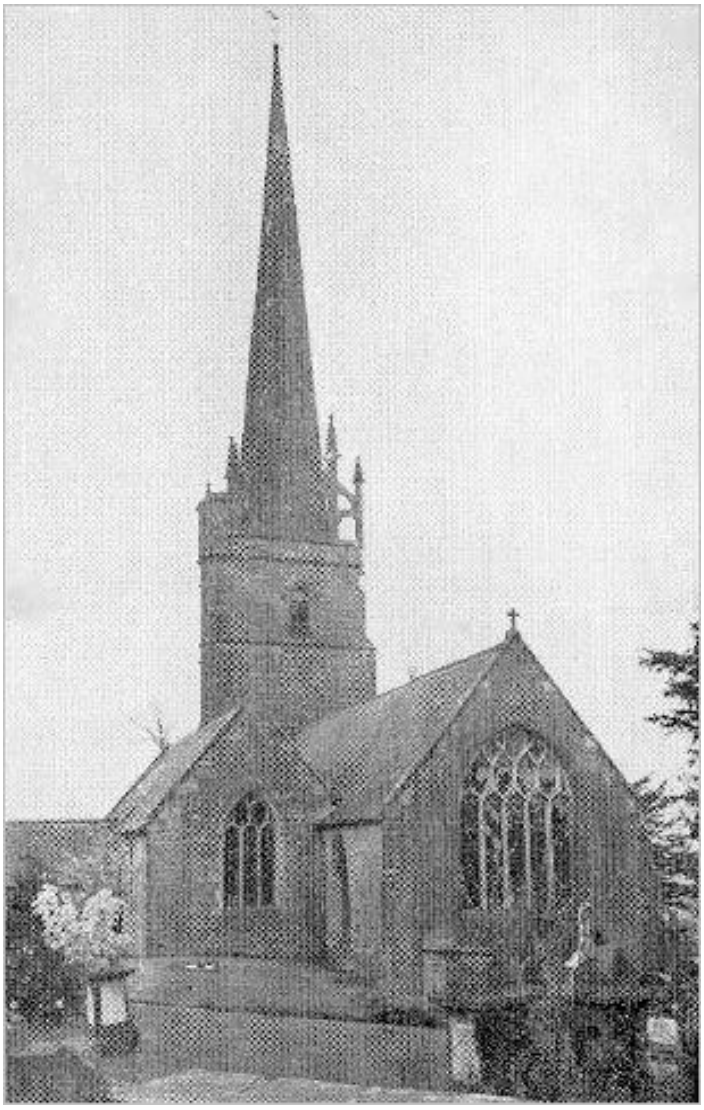
The Church of St. John the Baptist
Ruardean, Glos.



by Rev. L.J. Bowyer A.K.C.
1972

IN AID OF THE £10,000 RESTORATION APPEAL FUND

Price 5p (minimum)



The Early English Nave and Chancel

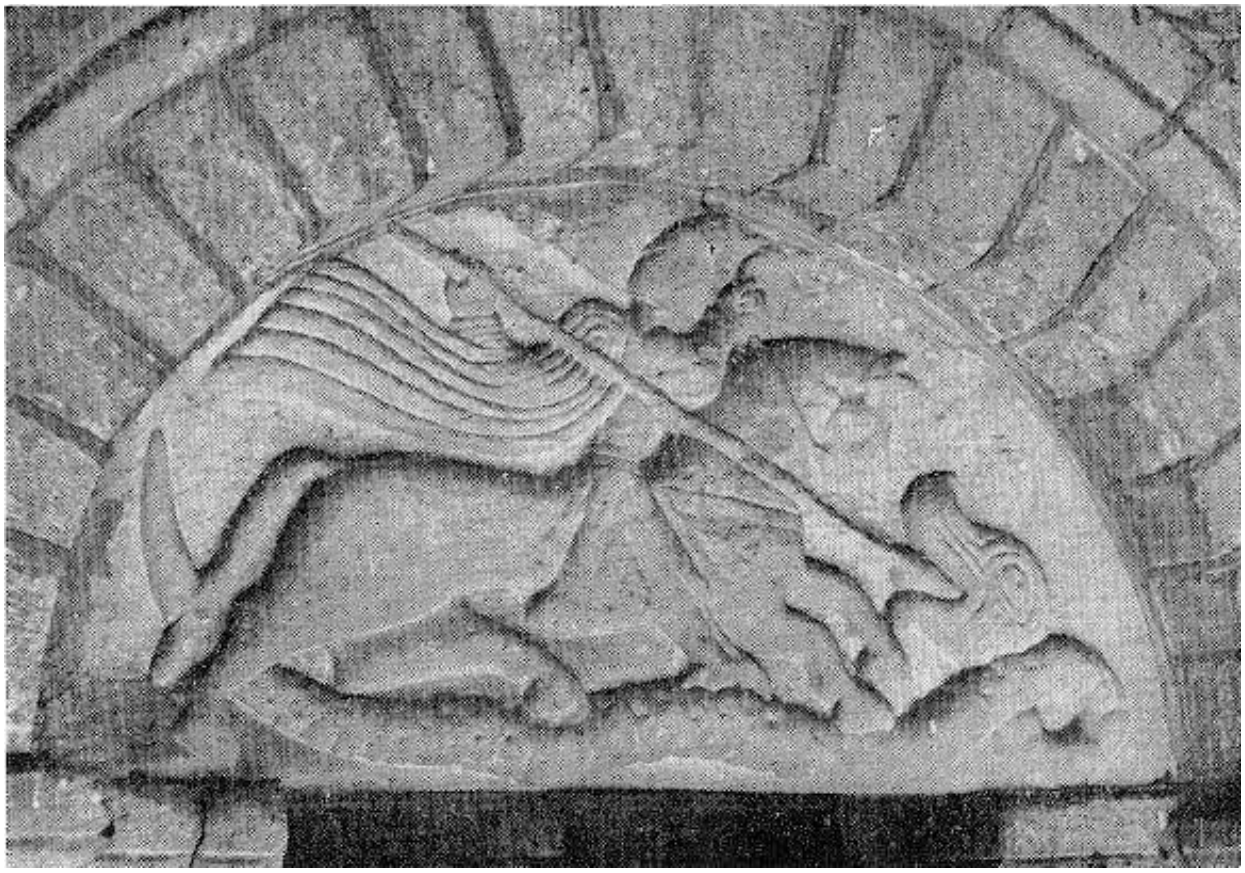
THE PARISH CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

Standing directly on the ancient Roman Way that once wound through the north of the Forest to Mitcheldean, with the top of its Spire reaching 1,000 ft above sea-level, this Church, the oldest in the original "Dene", commands a magnificent view across Herefordshire and the faraway Black Mountains of Wales. The name "Rwirdin" as in the Doomsday Book, probably means "the Wood by the River". This was actually so because until about 1800 the parish included both Drybrook and Lydbrook, bounded by the River Wye. From later Anglo-Saxon roots the name could could also mean a "Hill Fort".

Being well in the Forest in those times it seems certain that before the Normans arrived a Timber Church stood on this present site where, if the stone outside the Porch is an old Roman Altar, Caesar's soldiers had previously worshipped their own heathen gods.

The original part of the church was built of local stone c.1100 A.D. (romantically dated as "Four Ones" — 1111A.D.) and consisted only of the present South Aisle with its impressive Norman Doorway. The large Porch with its lop-sided Entrance Arch would have been added about 100 years later. The head carved on the outside moulding is probably meant to be of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Inside the porch above the door is the wonderfully preserved Tympanum, unusually large and boldly carved, showing a vigorous St. George on horseback spearing a Dragon through its mouth. It is one of only four such in the British Isles. The Doorway as a whole is very typical of Norman work having the usual plain shafts on each side with scalloped capitals. Above it is a Niche of the Decorated period c.1320, perhaps originally for a Calvary, but now containing a stone Shield showing Vaughan heraldry, i.e. three boys' heads and shoulders, each with a snake entwined. The Vaughan family have been Lords of the Manor from c.1625.



The Norman tympanum — St.George and the dragon

On entering the church the Early English character of the plain but graceful Arches of the Arcade, with the heavy round columns, shows that extensive additions were made about 1280, probably not long after the Porch was built, and certainly while the old Castle in the field to the north-west was flourishing perhaps under the Albamaras family. These additions would include the large Nave and Chancel, with very fine roofs similar to the present ones. The very early Lancet Windows each side of the main door, and the Piscina in the same South wall near the Lady Chapel alter, remain much as then altered from the original Norman, but all the other Windows were later enlarged and replaced with Early Perpendicular tracery before 1400. Practically all of these were faithfully copied and restored in 1890.

The Tower was added, complete with its very graceful Spire 180 ft. high and decorated with a characteristic band of quatrefoil and fleur-de-lys ornament half-way up, in 1365. We know from ancient records that the foundations were being constructed in 1364. Stone spires began to be fashionable in England, acting as land-marks, around the early 13th century. They were of course needed in this area to show above the trees of the Forest. Our Steeple is one of the finest examples of the period with its well proportioned four stages, its octagonal stair-turret, and plain parapet. The crocheted pinnacles and flying buttresses are modern, having been added in 1866.The plain north wall of the Tower was at one time white-washed so that the villagers could play games such as "fives". the Groined Stone Ceiling inside the lowest level, seen from the church floor, is worth noting as an unusual and charming piece of stonework of the period.

The Font is remarkable since it is genuinely dated 1657. This was during the time when Oliver Cromwell prohibited baptisms, and the use of fonts was forbidden.

The late Jacobean Pulpit is recorded in the old Registers (which go back to 1542) as having been given by Elizabeth Ale "at her own cost and charge" in 1635. The candelabrum is an interesting piece of "Victoriana" recently restored to its original position.

The Recess in the wall by the Pulpit, decorated with cusped moulding, could have been an Easter Sepulchre of the Early English period (well before 1300), or it may have been made to contain the monument of some eminent person. (Perhaps an effigy of the benefactor who made possible the extensions of the Nave and Chancel c.1280?)

The old chancel screen, probably richly carved and with a wide top to accommodate the musicians who played for services, must have been destroyed during the Reformation, but the lower Entrance to the narrow stairs inside the wall may still be seen behind the choir stalls. The openings were blocked up and a new Chancel Screen provided in 1890 when the old box pews in the church, and a Singers' Gallery at the West end, were removed.This Gallery had been constructed for an unrobed choir, in 1777, right across the graceful Arch to the Tower, having a false floor behind it for the Bell-ringers, making a Vestry underneath.

The Church Wardens Chest, shown by the Chancel Screen, is certainly old and is said to be of Elizabethan time. The pieces of sculpture around the church are parts of old monuments which once adorned the walls. The oldest memorial inscription will be found on the North wall dated 1637.

The Tower now contains a peal of Eight Bells. the earliest six had been re-cast, and re-hung in 1867 when the Rev. J. Burdon, Rector of English Bicknor, spent a large sum of money on restorations. Two more bells, the 1st and 3rd, were added in 1905 when the clock was given. The Bell placed at the West end of the Nave bears the inscription "Feare God :: That is the beginning of wisdom." This was originally the 5th bell, moved to 7th in the full peal. But is became unusable, and eventually, after the villagers had put much effort into raising the money, another was purchased and the whole peal re-hung on metal bearings in 1929. The bell on the floor may be the oldest, but the earliest date on any of the peal is 1725 on the 2nd which also bears the inscription "Prosperity to the Church of England."

The carving of St.George and the Dragon on the Tympanum implies that the Dedication of the original part of the church was to St.George, but there is no evidence for this. In the Inquisitiones Nonarum of 1340 the reference is only to "the Chapel of Ruardyn". In a later valuation by Cardinal Wolsey c.1525 no dedication is quoted but the value is given as £5. In the Bishop's Registry at Gloucester of 1758 "Ruardean Chapel" is described as dedicated to St.John Baptist, and worth £15.

From an early date in its existence the church is found to be under the patronage of the Canons of Hereford, served by Walford Abbey, although the Lordship of the Manor changed hands many times. According to our old Registers, in which there are various references throughout the years to a "Parish" and a "Vicar" (including "a house and garden in this Parish of Ruardyne" being given to the "Vicar" in 1697), the incumbency seems to have remained a Perpetual Curacy from at least the early 17th century served from Walford when necessary. In 1844 the Rector of Walford decided to pull the church down rather than carry out repairs! But a very active congregation objected so strongly that in the same year an Order in Council was made, officially creating Ruardean a Parish in its own right. In 1875 the patronage of all livings held by Canons and Prebends became vested in the Bishop of the Diocese wherever the church stood — and the Ruardean living became a Rectory at last.

By the Communion Rail can be seen the unusual Sanctuary Lamp which signifies that the Sacrament is Reserved. This is a miner's Safety Lamp witnessing to the time when the main industry of the Forest was in coal mining, as it had been for many centuries past. This occupation, flourishing only 20 years ago, has now passed away and pits are closed.