

WAYFARERS IN COUNTY TOWN

OLD GAOL & STRAW ROOM INSPECTED

Americans Keenly Interested

THE Huntingdon Wayfarers' Association's first excursion of 1944 took place on Sunday, when a number of interesting historic sites in Huntingdon were visited. Altogether nearly 100 people attended including a contingent of 30 visitors from the American Red Cross Club. The following places visited, were described by the leader, Mr. P. G. M. Dickinson.

CASTLE HILLS, which was the assembly point, is the site of a Norman castle erected by order of William the Conqueror in 1068. The area of the castle was encircled by a moat, a portion in the west corner being cut off from the rest by another moat which encircled a great earthen mound on the top of which a wooden "keep" was built. Both the outer works and the "keep" were protected by wooden palisades, for no stone castle was ever subsequently built here. These buildings were destroyed in 1173, since when the castle ceased to have any military significance.

Hard by the castle is the **OLD COUNTY GAOL**, now divided into various premises. By kind permission of Mr. and Mrs. Webb, the interesting dungeon beneath the western part of their house was inspected. This consists of a large room with fine brick vaulting springing from a square central pillar retaining the massive iron staples to which condemned prisoners were chained.

An arched door, now blocked, led northwards to more dungeons which are not now accessible and another blocked door led to a vaulted chamber further west which now forms part of adjoining premises. A later flight of steps led to buildings added after the transportation of prisoners ceased, when more accommodation was required. The dungeon was known as the "Straw Room" from the straw which used to be spread on its floor and rarely changed.

Mr. W. Peacock threw his portion of the prison open and the visitors were enabled to see the drawings of gallows, also the names and dates inscribed by prisoners in the 18th century. The rooms over were used as workshops and dormitories. One original round-headed window with its ironwork remains, overlooking the inner courtyard to the north.

At St. Mary's church, **SLOW'S BUILDINGS** were noticed. They are dated 1796 on a chimney and are very unusual in that they are three-storeyed thatched cottages of a type rarely met with.

CHEQUERED CAREER.

St. Mary's church has had a chequered career. Some remains of Norman stonework of a distinctive pink tint are in the south aisle, indicating that a 12th century church—possibly cruciform with a central tower—once stood here. It was completely rebuilt in the 13th century and the fine south arcade and the chancel (which was 18 feet longer than it is now) are of this date. The ornate west tower and south porch were added about 1375. Incised on the exterior west wall of the tower is a drawing of a bell, a most unusual and remarkable survival, showing the type of bell put in the belfry when it was built. The north and east walls of the tower fell down in 1607 and destroyed the north aisle. This was re-built between 1608-1620, and the pillars of the north arcade have inscribed on them the names of those who paid for their rebuilding—Robert Law, the vicar, Richard Tryce, Thomas Hodson, Robert Lambe, An Lamb, and Anes (Agnes) Abot.

On the way to All Saints' Church, some remains of St. Benet's church were pointed out; they are now incorporated in the premises of Messrs. W. H. Smith and Son. Close by are the buildings of one-time Walden's School, now turned to other uses.

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH is the mother church of the town, and also the "Corporation" church, for in its parish is the Town Hall. It is much smaller than St. Mary's, and the site is very constricted—so much so that, when a tower was added in c.1375, it had to be built over the west end of the north aisle. Though a Norman church once stood here, the oldest work remaining is the south arch of the tower which was the west arch of a former 13th century north arcade. The church was completely rebuilt, except the tower, between 1480-1520, and the chancel, following the line of its predecessor, is considerably out of line with the nave. The tower has been heavily buttressed and repaired; it was probably much damaged in 1645 when King Charles captured Huntingdon. The church escaped the destruction which overtook St. John's and St. Benet's churches at this time. A carved stone, said to be a Consecration Cross, can be seen in the east wall of the tower, just above the aisle roof. It is certainly not in its original position.

NORMAN DOORWAY.

The **OLD GRAMMAR SCHOOL**, was next visited, by permission of Highbury Hill High School and the Education Authorities. It was originally founded about 1160 as a Hospital for Wayfarers and an Almshouse for old people, and so it remained till it was dissolved in 1547. When complete it consisted of a nave and south aisle with three semicircular arches, and a small eastern chapel, all of Norman date. A north aisle of three pointed arches of Transitional-Norman style, were added about 1190. The aisles were used for beds, and the central nave for a living room.

In 1565, the building was turned into a Grammar School and the aisles, chapel and the eastern bay of the nave were destroyed. The remaining arches were blocked up and the whole divided into two storeys. It was restored to its present condition about 1874, when the 16th century brick facing which had covered the west front, was removed revealing the unsuspected Norman doorway, which is now such a feature of the High Street.

"**MONKS' HOUSE**" was the last place on the programme, and here Mr. W. A. Luxton and Miss Bennett welcomed the visitors, who were enabled to see the curious and possible unique plaster east front of the house, which is about 150 years old. Originally there was a row of three cottages here which were made into one house about 1790, a staircase block being added on the south side. Sixty years afterwards a spacious ballroom was contrived in the western portion by heightening the ceiling and thereby greatly constricting the bedrooms, which became dark and useless. This house is an interesting example of how old houses were altered to meet later and more modern requirements.

Thus ended the first excursion of the year, and thanks were extended to all those who had contributed to its great success.

P.G.M.D.

"**H**" and "**Cromwell**" Groups.—A meeting of these Groups was held in the old Grammar School (Huntingdon, on Thursday, with Mrs. Coleby (Sawtry) in the chair. Nine Institutes were represented, and heard Mr. P. M. G. Dickinson talk about their villages. His talk included accounts of two murders committed in Hunts, in bygone years, and aroused much interest, and no little blood-curdling! Mr. Dickinson, who is very popular with W.I. members, was warmly thanked by Mrs. Cresswell (Buckden). After tea a general knowledge quiz was held, the winners being Mrs. Bonnet and Mrs. Knight, both of Huntingdon. During the social half-hour a one-act melodrama was acted by members.

ST. MARY'S CHURCH.—St. George's Day was observed as suggested by the Archbishops, as a Day of Prayer. There were large congregations at all services. In the afternoon, the Wayfarers paid a visit to the church and were joined by several interested parishioners in hearing a short description of its interesting features from Mr. Dickinson.