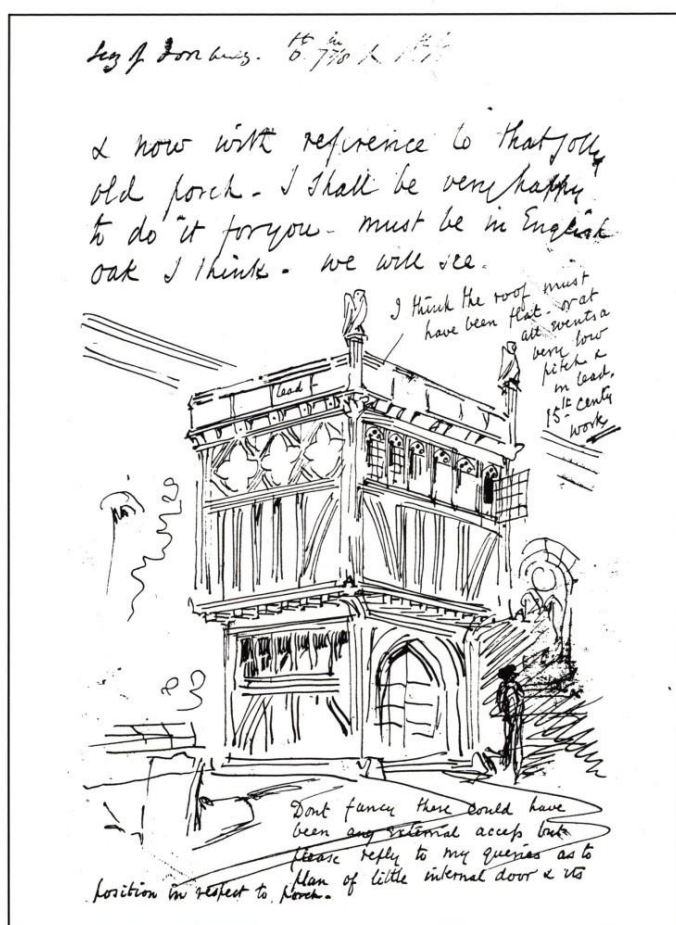


## W. Eden Nesfield the church architect



St Mary's, Radwinter, Essex: general view from south

In [my first post on W. Eden Nesfield](#), I described country houses and associated domestic work as the mainstay of his practice. The Saffron Walden bank is his only commercial building – indeed, only one of a tiny handful of works in an urban setting – and he made few attempts to enter the crowded lists of Victorian ecclesiastical architecture. But although his works in that field may not be numerous, they are of considerable interest and deserve to be featured here in detail. A good place to start is the restoration of the church of St Mary in Radwinter, Essex, already mentioned in connection with the Saffron Walden bank.



Letter from Nesfield to Bullock, probably written in early 1876, incorporating a sketch proposal for the porch. What was eventually built, visible in the photograph above, differs substantially in form, notably in the substitution of a steeply pitched and tiled roof for the

flatter, lead-covered one hidden behind a parapet indicated here.



General view of the interior of St Mary's in Radwinter looking east

Between 1758 and 1925, the incumbency of St Mary's was held by five members of the Bullock family consecutively. At some point during the period, it became a centre for ritualism, and the Rev'd John Frederick Watkinson Bullock – vicar from 1865 to 1916 and the fourth from that family to hold the post – embarked on a major programme of reconstruction and beautification. Bullock inherited a distinguished, if not exceptional 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century building. What he bequeathed to future generations is almost entirely the result of a major remodelling carried out between 1868 and 1888, begun by Nesfield and completed by Temple Lushington Moore (1856-1920).





Exterior of St Mary's in Radwinter from southeast, showing the exterior of Nesfield's



Vestry.

The chancel screen and pulpit at St Mary's in Radwinter: the latter is Moore's work and was introduced in 1892, although looks as though it must incorporate late medieval panelling of currently unknown provenance.

In the first phase of 1868-1870, Nesfield remodelled the body of the church. The nave was lengthened by one bay to the east and the aisles were rebuilt. So was the chancel, which gained an organ chamber and vestry. The reconstruction of the nave was so sensitively done that it is not immediately apparent just how much of the fabric was replaced. Nesfield reused the original chancel arch, which of course had to be resited, and much of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century roof structure. He engaged a family of flint knappers from Brandon in Suffolk to do the external walling of the new aisle, with its attractive admixture of tiles laid in thin horizontal courses.





St Mary's, Radwinter – the sanctuary, showing Nesfield's altar and the early 16th century Flemish reredos installed in 1888 folding wings added



at Bullock's wish.

St Mary's, Radwinter: detail of the tiled floor of the sanctuary

But the chancel, far taller than its predecessor, is less restrained and more obviously High Victorian, with features such as the outside cusping of the inner arch to the large south window. The bench ends of the choir stalls have carved reliefs with birds and flowers, while the poppy heads of the stalls incorporate Nesfield's favourite 'Japanese pies'. There is much good tilework, such as the floor of the sanctuary and the charming splash-back in the vestry, with painted figures representing the twelve months of the year. In the vestry there is a three-light window with vividly coloured stained glass of archangels designed by Nesfield – his only known work in the medium, dated 1870. The east window was installed that same year; the windows in the nave appeared later, between 1882 and 1888. With the exception of the vestry window, the stained glass was the work of Isaac Alexander Gibbs (1849-1899) of Gibbs and Howard.



St Mary's, Radwinter, Nesfield's window in the vestry: a detail of the right-hand light, where the date and architect's name appear, is reproduced at the top of this page.



St Mary's, Radwinter – splashback to the vestry sink

Radwinter came to occupy an important place in Nesfield's career. In 1874 a serious fire destroyed most of the village centre and he was closely involved in the rebuilding. He designed a terrace of four houses and a shop, as well as a pair of semi-detached dwellings called Brookside Cottages, all of them just outside the eastern boundary of the graveyard on Church Hill and pictured in [my first post on Nesfield](#). The street fronts are pargeted at first-floor level. Although this was a Nesfield trademark that the architect used indiscriminately in his domestic design throughout the country, it was drawn from the vernacular architecture of Essex and its neighbouring counties so here is more than just a mannerism.





St Mary's, Radwinter: 'Japanese pies' adorning a poppyhead in the

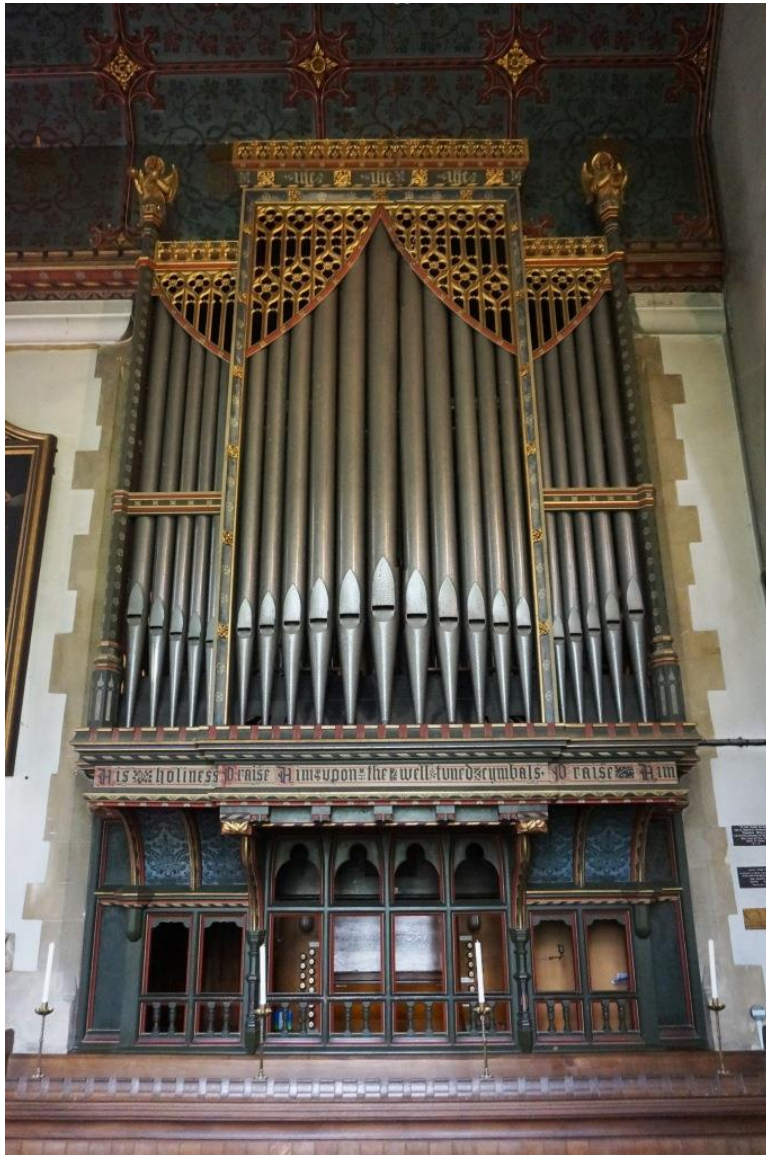


chancel

St Mary's, Radwinter, the chancel ceiling – the decorative scheme is Moore's work.

Nesfield retired from architectural practice in 1880, but Bullock's ambitions for the church were unfulfilled and this necessitated a change of architect for the subsequent phase of the remodelling. With the benefit of hindsight, Temple Moore appears a natural choice as a successor. Aged just 24 when he was appointed, as a pupil of George Gilbert Scott Junior, whose office he had taken over when that architect became incapacitated, he was in the vanguard of stylistic developments of the time. Moore oversaw the execution of Nesfield's design for the wrought iron chancel screen, reputedly made by a local blacksmith from Saffron

Walden. He also rebuilt the upper room of the two-storey timber-framed south porch, which had been derelict since the early nineteenth century. Nesfield had planned this, and sketches for it appear in letters to Bullock of 1876 from the charming correspondence reproduced in facsimile in *A Deuce of an Uproar*, the detailed account of the remodelling of St Mary's published in 1988 by the Friends of Radwinter Church.



St Mary's, Radwinter, the organ case in the chancel: the lower part with the patterned coving would appear to be Nesfield's work (compare with the organ case at Calverhall, pictured below), but the upper section with the pipe shades is by Moore.





The front of the organ case in the south aisle added by Moore

In the first major campaign overseen by Moore in 1887-1888, the existing west tower was dismantled and completely rebuilt on a grander scale (the original bells were retained and rehung), and a second vestry was added to the north side of the nave at its west end. But Bullock was apparently still not satisfied and Moore seems to have been involved sporadically on several later occasions throughout the remainder of his incumbency. Two large, polychromed cupboards were set up in the base of the tower and in 1892 a baptistry was created at the west end of the north aisle, containing a stone font with a tall wooden cover, and the pulpit was introduced. The pipe rack of the organ facing into the chancel gained a richly painted and gilded surround with traceried pipe shades, as well as a completely new front, also gilded and painted, speaking into the south aisle. This was done to commemorate the 48<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Bullock's ordination, which would date it to 1911. The chancel roof was also painted and gilded at a currently unknown date.

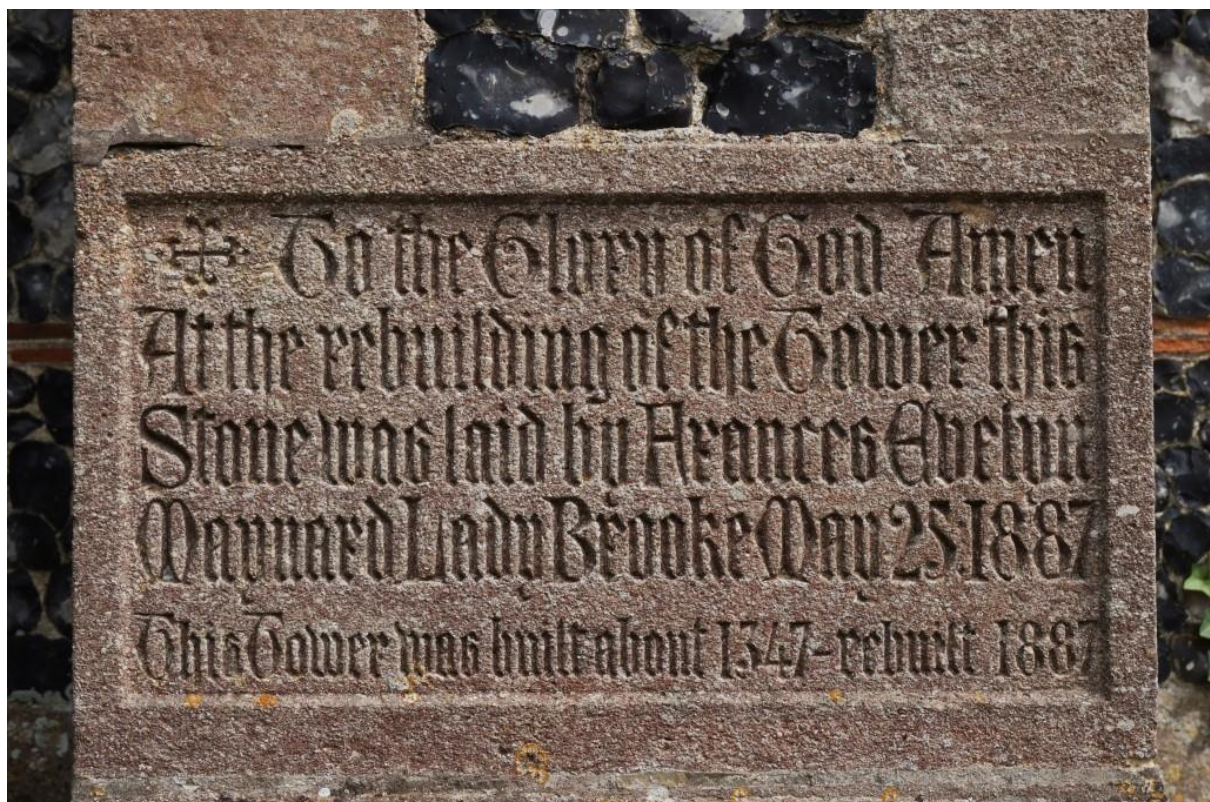




St Mary's, Radwinter: the baptistry at the west end of the north aisle with Moore's font and font cover of 1892.



Moore's work is very different in flavour to Nesfield's. It shows greater concern with archaeological precedent – note the lead-covered 'Herts spike' on the tower, a nod to local traditions – and, for all its refinement, is more earnest and less playful. At this stage in his career, he was still steeped in the influence of his teacher and his own architectural personality had yet to emerge in full. In his later work, especially the large town churches, he shows greater freedom and inventiveness in his treatment of historicising motifs, planning and volume. Then again, tact was essential for the additions to Radwinter and being overly assertive with a building on which one architect had already strongly imprinted his personality could easily have impaired its coherence. Like Nesfield, Moore was involved in the rebuilding of the village, designing the charming parish hall of 1889 located almost directly opposite the church and adjacent almshouses. Like Nesfield's buildings in the village, these are targeted in deference to local traditions.



St Mary's, Radwinter: the foundation stone of the tower





Temple Moore's village hall in Radwinter of 1889

Following Nesfield's rebuilding of the chancel, an English altar with riddel posts and altar curtains was set up, but Bullock had greater ambitions. They were fulfilled when, by happy coincidence, during the course of Moore's work a Brussels altarpiece of c. 1510 was put on sale by auction at the London premises of antiques dealer Julius Ichenhauser. Originally made for a church in Maaseik, it had been looted by soldiers in the Grande Armée and taken to Brussels, later being restored by sculptor François Malfait in c. 1880. Bullock's bid was accepted and the altarpiece was in place by 1888. Moore resisted the rector's wish to reinstate some of the lost colour and gilding on a gesso ground and instead folding wings painted with Marian scenes, complementing those of the original carved panels, were added, executed by an artist who has never been conclusively identified.





St Mary's, Kings Walden, Hertfordshire: general view from the south,

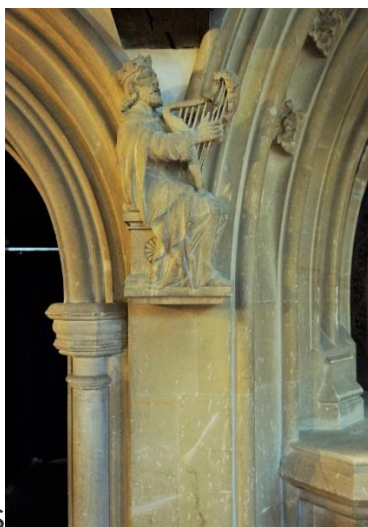


showing Nesfield's porch  
St Mary's, Kings Walden – hopper head on the south aisle

In 1950, Stephen Dykes Bower (1903-1994), who lived not far away in Quendon, converted the hanging oil lamps in the nave and aisles to electric lighting. In the 1960s, surviving medieval painted geometrical decoration to the north arcade was painted out. More happily, part of Moore's northwest vestry has recently been converted to a toilet and conservation work carried out on the reredos. St Mary's is not usually kept open during the day and so can only be visited outside service times by appointment, but it is well worth the effort of making arrangements in advance – this is a hugely rewarding church and a building to savour if ever there was one.



St Mary's, King's Walden: the



sanctuary and reredos

St Mary's, Kings Walden – figure of King David by the vestry door

It makes one curious to see more of Nesfield's ecclesiastical work, and the church which bears the closest comparison with Radwinter is St Mary's in Kings Walden, Hertfordshire, a tiny village in delightful country of switchback roads between Luton and Hitchin. In 1868, the same year



that he was engaged by Bullock for the scheme at Radwinter, Nesfield carried out a major restoration for the then-Lord of the Manor, Charles Cholmeley of the adjacent King's Walden Bury. Though the structural interventions were less radical, apparently limited to a rigorous retooling of the existing fabric, he again lavished a wealth of colourful, entertaining decorative detail on the building and refurnished it throughout. Outside, note the crenellated hopper heads adorned with Japanese 'pies' and lively, grimacing masks discharging water into them from the gutters behind. The 'pies' appear also on the posts of the timber-built porch in the form of circular folk-like motifs carved in shallow relief on the uprights.



St Mary's, King's Walden: the pulpit and medieval chancel screen with its Victorian polychromy



St Mary's, King's Walden: detail of the tiled floor by William de Morgan in the baptistry

Internally, one of the most striking features is the tiled floors – a bold geometrical scheme in green, white, black, ochre and terracotta in the chancel, while in the baptistry there are intricately patterned designs by William de Morgan incorporating the symbols of the Evangelists. The stone carving, reputedly by James Forsyth (1827-1910), is superlative in design and execution. The powerful geometry of the font looks beyond the Gothic Revival to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in its abstract forms. Note also the lush reliefs of the pulpit, the wonderful figure of King David with his harp by the vestry door and the splendid reredos with its incised decoration consisting of Aesthetic Movement Japonaiserie set in Gothic blind arches. The joinery is a delight, too – sumptuous foliate poppyheads to the chancel stalls and a delightful organ case with fine scrolly wrought-iron hinges to the cupboards. The pipe rack is decorated, just like the medieval chancel screen, with rich polychromy.



St Mary's, King's Walden: the font

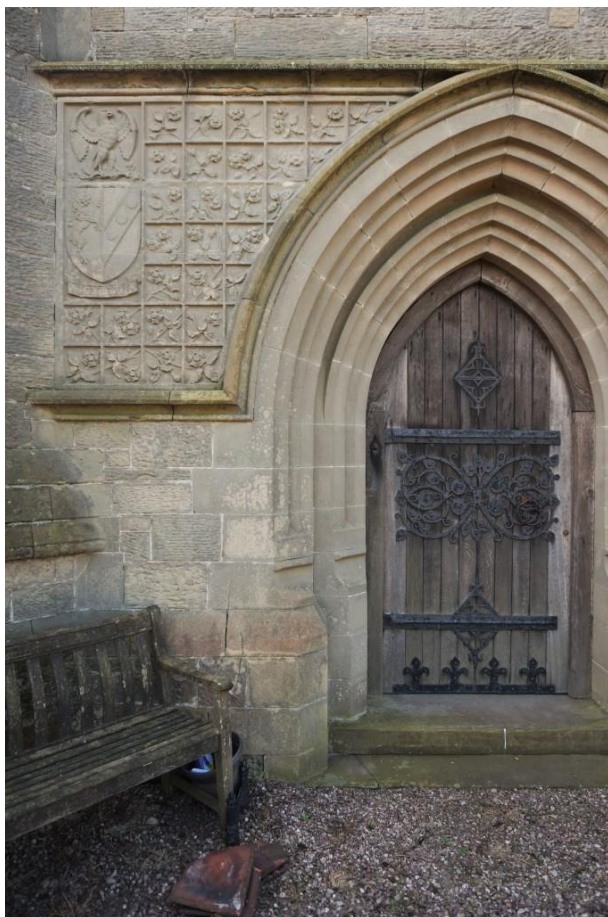


Holy Trinity, Calverhall, Shropshire: general view from southwest, showing the attached almshouses of c. 1725

Wonderful though the work at Radwinter and Kings Walden is, both commissions constitute the restoration of ancient fabric which, to a greater or lesser degree, dictated the constraints within which Nesfield worked. Neither building really gives us a full sense of what he might have done if given free rein in designing a new church from scratch, and for that one must head to Holy Trinity in Calverhall, a small Shropshire



village about half-way between Whitchurch and Market Drayton. Formerly an outlying hamlet in the parish of Ightfield, it is the nearest population centre to Cloverley Hall, which is located just under a mile to the southeast. This was the country seat that Nesfield rebuilt in 1864-1870 on an ambitious scale for Liverpool banker John Pemberton Heywood (1803-1877), as illustrated in [my earlier post](#). In c. 1726, a chapel-of-ease was built in Calverhall as part of a complex including almshouses, a school room and schoolmaster's house, arranged around an open square in a near-symmetrical composition. In 1843, what appears to have been a very plain brick structure was remodelled under the patronage of the then-owner of Cloverley Hall, John Whitehall Dod.



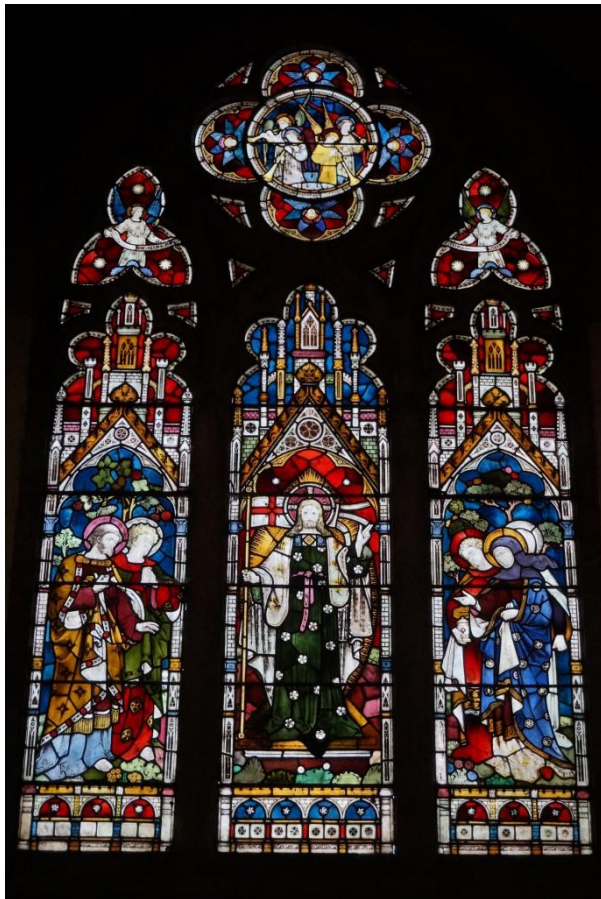
Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the main entrance to the porch in the base of the tower





Holy Trinity, Calverhall: general view of the interior looking east

No image of the rebuilt chapel has yet emerged, but, given the date, one infers that the architectural treatment and liturgical arrangements soon came to fall short of mid-Victorian notions of ecclesiastical propriety. In 1872, following the completion of the main building campaign at Cloverley Hall, Heywood (who had originally been an enthusiastic Unitarian but later converted to Anglicanism) commissioned Nesfield to add a chancel to the existing chapel. The architect obliged with a design in a Geometrical Decorated Gothic style with numerous affinities to the work at Radwinter, flanked by a large vestry to the south and chapel and transept to the north.



Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the east



window of 1879 by Clayton and Bell

Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the font at the west end of the nave and a surviving fragment of the lost tiled reredos

Following her husband's death, Anna Maria Heywood brought back Nesfield in 1878 to remodel the remainder of the building as a memorial



to him. Though just six years had passed, fashions in ecclesiastical architecture were changing rapidly and this is reflected in the marked stylistic contrast between the two phases of work. The lofty, clerestoried nave is handled in a spirited and ornate Perpendicular Gothic, something unthinkable just ten years previously, with a fine tie-beam roof based on West Country prototypes and splendid seven-light west window. A powerfully modelled tower with a prominent stair turret and rib-vaulted porch on the ground floor adjoins the nave to the north.



Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the nave roof

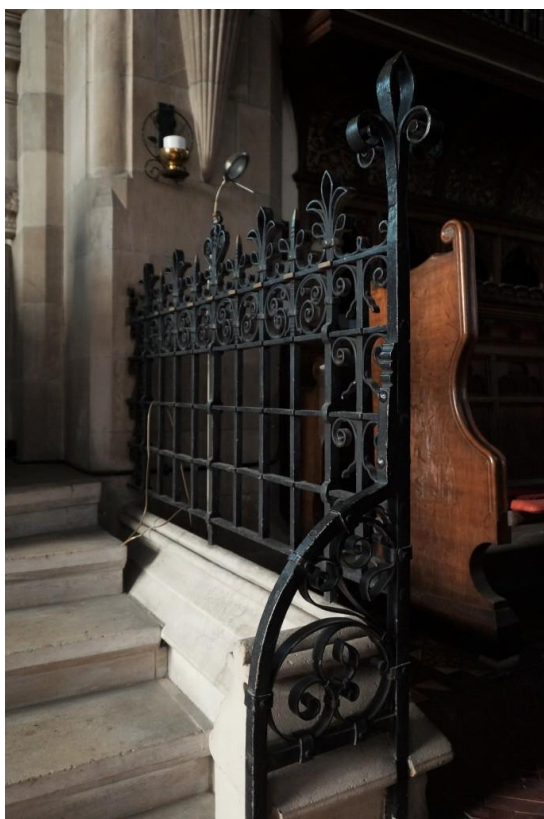


Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the pulpit

Despite the hiatus in construction and absence at the outset of a unified concept, the interior of Holy Trinity is every bit as much as Gesamtkunstwerk as Radwinter and Kings Walden. The fittings are largely Nesfield's work and show his delight in different materials, craft techniques and pretty ornamental detail – wrought iron for the communion rail supports, low chancel screen and main south door, high quality joinery for the choir pews, parcloze screen and vestment



cupboards in the vestry, even embossed leather for the coving of the organ case. The pipe rack above is stencilled with 'Japanese pies', which pop up again in numerous other location, even the backs to the sedilia and piscina. Within and without, the stone carving is also superlative quality: note especially the pulpit with its inlaid panels of marble, the internal hood moulds with their richly carved, slightly overscaled label stops and delightful figure carvings adorning the west gable. Some of this may have been executed by the same James Forsyth mentioned in connection with Kings Walden, whose involvement at Cloverley Hall is attested.



Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the chancel



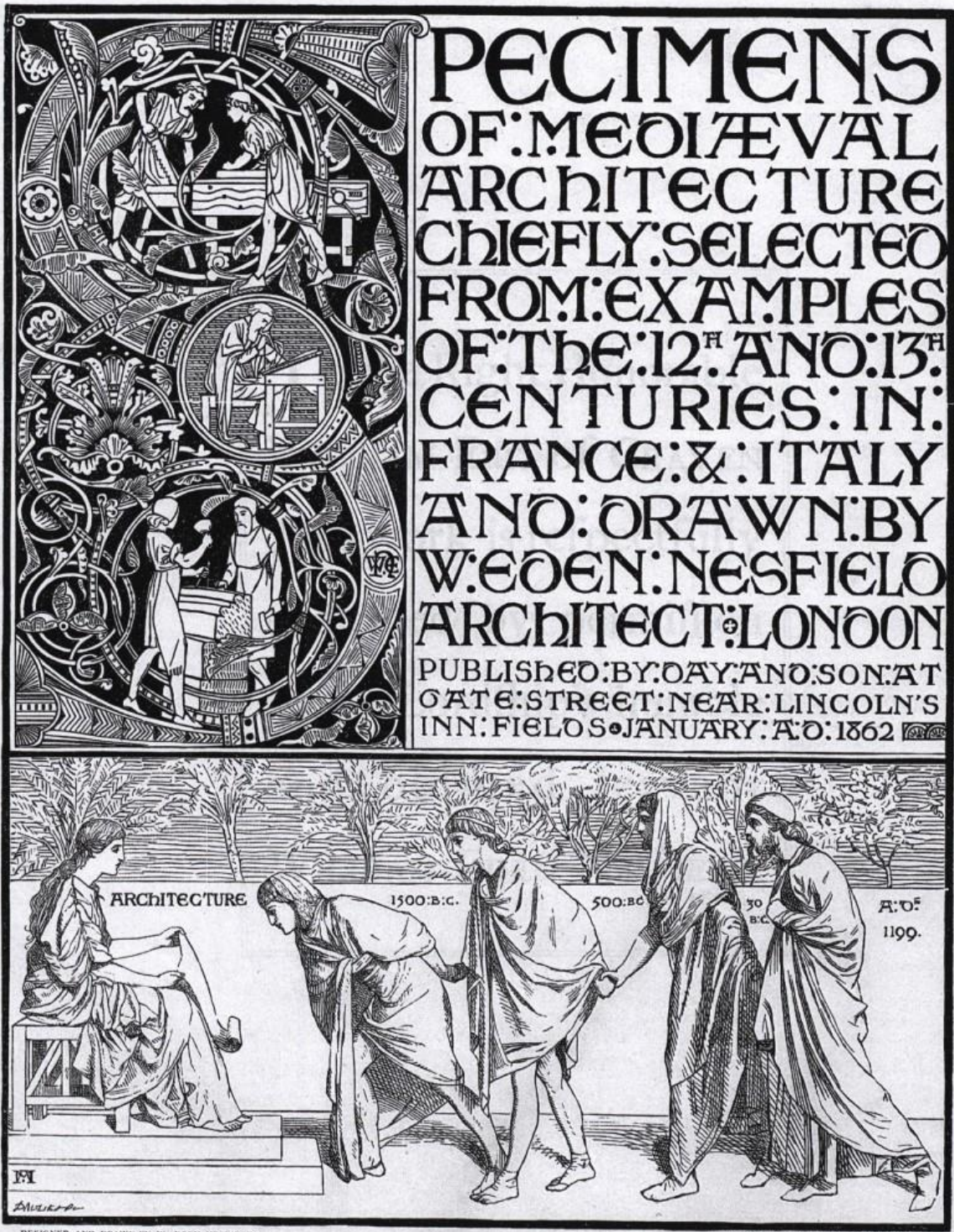
screen Holy Trinity, Calverhall: the organ case on the south side of the chancel

The lower part of the east wall in the sanctuary was formerly tiled, but this was lost in 1944 when it was replaced by oak panelling. A sad fragment now resting on the plinth of the font hints at what an exuberant, colourful display it must have made. The stained glass was added incrementally and does not form a unified scheme, but nonetheless includes pieces of superlative quality by leading designers of the period – Morris and Co for the south chancel window (the earliest stained glass, installed in 1875), Clayton and Bell for the east window of 1879, a design by Henry Holiday for the north chancel window by Powell's of 1888, and elsewhere several pieces by Hardman.



Holy Trinity, Calverhall:  
stained glass by Morris & Co depicting the Visitation on the south side of  
the chancel



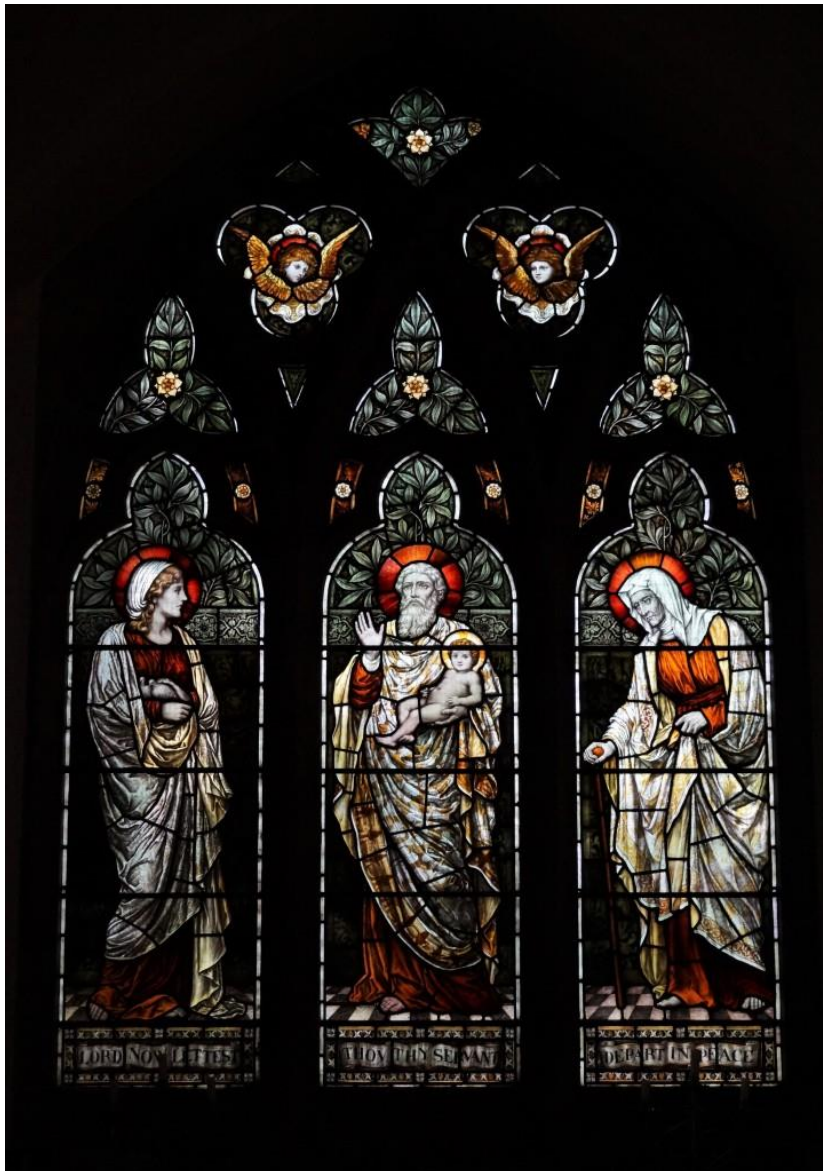


The cover of Nesfield's *Specimens of Mediæval Architecture*: note the similarity in the drawing of the figures to those of the tiled splashback in the vestry at Radwinter.

In contrast to studies of domestic architecture of the period, Nesfield tends to fall by the wayside in surveys of mid-Victorian ecclesiastical

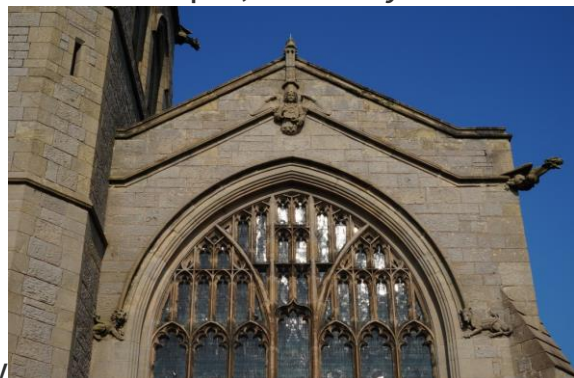
design. Given the paucity of commissions in the field, this is hardly surprising. Yet for all that, he was no less passionate a Goth than his peers and, like so many of them, had cut his teeth as a young man with a European tour, chiefly of greater churches in France and Italy. The fruits of this emerged in his *Specimens of Medieval Architecture* of 1862, copiously illustrated with his exquisite drawings. Nesfield's achievement as a church architect was to show how High Victorian Gothic could be spiced with pretty and inventive decorative detail. His aim is always to entertain, beguile and delight rather than to assail with high-minded stridency. All the qualities that make Nesfield's houses such a delight are evident in his churches and his compelling, strongly individual personality shines through in them every bit as brightly.





Holy Trinity,

Calverhall: stained glass of 1888 on the north side of the chancel depicting the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, made by James



Powell to a design by Henry Holiday

Holy Trinity, Calverhall, west gable of the nave – note the elaborate stops to the hood mould of the window

Posted by [Edmund Harris](#) September 6, 2020