

THE BUILDING OF ARLINGHAM CHURCH TOWER 1372

by Joseph Bettey

The parish of Arlingham is situated in a low-lying area on the bank of the Severn, within the horseshoe bend of the river, and the attractive medieval parish church has many features of historical interest. In the churchyard there are numerous finely-carved headstones, with beautiful lettering and a splendid collection of cherubs, crowns, books, hour-glasses, scythes, skulls and other emblems of mortality. The architecture of the church displays good-quality work of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and the church windows contain some of the oldest stained glass in Gloucestershire, dating from the mid-fourteenth century and depicting various saints in the rich colours characteristic of that period. This expensive glass, which somehow managed to survive the onslaughts of the reformers during the Reformation, provides good evidence of the wealth which the parishioners lavished on their church during the later Middle Ages. Equally remarkable evidence is provided by the contract which survives for building the fine tower in 1372. Such medieval contracts are rare, and the Arlingham contract, which survived among the Berkeley archives, is especially valuable for the evidence which it provides about the building process.

The responsibility for the nave and tower of a medieval church rested with the parishioners, and the Arlingham contract makes it clear that the money for the tower was raised and the building work was organised by the people of the parish themselves, without the help of wealthy benefactors. Throughout the Middle Ages, Arlingham was dominated by two rich institutions, neither of which seems to have contributed to the tower. The 'advowson' or right to appoint the vicar had been one of the possessions of the priory of Leonard Stanley, and later passed to the Benedictine abbey of St. Peter's, Gloucester, and these religious houses took the major part of the tithes of the parish. In addition, much of the land in the parish belonged to the Augustinian abbey of Bristol, and each year the tenants on those lands had to send their rents and dues to Bristol, including a payment for rights of fishing on the Severn. With such a heavy drain on the resources of the parish, it is a remarkable tribute to the piety and enthusiasm of the parishioners that they were able to raise the very large sums needed to provide the building materials and scaffolding, and to pay the masons for the expensive work of building such a fine tower.

The contract of 1372 was drawn up in Latin, and was made between the parishioners of whom nineteen are named, including John of Yate, William of Erlyngham, the Vicar whose name was Roger, 'and all the parishioners of the church of Erlyngham', on the one part, and the mason who undertook to build the tower on the other. The mason was Nicholas Wyshonger from Gloucester, so that the Arlingham tower was not built by any specialist team of travelling craftsmen but by a local builder. Some work had previously been done on the tower which was already several feet high, for Nicholas Wyshonger agreed to 'build, construct and finish the bell-tower of the church of Erlyngham in the same manner as it had been started'. The work was to be finished within three years, and in each year twelve feet in height was to be added to the tower.

A feature of this and other similar contracts is that much was left to the mason's discretion and good workmanship. For example, the Arlingham contract stipulated that the tower was to have four buttresses 'competently built', and battlements 'well and handsomely built', while everything was to be completed 'in a good and workmanlike manner', but no detailed specifications or sizes were stated. The mason was to

provide floors within the tower, held up by corbels, and a spiral stairway with doors at the top and bottom. The tower was to have a fine window on the west side ('una fenestra artificialer constructa'), and four small windows, one on each side at the top stage where the bells would hang. These windows survive and the workmanship can still be admired after six centuries.

The parishioners undertook to provide all the requisite building materials, stone, sand, lime, timber, scaffolding and all other things necessary to the work, except the workmen's tools, and to bring these supplies to a convenient place ('in loco apto') within forty feet of the tower. They also agreed to provide food and lodging for the workmen during their stay, together with hay for one horse, since it was clearly too far for the men to return to Gloucester each evening, ('focalia et hospicia pro mora eorum et fenum pro uno equo suo').

The fine tower at Arlingham, together with the beautiful church, survives as a monument to the piety and foresight of the fourteenth century villagers, to their enthusiasm for enlarging and beautifying their church, and to their willingness to contribute generously so that the church should be as grand and as sumptuous as possible, to the greater glory of God.

A transcript of the contract in the original Latin can be found in L.F. Salzman, *Building in England*, O.U.P., 1967 edition, 445-6.



Arlingham Church