

The Rev. John Escreet, who has done all the wood-carving for his parish church.

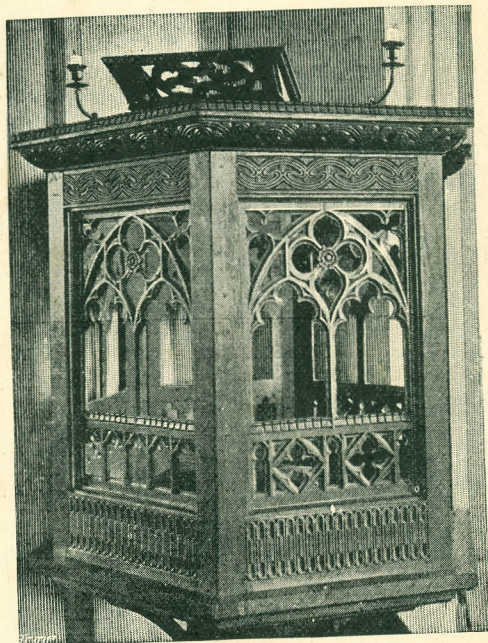
# A CLERICAL ARTIST IN WOOD

BY FRANCIS ARTHUR JONES.

Photos by F. Wilson.

PROBABLY very few readers of THE ROYAL MAGAZINE are acquainted with the picturesque village of Hempstead, in the North of Essex, for it lies far from the track of the holiday-seeker, and is many miles distant from the nearest railway station. And yet the interest attached to this small agricultural hamlet is three-fold. For upwards of two hundred years it has been famous as the burial place of the great Dr. William Harvey, whose name is known and honoured in every civilised country of the world, and whose discovery of the proper circulation of the blood may be said to have revolutionised the surgical world. Again, Hempstead was the birthplace, nearly two centuries ago, of the notorious highwayman and hero of romantic boyhood—Dick Turpin, whose baptismal register may be seen among the old records of the parish church. And lastly Hempstead will always be noted for possessing the church which contains pulpit, lectern, and reading-desk, the entire work of the curate in charge, the Rev. John Escreet. It will be remembered, that some short time since many of the London and provincial papers commented upon this unique fact, and thinking readers of *The Royal* would like to hear a little more about a cleric who had shown so much practical love for his church, the present writer asked Mr. Escreet to supply him with a few facts and permit the more important pieces of his carving to be photographed for the purpose of reproduction. After some demur, for Mr. Escreet is a modest man, and thinks less of his work than does anyone else, he consented, and, while Mr. Frost Wilson took the photos, chatted about what he is pleased to call his "hobby."

Mr. Escreet has been curate of Hempstead for the last twenty-two years, and the church was brought into some notoriety by the fall of its tower on January 28th 1882. This tower, which was situated upon an eminence near the centre of the parish, was one of the most prominent in the district. It was a great landmark, and, indeed, a principal station of the late Ordnance Survey, and its fall, which entirely destroyed the whole of the west end of the church, was regretted for many miles round. The farm-labourers and village folk generally felt that in the hoary structure they had lost a friend, and among the more superstitious the fall of the old tower was thought



Here is the beautifully decorated pulpit of Mr. Escreet.



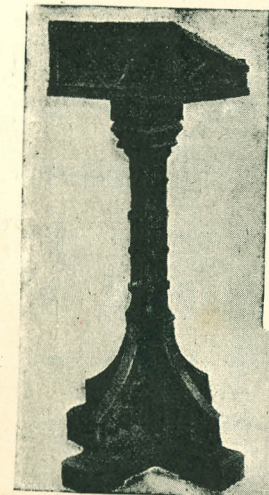
to portend some dire misfortune which, however, did not come to pass.

It was supposed by some that, as the remains of the famous Dr. Harvey rested there, funds for the restoration of the church would flow in from the medical faculty without any special effort on the part of those more closely connected with the parish; but, notwithstanding the great kindness of the College of Physicians, it was a very up-hill process, and when the restoration actually began there

were some £300 short of the money required for the rebuilding of the nave and aisles alone. Not one penny was subscribed towards the re-erection of the tower, and down to the present time, nearly eighteen

designed one pierced panel, representing a two-light window in the perpendicular style of architecture. The panels in the reading-desk, which should have matched those of the pulpit, were, through ignorance, and also for variety's sake, pierced in the flamboyant style; but the same three carvings from the wood-work stretch across the top and bottom of the desk, as seen around the top and bottom of the pulpit."

The reading desk and pulpit were made in the summer of 1886. Mr. Escreet is a quick worker and always "makes up his own carvings," being an excellent carpenter and joiner. The structure stands 6ft. 6in. in height—3ft. 3in. in pedestal, and 3ft. 3in. in pulpit—and compares well with some of the best work to be found in our largest and handsomest churches. It is hexagonal in shape, and its internal measurements vary from 2ft. 11in. to 3ft. 3in. The lectern was made in 1887, and took about three months to complete. Mr. Escreet says this piece of work was quite an afterthought and done at the casual suggestion of one of the congregation who wished for it, and so gave the curate a guinea to purchase the oak with which to make it. The style is totally different from that of the pulpit and reading-desk, being less massive, more graceful and artistic, and after an original design. The pulpit and desk bear the date 1886, and the lectern 1887, carved upon the bases.

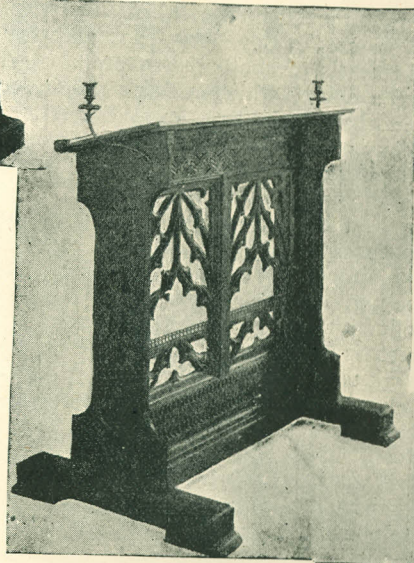


The lectern.

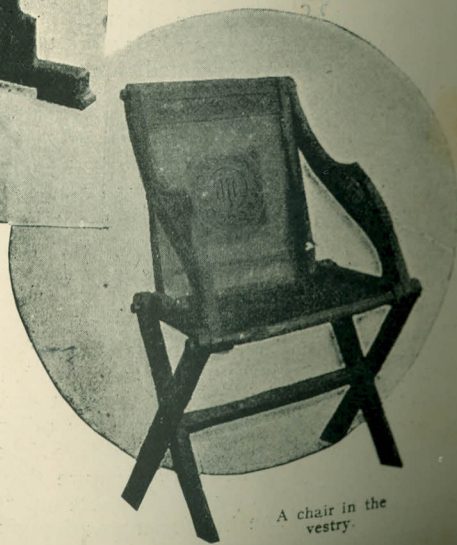
years after its fall, there seems but scant hopes that Hempstead Tower will very speedily rear its head once more above the scene of its fall.

"Necessity" said Mr. Escreet, "is the reputed mother of invention, and lack of funds stimulated

me to make for the church a new pulpit, reading desk, and lectern. Amongst the pews, in the old church, there were a few fragments of oak-carving, but these were so decayed that they could not be preserved and so, that they might not be entirely lost, I determined to copy them upon a new pulpit and arranged them in my plans, two around the top and one around the bottom of the frame-work. For each side of the pulpit, I



The reading-desk



A chair in the vestry.

Not the least pleasing fact about Mr. Escreet's work is that both the pulpit and desk are made out of oak grown almost within the shadow of the church.

"Whilst I was getting out and developing my plans for the pulpit and desk," continued the energetic curate, "I looked around me for some suitable material, and thinking it would be well, if possible, to make the pulpit of wood grown in the parish, I discovered that an oak tree, which would just about suffice for the work, had been cut down some ten or twelve years, and still lay on one of the farms where it had been felled. I approached the owner and explained to him regarding the work I was undertaking and delicately suggested that the fallen giant was the very thing for my purpose. He gladly gave me the tree, and the local carpenter and his man cut the timber, free of cost, into suitable planks, which they placed about upon the vicarage lawn. Here they remained for some weeks, though every few days I used to turn them over that they might get well baked in the sun and finely seasoned. They turned out excellent pieces of wood, hard and sound.

With regard to originality of design Mr. Escreet does not despise the copying of an attractive style. His one idea, for instance, when carving the pulpit, was, as already mentioned, to embody and preserve the three carvings which run round the top and bottom and were previously in the ruined church itself. For the pattern of the pulpit in its entirety he visited six or seven churches and picked up a little here and there, the result being, if not exactly confined to one particular period, decidedly attractive and novel. Having made the pulpit, lectern, and reading desk, Mr. Escreet might reasonably have been expected to rest from his labours as carver and carpenter, but no—there was still lacking a very important item towards the church's restoration, and the curate decided to complete the work he had begun.

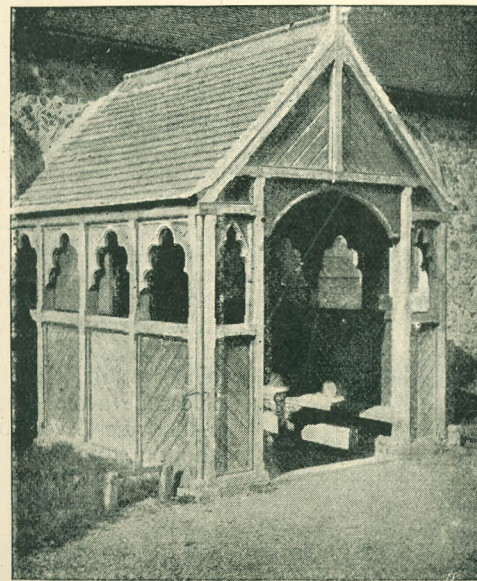
"When the church was re-opened for Divine service," said this indefatigable cleric, "there was no porch! To continue our services without one, with the winter approaching us, was hardly to be thought of, for the west and south-west winds blew cold and cutting upon the south entrance, and was a source of considerable discomfort and even danger to the congregation. I therefore ordered a quantity of pitch-pine, and again fell to work. In many ways it was a long and tedious job, but its real necessity encouraged and stimulated me to get it finished as speedily as possible, and after a few weeks continual work the porch was a thing accomplished. To some considerable extent I imitated the original porch. The whole

of the carving is, indeed, the same with this one exception, that, whereas two coats of arms ornamented the two chief brackets of the old porch, I added upon the brackets of the new porch, the coat-of-arms of the Patron of the living, that of the vicar, of the churchwardens of the parish for the time, being, and of the Harvey family."

Mr. Escreet has also carved for Hempstead Church a sanctuary chair and an alms-dish, as well as the fine, massive chest shown in our last illustration.

He is entirely self-taught in regard to wood-carving, and has been pursuing his hobby for the last twenty-five years. With reference to his first important piece of work he said:

"About the year 1875, wishing to make a present to a neighbouring church, I planned an altar-rail upon six standards, and carved double brackets for each standard. I believe this was my first attempt at this kind of work. At the same time I designed and carved a hall table. My next work was nearly ten years later—to be exact, in 1884. When this house (Hempstead Vicarage) was being built I made and carved a couple of mirror frames, one for each of the front rooms,



This carved porch is also the work of Mr. Escreet.



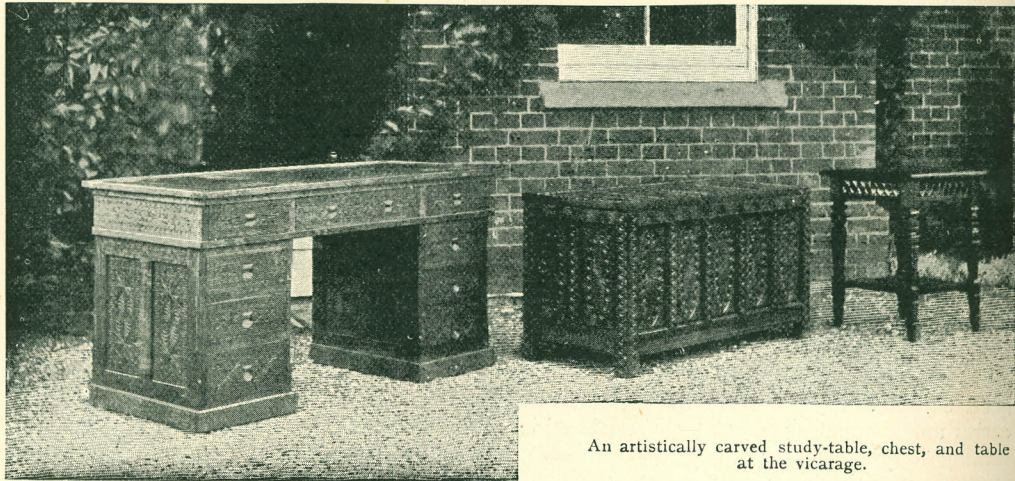
where they have hung ever since. About this time, too, I took up fret-work in my spare moments, and completed several pieces in this style of carving."

Mr. Escreet's great desire is to see the tower of Hempstead Church once more in its right place. If a carved wooden one was suitable he would doubtless set to work and produce it within a year, but, then, wooden towers won't stand our climate. He is not, I think, quite despairing of seeing his own energy and hard work acknowledged in a manner which would enable him to give the necessary orders for the commencing of the work, for, some short while since, he received from an anonymous correspondent the offer of £100 towards the re-building of the tower, on condition that he obtained sufficient money, in cash or promise (which should not be less than £1200), as would encourage him to begin the work before the end of the year. Admirers of Dr. William Harvey, as well as devotees of the famous Richard Turpin, will, perhaps, see that Mr. Escreet is not disappointed.

In the interests of all amateur carvers (in wood, of course), I did not leave the curate of Hempstead without asking his opinion of carving as a hobby, and his advice to those who indulge in it.

"This," he said, "is a difficult point. Planning and carving are very interesting, and, when fairly entered upon, so attractive, that they call for much self-denial to leave off; hence they are rather a dangerous hobby. My own experience tells me that to execute anything worth preserving in carving,

the amateur should first learn something about cabinet-making, as it is a very difficult thing to find joiners who will carefully make up another person's carved work. One can readily understand this. It is very similar to buying your cloth at one shop and sending it to another to be made into a coat. It rarely turns out satisfactorily. If you are capable of putting together your own carvings, a man can scarcely have a less expensive hobby, for wood is cheap. Few tools are required, and the man who surrounds himself with innumerable knives, and purchases 'sets' of carving implements, will, as likely as not, do no great amount of good work. The tools are not expensive, but should be of the very best quality. It is a waste of time to buy second-grade articles. Go to a good firm and choose the kind most suitable to the wood on which you intend to operate. Buy the implements as you require them, and always keep them thoroughly sharp and keen; have a good oil-stone and an old razor strop—two articles which are indispensable. Of course, some kind of bench is necessary, but if you have taken the precaution previously to obtain a few lessons in carpentering, you will be able to make this yourself out of a stout piece of coarse oak. In conclusion, I would impress upon all amateur carvers to 'set' their tools in readiness for the morrow's work. Nothing disheartens one more than to commence a piece of work with blunted instruments, and this can be avoided only by making it an invariable rule never to put away one's tools without first putting them in a state of perfect readiness for their next task."



An artistically carved study-table, chest, and table at the vicarage.

in abundance, from a sense

The fact was that the man, and he was afflicted with that intercurable life. For many late he had at, seeing that stumbling-block

The lady it may at once be said that a charming girl and kindly was a martyr she was quite awkward plighted understanding

So matter his window enslaver that to spend his daughter in him as much successful tears but had not the dreams did the conclusion that it



The Royal Magazine.

May 1900.

To Church Warden  
of  
St Andrew's  
Church

ESSEX.