of Swymbridge, and spent nearly the whole of his clerical career there.

The Parish Registers commence baptisms and burials in 1562; marriages in 1563. From this



FIG. 3

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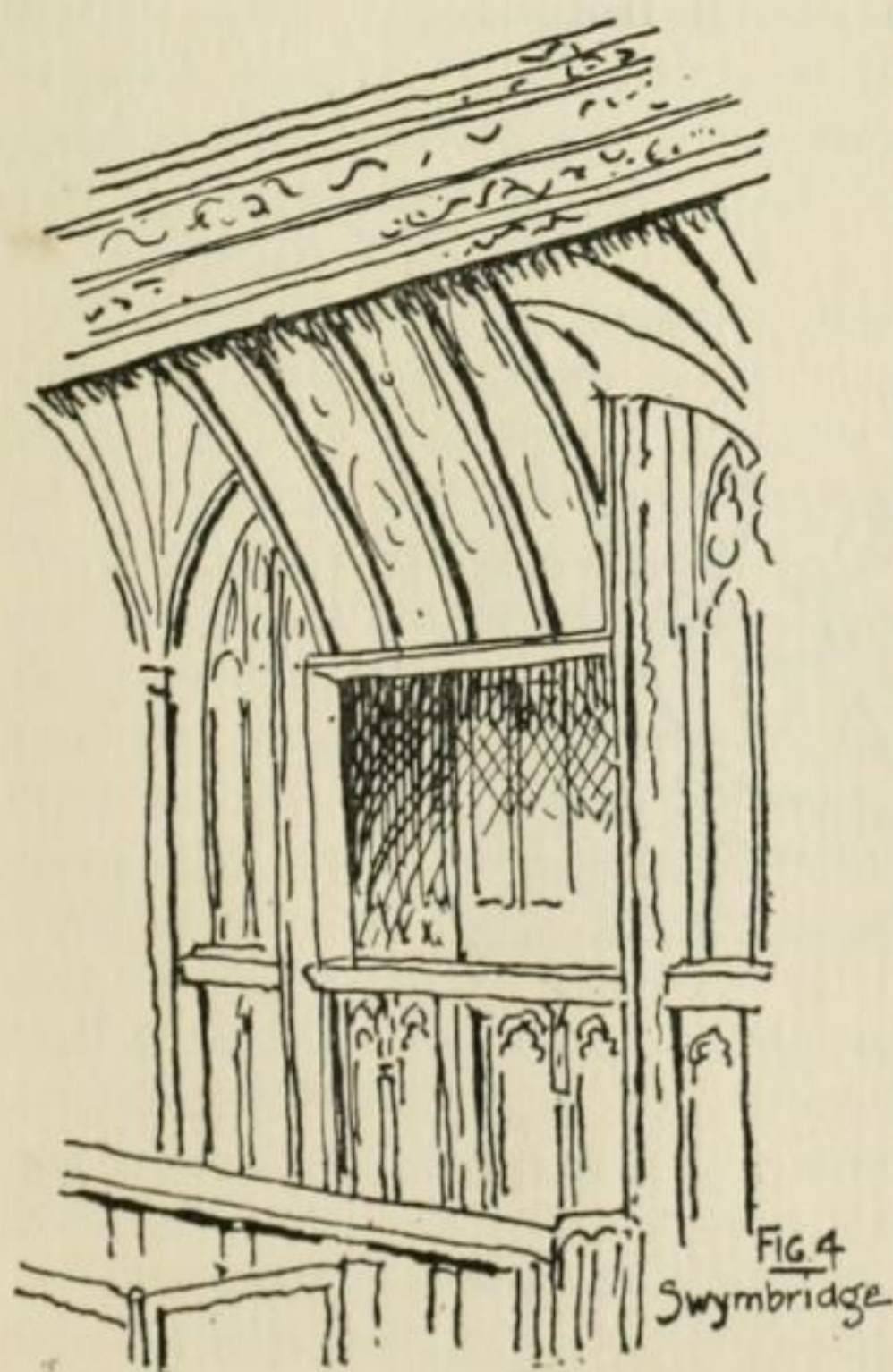


FIG. 4

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date, with the exception of the years 1653-59, they are in a very perfect condition. Amongst the church plate is a very fine chalice of Elizabethan style, dated 1576, the work of T. Matthew, goldsmith, of Exeter, who made many of the North Devon chalices.

The sketch of the church is from the south-west, from which point it looks most uncommon and striking, owing to the plainness of the tower as contrasting with the more ornamental parts of the building.

The following list of Perpetual Curates and Vicars of Swymbridge, from 1578, has been compiled by the Rev. J. Frederick Chanter, of Parracombe. It has not been found possible to obtain a list of the earlier names.

PERPETUAL CURATES.

1578—James Martyn, register, Sir James Martyn and Anne, married 15 Feb., 1578.

Richard Can, buried 18 Feb., 1588.

1589—John Brook. He had been curate of Iddesleigh 1584 to 1589, and resigned Swymbridge in 1603 for Lynton, where he died and was buried 16 March, 1613-4. The early part of the oldest register book at Swymbridge, viz., from 1563 to 1600, is a parchment copy made by John Brook from paper originals.

1603 to Feb., 1606—Matthew Hammond.

1606—Edward Dawson.

1627 to 1649—William Leigh, sr. William Leigh, clerk, buried 31 May, 1649; will dated 8 Sep., 1648, proved 25 June, 1650 (96 Pembroke).

1649 to 1669—William Leigh, jr. William Leigh, Clarke, buried 29 May, 1669

1669-1674—Daniel Cory. Mr. Daniel Cory bur. 29th July, 1674.

1674—Arthur Willcocks.

1679—Thomas Yeo. Was at Swymbridge certainly to 1687, probably to 1695.

1695—William Bear.

1736-1779—William Prince. William Prince was the grandson of the Rev. Leonard Prince, of Ilfracombe and Instow, who was uncle of the famous Rev. John Prince, author of the "Worthies of Devon." William Prince, curate of Swymbridge and Landkey, married Elizabeth, dr. of Rev. Christopher Boyce, R. of Sherwell, and was the last male of the Prince family, having had only one child, a daughter Priscilla.

1778-1787—Charles Hill.

1788-1822—Nicholas Dyer.

1822-1832—Hugh Northcote.

VICARS.

1832-1880—John Russell.

1880-1887—Richard Martin.

1887-1899—Jose F. L. Gueritz.

1899—H. Harrison.

