

Courtesy of Somerset County Gazette

EXMOOR VICAR'S VISION BECOMES REALITY

“New Look” For Brompton Regis Parish Church

THRILLING FINDS STIMULATE HARD AND INTENSIVE WORK

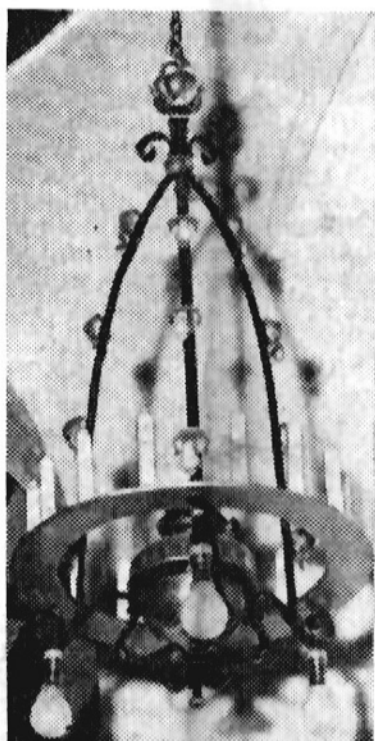
WHEN the Rev. W. D. Speakman saw Brompton Regis Parish Church, on Exmoor, for the first time, he was horrified and saddened that it had been allowed over the years to get into such a dilapidated condition. There was no plaster on the rough stone of the inside walls, the pillars and windows were covered thickly with mildew and the pews were worm-eaten and coated with a dark brown paint. It was as dismal a sight as could be imagined.

“Yet,” Mr. Speakman told the *Devon & Somerset News* last week, “I got a vision of what it could be. I decided there and then to accept the living and to make my vision a reality. To me, it was just a matter of faith.”

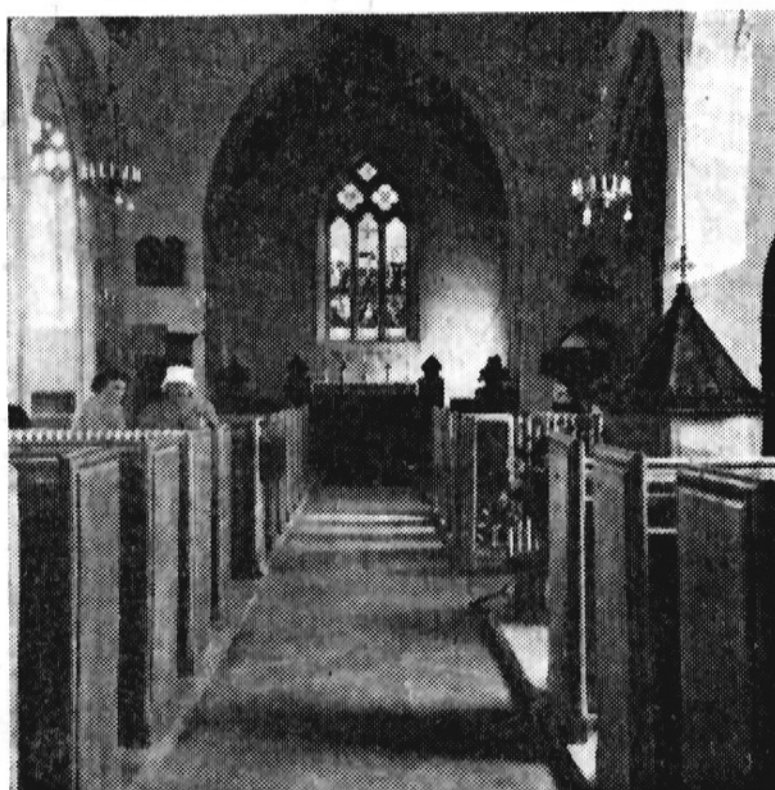
The Vicar was inducted and instituted in January, 1961, and since then has been busy—very, very busy, plastering the walls and doing it the hard way. He has carried the plaster in a hod up ladders and worked from



The ancient Parish Church of Brompton Regis.



One of the many fine old wrought-iron lamps rescued by the Rev. W. D. Speakman from under tons of rubble in the Vicarage stables. Normal illumination of the Church is from the electric bulbs pendant from the bracket.



The neat interior in its restored form.

them. At the present time he is plastering the inside of the

tower, having finished the remainder of the church, and the

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quite restful. The church is trim and bright—a pleasure both to the eye and to the soul.

Mr. Speakman could see the beauty of oak under the layers of unsightly paint and set about the restoration of the pews in characteristically forthright manner. Caustic soda removed the paint and grime of generations and vinegar neutralised the soda. He then used a sanding machine to tidy up the wood and finally made his own beeswax and worked it into the oak after treatment for wood-

worm. The ancient glory of the pews has been restored.

An eye for beauty and the fitness of things led the Rev. W. D. Speakman to rummage about in the old stables of the Vicarage. Under tons of rubble, he found the original wrought-iron oil-lamp holders of the church. They were rusty and coated thickly with grime. He worked on them for weeks and months and today they can be seen hanging from the roof in all their loveliness of form.

Mr. Speakman, however, has still further beautified them. The oil lamps occupy their original positions, but around

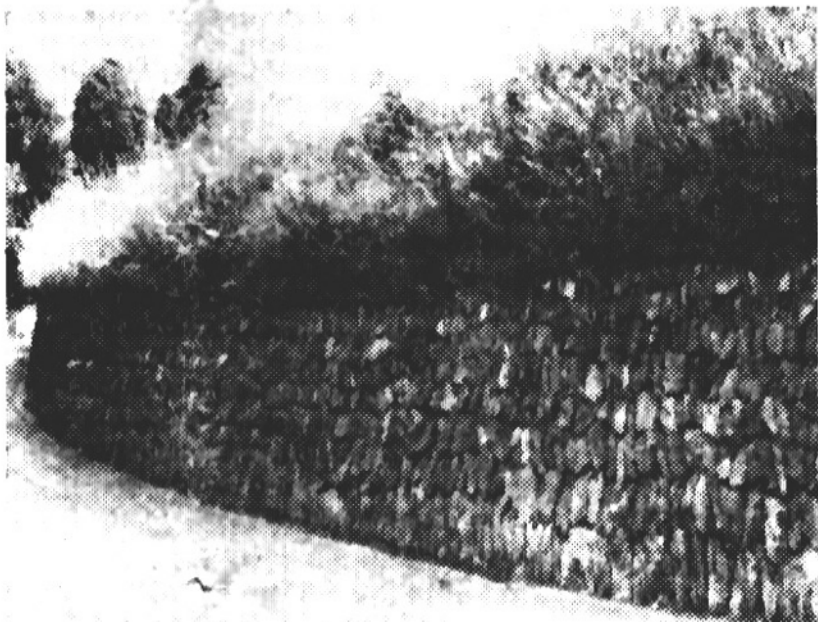
the bearer rings he had positioned candlesticks and, underneath, electric bulbs. The

candles are in once a year for midnight mass at Christmas and the church is then wholly illuminated by this means.

Another interesting and useful find in the rubbish of the stables was the ancient oak gates which used to be at the entrance to the church porch. Suitably restored, they are once again performing their function.

There was a still further discovery—a cast-iron coat of arms placed in the church at the order of King James I to substantiate his claim to be the defender of the faith. It was in such a bad state that restoring it was entrusted to Mr. J. Collins Baker, art master at Dulverton Secondary School. He has brought it back to its original condition most expertly and it now occupies a place near the organ.

The organ itself was dealt with in the early days of Mr. Speakman's charge. It occupied the space which used to be the lady chapel and was obviously in the wrong place. The instrument was restored at a cost of £745 and moved to the other side of the church. The lady



The removal from this wall around the churchyard of tons of earth and rubble by the Vicar and his helpers has given greater width to the road. The wall had been hidden for more than a generation.



Mrs. Speakman and daughter Anne steady the ladder while the Vicar carries on plastering work in the belfry.



The organ was removed from the lady chapel, which is shortly to revert to its original purpose. On the wall to the left can be seen the James I coat of arms.

chapel itself is now in process of conversion to its original purpose, the money being provided by local subscribers, and soon will be consecrated by the Bishop of Bath and Wells.

It was while Mr. Speakman was doing work incidental to the restoration of the lady chapel that he found the entrance to the rood loft. It has been filled in with great stones and these he has removed.

Our reporter asked the Rev. W. D. Speakman what his parishioners thought about their church in its restored condition. "They are absolutely thrilled about it and very proud," he said. "With the work I have done on the outside of the fabric, the building is now quite dry and very much more comfortable."

The work he has done so far has cost in materials about £50. Had it been done by a contractor, the restoration would have involved up to £800.

Mr. Speakman was told by well-wishers before he started on the work that it was quite impossible for him to tackle it virtually single-handed. For

eight weeks he worked on the plastering for 12 hours a day and followed this up dealing with the pews and other restorations.

But how did he manage to cope with these skilled jobs? Mr. Speakman is quite modest about it. "I am one of those people who can learn from anybody and feel that I can master most things. It is the spirit with which one tackles a job that counts. Even when I felt quite exhausted after long spells up the ladder distempering the walls, I found that an inner spirit was helping to keep me going."

While he was so busy with the work on the church, Mr. Speakman still found time to write a booklet on its history, and from the sales he hopes to raise enough money to pay for the five bells (one of them, incidentally, came from Barlynch Abbey which used to stand nearby) to be re-hung and a sixth installed. The cost will probably top £1,500.

The churchyard is also being given a face-lift. All the old tombstones are to be resited around the outside of the church and the wide sweep of the yard to the West is to be levelled and grassed. It is Mr. Speakman's hope that future benefactors will give flowering shrubs and trees to add still further to the beauty of the church's surroundings.

Some of the ancient tombstones bear quaint inscriptions. One centuries-old memorial is to a benefactress who died, aged 47, at Bath and was buried at Brompton Regis. Some of the tribute is indecipherable, but it is quite easy to read that "the funeral sermon by the Rev. ... was very pathetic"!

With help from the choir-boys, the Rev. W. G. Speakman has removed tons of earth from the very fine stone wall surrounding the churchyard and an incidental result has been that the highway is now quite a yard wider.

He spoke most appreciatively of the encouragement and help given to him by many people, and particularly by the Methodist community of the parish. They had all been very kind to him, he said.

Brompton Regis, by the way, used to be a royal parish and was known as King's Brompton. Up to 50 or so years ago, two markets a week and one fair a year were held there, both under royal charters. The parish used to have a population of 1,000 or more; now there are only about 300.

Mr. Speakman is a native of Manchester and was ordained in that diocese. His last living before going to Australia was Ruishton, near Taunton. For 12 months "down under" he occupied a living offered to him by the Bishop of Perth, but had to come home because of the health of his daughter Anne, who is now 15 years of age. Now Brompton Regis — and what a story!