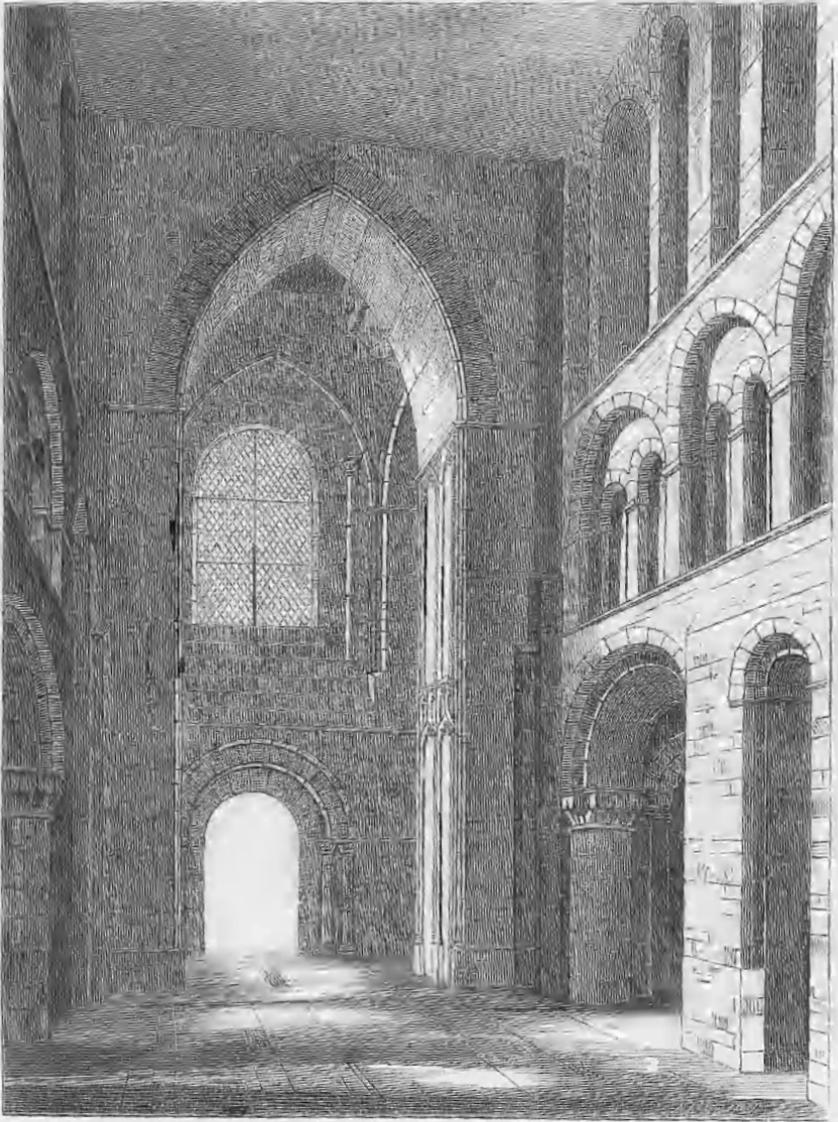


LEOMINSTER PRIORY CHURCH.



Interior view of the Nave, looking west.



EXCAVATIONS AT LEOMINSTER PRIORY CHURCH.

IN a late number of the "*Archæologia Cambrensis*" I gave a full description of the state of the Priory Church of Leominster, as I found it at the visit of the Cambrian Archæological Association in August, 1852, and of the views as to its original extent to which I was led by the existing appearances.¹ I have now the still more pleasing duty of recording the very important discoveries to which that visit has given rise,—discoveries which afford a most conclusive testimony to the value of societies such as the Cambrian Association and our own, and which reflect the highest honour on the inhabitants of Leominster and its neighbourhood.

It may perhaps, be desirable however to give some brief account of the building as it at present stands.² It may be best described as consisting of two churches side by side; the northern one, now disused, consists of what has evidently been previously the nave and north aisle of a Norman conventual church; the south aisle of this has given way to a large structure of the Early English and Decorated periods, which forms the present parish church, the old Norman nave being locally known as "the back aisle." At the east end are palpable signs of the Norman building having extended further, and having possessed transepts and a central tower. This is in conformity with the statement of Leland, that "the church of the Priory stood at the east end of the parish church, and was but a small thing." By the "church of the Priory" he evidently means the monastic portion of the church, the choir, namely, and its adjuncts, as distinguished from the "parish church" or nave. These eastern portions had clearly been destroyed between the Dissolution and the time of his visit. Their extent and form, which before could only be guessed at, have been pretty completely ascertained by the excavations which I have now to describe. They make it clear that the original building was

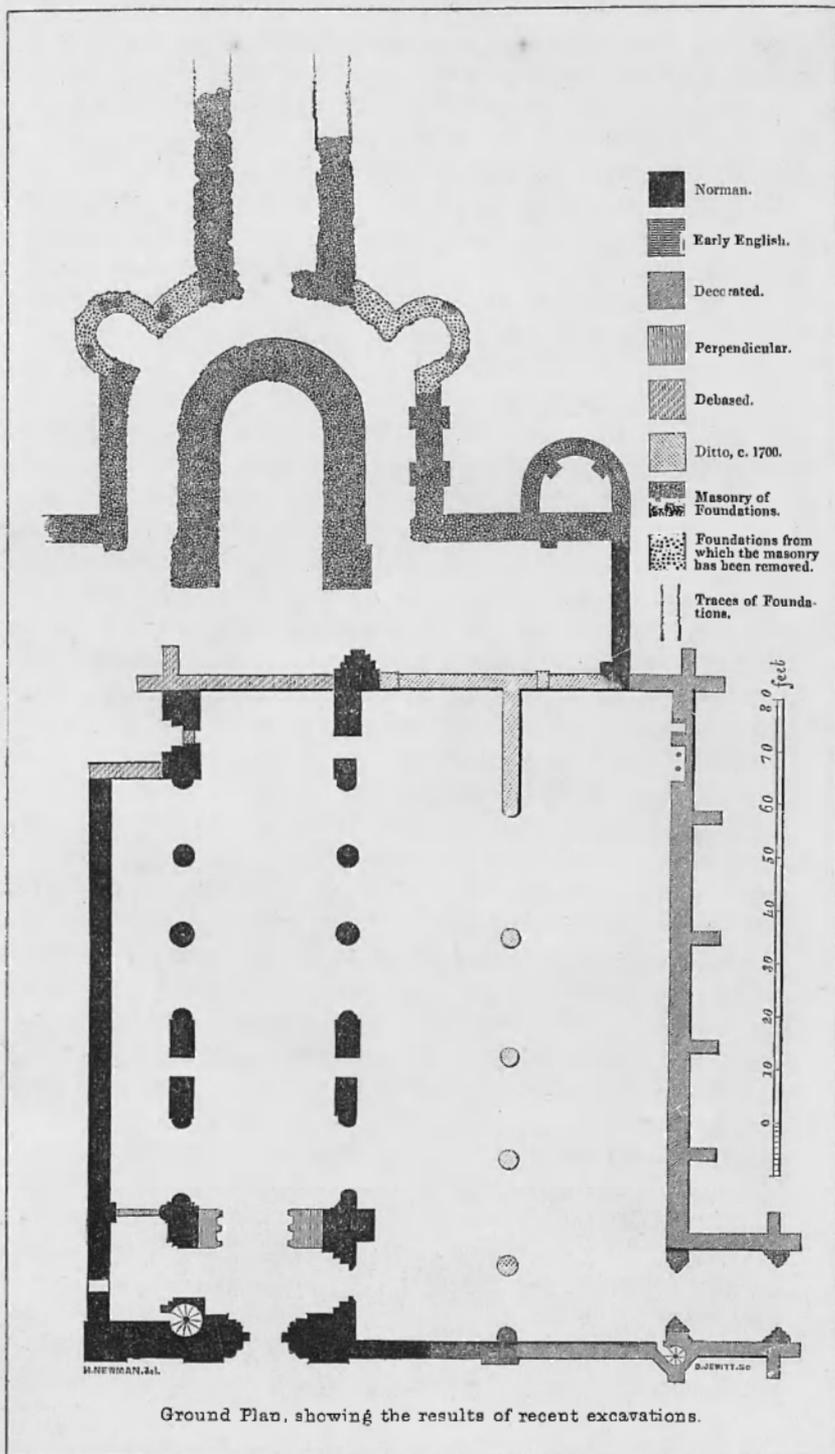
¹ *Archæologia Cambrensis*, New Series, vol. iv., p. 9.

² A good view of the western end of the church, the tower, and great west window, may be seen in Dugdale's *Mon. Angl.*, edit. Calcy, vol. iv., p. 51.

a Norman cross church, with both a central and a western tower, but its general outline must have been greatly altered by the large and magnificent addition on the south side.

In describing the actual process of discovery, I will avail myself to a great extent of the account furnished by the intelligent correspondent of the *Hereford Times* (Feb. 5th, 1853), following it up by a technical account of what those discoveries eventually brought to light. In the middle of December last the embankment of the Shrewsbury and Hereford railway began to make its appearance in the meadows a few hundred yards below the Workhouse premises, in which the site of the choir and transept is included. The question of the propriety of lowering and levelling the high ground of the Workhouse-garden having been discussed, it was thought probable that the railway contractors might at their own expense remove any surplus soil to their embankment below. By tacit consent, therefore, a square hole was sunk in the garden, in order to ascertain the nature of the sub-soil. After sinking to the depth of about 5 feet, the workmen came to some rough stone-work which crossed in a direction from east to west the centre of the hole they were sinking. The excavation was continued some 4 feet lower down the side of the stone-work, and the hole when finished was about 5 feet square and 9 or 10 deep. Rumours were soon afloat in the town that a "cell or covered tomb" had been discovered, and the workmen made an effort to penetrate the wall with a view of ascertaining its contents. At this stage of the proceedings I had the honour of being taken into council about the matter. I received a letter from Mr. Gamble, of Leominster (whose acquaintance I had made on my former visit, and who had rendered me some assistance on that occasion), describing what had been done up to that time. On this, I ventured to address a letter to Mr. Bennett, the chairman of the Board of Guardians, suggesting the great benefit that might accrue to antiquarian and architectural students, if the excavations could be continued, and requesting that the subject might be brought before the notice of the Board of Guardians. After some little delay, the Board passed a resolution, granting me permission, on behalf of the Cambrian Archæological Association, to pursue the investigation under certain restrictions. These last, indeed, amounted to nothing

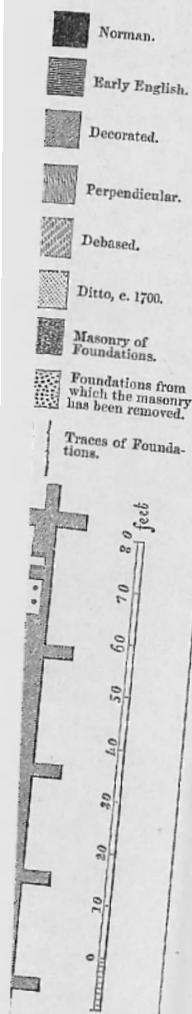
LEOMINSTER PRIORY CHURCH.



Ground Plan, showing the results of recent excavations.

more than a requirement that when the excavation should have been effected, it should be all covered up again, to admit of the garden being planted afresh. Alone, at a distance, I could have done nothing; but I am happy to state that the matter was taken up in Leominster and its neighbourhood in a way which is a most encouraging sign of the growing feeling of interest as relates to archaeological pursuits. A committee was formed, including persons of various callings and denominations, who have worked with the most praiseworthy zeal, taking it in turn, in all weathers, to inspect the operations of the workmen employed, and which have finally issued in laying bare the most important parts of the foundations of the eastern part of the church. Besides Mr. Gamble, whom I have already mentioned, my thanks, and those of antiquaries in general, are due to the Rev. J. P. Taylor, to Captain Turner, one of the churchwardens, and to Messrs. Watling, Lloyd, and Gilkes; to Mr. H. Newman we are still further indebted for the ground-plan which accompanies this account. During these operations, I revisited Leominster at their request, and delivered a lecture on the ancient church and the recent discoveries. All this time, the fear hung over our heads that what we had so recently explored must be again concealed; but I am rejoiced to be able to add that this fear has been at last removed. The interest felt in these discoveries was by no means confined to Leominster itself. Several of the neighbouring clergy took an active share in the discoveries; and a memorial to the Guardians, praying that the excavations may be allowed to remain uncovered, received, besides the signatures of the Mayor and several of the Town-council of Leominster, those of the Bishop of the diocese (Dr. Hampden), of Lord Bateman, the Lord-Lieutenant of the county, of Lord Rodney, and other influential persons in the neighbourhood. Addresses to the same effect were forwarded by the Archæological Institute, the Cambrian Archæological Association, and the Oxford Architectural Society. All lovers of antiquity will rejoice to hear that the result has been that the Guardians, in a liberal and enlightened spirit which does them great honour, have passed a resolution, by the terms of which these valuable remains will be preserved for the purposes of antiquarian study.

I will now proceed to describe the actual results of these investigations. All the conjectures on which I formerly



ventured have been confirmed by the recent excavations. The whole of the south transept and of the presbytery has been traced out, and the surrounding aisle and chapels of the latter, as far as their foundations existed. Owing to the nature of the ground, the north transept has not yet been touched, and it will probably be found impracticable to extend the excavations to that portion of the building.

The shape of the church must have been somewhat irregular, the four limbs not being of the same width ; and more than this, the choir and presbytery, which are narrower than the nave, are put on askew, their centres not coinciding. I had once thought that the central tower was actually narrower from east to west than from north to south, as at Bath Abbey and Leonard Stanley, in Gloucestershire, and had not merely the transept arches narrower, as at Malmesbury and elsewhere. But, on farther examination, I find the state of the case rather to have been as follows :

The evidence existing previously to the excavation supplied us with the fact that a south transept had existed, and that the western and southern arches of the central tower had rectangular piers of several orders ; but, as it has been found that the inner wall of the presbytery ranges with the inner member of the south-western pier, we must suppose that the eastern arch of the lantern sprang from corbels. There must therefore, from this source alone, have arisen a considerable amount of singularity, not to say awkwardness, in the internal treatment of the tower. It differs, for instance, from the case of St. Bartholomew's in London, where the eastern and western arches spring from corbels, while the narrower ones to the north and south have piers ; for there the nave and presbytery are of the same width, and the arches answering to each other were similar. Here at Leominster, the eastern and western arches must have been most conspicuously dissimilar. But, besides this, as the space below the central tower—forming of course the choir—and the eastern limb—forming the presbytery—were both narrower than the nave, and as the southern walls of the two are nearly in a line, it follows that a still greater difference must have existed on the north side, and the western arch of the lantern have stood quite on one side as regards the nave. It is much to be regretted that, as this arch was completely destroyed (and not, as usual, merely filled up) at the Dissolution, we have only conjectural evidence

Recent excavations. The presbytery has and chapels of the. Owing to the has not yet been impracticable to the building.

been somewhat same width; and which are narrower is not coinciding. It was actually to south, as at Westershire, and, as at Malms- tion, I find the

ation supplied sted, and that al tower had as been found es with the must suppose rom corbels. ave arisen a vkwardness, for instance, where the while the ; for there , and the

Here at have been s, as the e choir— vere both ls of the greater and the side as as this merely vidence

as to the manner in which it was treated; but it is clear that the northern arch of the tower could never have had the usual abutment to the west.

If any one should infer from all this that no central tower ever existed, I ought in fairness to help him to the fact that no foundation could be discovered running north and south at the point where the eastern arch would have sprung; and to remind him of the instance of St. Mary's, Shrewsbury, where the nave and two transepts have three arches exactly like those of a lantern, but where the fourth arch to the east is wanting, and apparently can never have existed. But I have the authority of Mr. Scott and Mr. Penson for the statement, that constructive necessity does not absolutely require such foundations,¹ and that instances occur both ways. And from the general analogy of Norman buildings, one can hardly imagine a cruciform and conventual church in that style not designed for a central tower. Probably the Priory Church—"the small thing" of Leland—was commenced on a small scale, which was exchanged for a larger during the process of building, to which extension we owe the increased size of the nave and the second tower at the west end. For this suggestion I have to thank Mr. Basil Jones.

This "Priory Church" must have been indeed "a small thing," as the ground-plan will show; yet its design was in some respects an ambitious one, as we shall presently see. The space under the tower, forming the choir, must have been unusually confined; while the presbytery, or eastern limb, is itself so short that the stalls can hardly have run east of the tower. This may be perhaps explained by remembering that Leominster was not an independent Priory, but merely a cell to Reading, and that, consequently, the number of monks present at any one time would probably be small. As the high altar doubtless stood on the chord of the apse, it will be seen that the eastern limb, as well as the space under the tower, was of confined dimensions.

Yet this little presbytery had adjuncts of greater comparative extent than those of St. Georges de Bocherville or the Abbaye aux Dames. I have incidentally mentioned that it had an apse: but more than this, the apse was

¹ No such existed under the eastern towers of Llandaff Cathedral, whose existence, or at least intention, I think I have demonstrated. (Llandaff Cathedral,

p. 66.) I may add, whatever value may attach to the testimony, that an ancient seal of Llandaff, of the thirteenth century, exhibits a church with four towers.

surrounded by an aisle, like the Conqueror's Chapel and St. Bartholomew's Priory; and yet again the aisle had diverging chapels, like Westminster or Tewkesbury.

Very great difficulty was found in the excavation of this portion, and very many conjectures were offered during its progress; the final result has been the discovery of a most important example of a Norman apse, with a circumambient aisle and radiating chapels. We have clearly made out the foundations of an aisle running round the presbytery, with apses diverging to the north-east and south-east; and, finally, a projecting chapel has been discovered at the extreme east end, which has not been excavated all round, because the foundations of its eastern portion have been wholly removed. From the length of this chapel I cannot help suspecting that it is a later addition; but if so, it most probably supplanted a mere apse at the extreme end, like the other two. The discovery of these chapels has been made since my last visit.

The best preserved portion is to be found in the south aisle, where the foundations rise so high that part of the plinth of the external basement exists. The outer walls of the aisle have a double range of flat pilasters—a marked characteristic of the church throughout—the inner ones acting as vaulting shafts, the external of course as buttresses. We could not make out the form of the piers, except that there seemed signs of projections towards the aisle matching those in its own outer walls. We may therefore conclude that the aisles were vaulted, and consequently the triforium differently treated from that of the nave, where it is a mere pretence, as the aisle must always have included its full height. The basement on which the arcades stood exists for a considerable extent on the south side, and we could make out the height of the pavement, portions of whose tiling remained *in situ*.

The south transept has been entirely exhumed. It had no eastern aisle, but one of the eastern apses so usually found in that position. A Decorated sepulchral arch at its extreme south was found to be of remarkable height, and exhibited clear signs of mediæval whitewash.² A Norman string above it, evidently *in situ*, which existed at the visit of the Cambrian Association, had been destroyed before the excavations commenced—so easily may important evidence on such points be lost. Whether the transepts had western

² Compare Llandaff Cathedral, p. 52.

aisles is still uncertain ; the fact that the eastern bay of the north aisle was destroyed with them looks as if they had ; there are also some signs of jambs at the east end of the great southern addition ; but it is not yet clear whether they are those of an original arcade, or of mere doorways between that addition and the south transept.

The whole of the foundations discovered seem, with the probable exception of the extreme eastern chapel, to be of the untouched Norman work ; so that any later alterations must have been entirely confined to insertions in the superstructure. It is easy to imagine the general effect of the building, which, with the varied grouping of the two towers and of the numerous apses, must have been one of the most picturesque of its kind. The choir and presbytery, as an example of a very complicated arrangement on a very small scale, seem especially valuable.

The work is not yet so complete but that fresh discoveries may be expected ; and, as I before said, some very important points have been made out since my last visit. I trust I may some day see Leominster again ; in any case, should I learn anything worthy of note respecting the church, I will not fail to make it the subject of another communication to the Institute.

I may add another question with regard to Leominster Church. I argued in the *Archæologia Cambrensis*, that the Early English addition included the site of the present Decorated south aisle, on the ground that the piscina and both the doorways of the porch are of the former style. The idea has been suggested to me by Mr. Jewitt, which had also occurred to me independently, that it is more probable that the Decorated aisle was a farther addition, and that these portions were built up again. I am now inclined to accept this theory, on account of the thorough rebuilding which my former view obliges us to suppose within a century after the original addition. The whole work, even in the porch, is, with these exceptions, Decorated from the ground, and not merely, as usual, rebuilt from the window-sill ; while the Early English architects of this very addition retained so much of the original Norman south aisle as suited their purpose. Unfortunately the evidence of the centre arcade, which would have decided the question, is lost, owing to a fire in the year 1699, which destroyed the original arches and the east end of this part of the church.