



Church of Ashington, Essex.

## ASHINGDON CHURCH, ESSEX.

By EDMUND B. FERREY.

MR. JOHN HENRY PARKER, C.B., having requested me to supplement his brief notes on Ashingdon Church, Essex, with some drawings and with any other matter of interest I could add, I take this opportunity to offer a few jottings upon the subject. I must at the same time premise that I cannot give very much information concerning it of a *novel* character. Mr. Parker says, "In the *Saxon Chronicle* for the year 1020 A.D., we are told that King Canute or Knut ordered a church to be built of *stone and lime*, in the place of one that had been burnt down during the wars." Mr. E. A. Freeman denies that by stone and lime being mentioned anything particular is intended, but Mr. Parker is of opinion that these materials being thus specifically described, this construction was then something out of the common.

In his excellent history of the Norman Conquest, the former learned authority has shown that the site of Assandun, long a puzzle to archæologists, is Ashingdon, sometimes called Ashington, in Essex, about seven miles from Southend, and three from Rochford, and the position of the church agrees perfectly well with what we might have expected. It was in every probability that at Assandun the last great battle between Cnut and Eadmund took place in 1016. In the *Saturday Review* (July 7, 1866) there is an able article, entitled "Two East Saxon Battlefields." The writer there says, "Assandun is simply 'Mons Asini.'" Concerning this derivation, however, there is difference of opinion, for Mr. H. W. King, the well-informed secretary of the Essex Archæological Society, says, "I do not believe Ashingdon to signify 'Collis Asinorum,' or 'Mons Asini,' as the Latin chroniclers interpret it. Perhaps a good derivation may be found in the Anglo-Saxon 'Aesc,' (ash) 'ing,' meadow, 'dune,' down or hill, or, may be, a better in a Danish surname, quasi 'The Hill of Assan,' which I was once told by a Danish scholar has the form and

assonance of a Danish name." The writer in the *Saturday Review* adduces pretty conclusive evidence that the scene of the great battle-field really was near Ashingdon, in Essex. There are barrows and entrenchments closely adjoining. The neighbouring hill and parish of Canewdon, though the derivation does not seem absolutely certain, most probably retains in its name the memory of the Danish conqueror.

I went over to the church at this place to see if I could discover any trace of such a structure built of "stone and lime," as might have been the work of Canute. It is, however, a fine large building of the Perpendicular period, with a lofty tower, more like a Somersetshire specimen than a denizen of Essex. I could not find a trace of any thing of earlier date than Perpendicular, though there are the evidences of a north chancel chapel, now destroyed. The *Saturday Review* remarks, "It has been suggested that Cnut's Minster is to be looked for, not on Ashingdon itself, but on the neighbouring height of Hockley, where is also a church of small size within an entrenchment, the masonry of whose nave seems of early date. Hockley, as well as Ashingdon, commands an extensive view over the whole scene of action." I have examined Hockley, as well as Canewdon, in the search for Saxon work. It is impossible, however, to tell the date of the masonry, for the whole has been so entirely plastered over outside, that not a vestige of the real surface of the walls is visible. On the south side of the chancel is a window built of a material resembling the Reigate fire-stone. The stones are very small, less than ordinary, and the inner order of the window appears to have been cut away to allow of the insertion of new glass. The church has a north aisle, separated from the nave by an Early English arcade, with elegant foliated caps, formerly plastered over, but restored to view again some thirty years since. The west tower doorway had been elaborately cusped, and once had a finial on the top, but is now in a dilapidated condition; it appears to be of Decorated date.

I have thought it well to describe the noteworthy features in these two churches at Canewdon and Hockley (which has been mentioned in connection with Saxon work) in order to show that it is useless to look *there* for vestiges of Canute's church—all the evidence pointing, as will be presently seen, towards the church at Ashingdon.

It will seem, I fear, that I am not saying much about the church, the name of which is at the head of this paper, but after disposing of the two last-mentioned buildings, I will hurry on to Ashingdon. I cannot do better than quote the words of the *Saturday Review* in describing its situation. "The position of Assandun \* \* \* is a striking one. It is one of a range of hills, high for the east, though it would be low for the west of England, looking down on a wide plain, which stretches to the broad tidal stream of the Crouch. But between the actual plain and the hills themselves lies a considerable extent of flat ground at an intermediate height, part of which, between the hills of Ashingdon and Canewdon, was probably the actual site of the battle. Cnut was returning to his ships, which doubtless lay in the Crouch, after a plundering expedition into Mercia. He was pursued by Eadmund, most probably along the line of hills which we have mentioned, running east and west. Eadmund took up a strong position on Assandun, from which he allowed himself to be enticed down into the 'æquus locus,' the lower ground between Assandun and Canewdon. The Danes had the advantage, seemingly more through the treacherous flight of Eadric, and the slaughter of the English nobility, which was immense, than through any strictly military success. At least, it was so nearly a drawn battle, that it was followed, not by any decisive step on the part of the conqueror, but by the conference of Olney and the partition of the kingdom." The writer proceeds to say "One thing only remains, 'the minster of stone and lime,' which four years after the battle Cnut and Jarl Thorkill dedicated at Assandun,"—but he cannot discern any traces of work of the eleventh century in the church. As regards the body of the building this is correct, but in Mr. Parker's opinion, the tower in its construction agrees perfectly with that of the eleventh century, and it is as rude as could well be to stand at all. The walls are built of rubble work, with a good deal of lime-mortar, with wide joints, pebbles being used in the core of the wall, while Roman bricks and tiles are visible externally, particularly on the north side. There is not a great deal of cut stone, and the quoins and dressings of the lower windows are of long and short work (though not very pronounced). The rude character of the freestone dressings where they abut against the rubble work will be observed; no attempt has

been made to trim them, and this is, of course, rather an evidence of early work. Besides the windows (one of which is given in the accompanying illustration) there is another one, but smaller, of the same type, on the east side of the tower. The walls have every appearance of being original up to the summit (the roof is, of course, modern), but larger belfry windows have been inserted in the time of Edward III. in the place of the small old ones.

If, as the construction would show, the inner part of the tower is Saxon, it is clear that these three square-headed windows are of the same period, although it is more usual, no doubt, for them to have triangular, or semi-circular heads. Against the angles of the tower, buttresses have been built in the period of Edward III. This is distinctly seen in the south-east buttress, which is parting away from the older work, as it was not properly chased and bonded into it. The north-east buttress has been cut away, but there are the marks of it in the wall, and a straight vertical joint close to the west wall of the nave where it joins on to the tower. Holes used for the scaffolding remain in the internal angles, showing that it was erected inside; another mark, it may fairly be considered, of the early construction. There are no internal means of access to the belfry, so that I was unable to examine the upper portion of the tower, or the inside of the belfry windows. The doorway on the east side, opening out into the nave is of later date.

I will briefly describe the body of the church, which is, as yet, unrestored, a thoroughly old world building, with high pews, so that on stepping into it one seems carried back a hundred years. It has been rebuilt in the time of Edward III. and very much knocked about and repaired at subsequent periods, the repairs being chiefly of brick. In the north wall of the nave, the two westernmost buttresses are ancient, and there is a semi-circular arched doorway (now blocked up) of Decorated date. On *this* side of the church the jambs supporting the former chancel arch still remain, though much out of the Perpendicular, consisting of respond shaft, cap, and base, of a good section. The southern respond and the arch itself have either fallen down or have been destroyed and taken away. Oak posts placed against the nave walls support the principals of the roof independently of the walls. There can be but little doubt

that the roof and these posts are of the date of Queen Elizabeth, or that they were rebuilt during the 16th century. The east wall of the chancel is modern, and the chancel itself has been shortened a few feet when rebuilt. The south doorway is good "Decorated" work, of the time of Edward III., and the original portion of the north wall is, no doubt, of that date. The church has every appearance of having been originally long and narrow, the widening being clearly an afterthought from the way in which the body of the building fits on to the tower. There is a trefoil-headed niche, probably of a piscina, in the north wall of the nave, very near the chancel arch, of which only the top is now visible, the lower portion being concealed by the high pewing. There is a piscina in the south wall of the chancel, partly destroyed, and an original aumbry on the north side of the nave, somewhat tampered with. The foundation of the church rests on clay.

I will now add a few remarks upon the building stone probably used in the construction of Ashingdon Church, as well as other Essex churches.<sup>1</sup> In many instances Kentish rag, obtained from Maidstone, is employed,—water carriage down the Medway to the Thames at Sheerness and thence across the mouth of the river, being easy. Harwich cement stone, so-called because shipped to Harwich for making cement, and flint boulders are also common materials in Essex. It may safely be said that the county supplies no serviceable building stone whatever, so that it was necessary to have recourse to other districts. Harwich is about forty miles north-east of Ashingdon, and the Rev. Septimus Nottidge, the rector, informs me that any materials for building might be brought up the Crouch River within two miles, or even less, of the place. Mr. H. W. King, the Hon. Secretary of the Essex Archæological Society, says that Kentish rag, in early times, save in some exceptional instances, was not obtained in large quantities, and so was sparingly employed. Ashingdon is probably one of the churches where it was used. In London,

<sup>1</sup> Professor Tennant, of the Strand, has given his opinion on some of the materials employed in the main walling at Ashingdon. They consist of chalk, pebbles formed of flint and slag, the lower layers of Kentish rag, also one of the upper beds of the same from the flinty bed, with chert or chalcedony—and clay-iron stone

or septaria. Many portions of the walls internally being in a loose crumbling state, I was able to procure this specimen without injury to the structure; but of the freestone employed in the dressings it has not been possible to get a specimen. But it is probably an indurated chalk, a natural material to in Essex.

as many are very well aware, Kentish rag has only been introduced within the last thirty years. Mr. King, however, remarks that Essex produced flints, pebbles, chalk, red conglomerate and pudding-stone, and also large boulders, which occasionally crop up, or are found in gravel pits, and in some districts *septaria*. All these various substances are to be found in tower, and other walls of buildings in the county. It is generally believed that Kentish rag began to be employed very extensively in the fifteenth century, when water transit was more easy. With respect to freestone, Mr. Joseph Clarke, F.S.A., is of opinion that the freestone generally used in Essex and part of Hertfordshire, was Barnack stone from Leicestershire, and after its disuse Caen stone and clunch, found in Hertfordshire, seem to have been adopted.

The accompanying drawings are enlarged from my sketches made on the spot, and I should mention that I was careful to draw correctly each stone to the dressings of the windows. These shew the south and west sides of the tower with its section and plan, and the exterior and interior elevations of one of the windows of the year 1020. Every one at all acquainted with the subject knows the importance of marking in the masonry joints. In conclusion, I have to sincerely thank those gentlemen who have kindly assisted me in the material for this short description, *i.e.* the Rev. Septimus Nottidge, the rector of Ashingdon, (who takes great interest in his church), and the others I have previously mentioned. My special acknowledgments are due to Mr. Parker, who has assisted me greatly in this little memoir, and guided my personal observations in the careful examination of its subject.