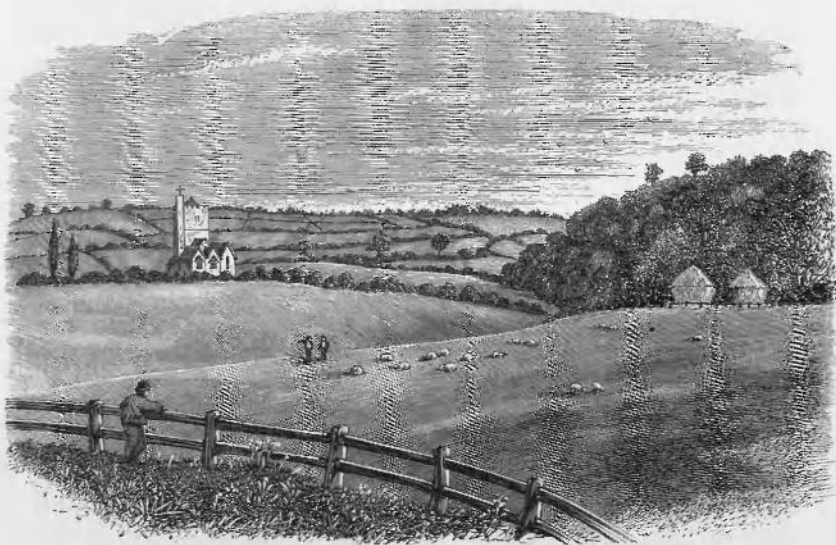


PERFORATED ALTAR-TOMB AT NEWINGTON-STREET, IN KENT.

By JOHN HEWITT.

AMONG the pleasant glimpses afforded by the London, Chatham and Dover Railway, none is more alluring than that of the pretty village of Newington on the Watling Street, in Kent, with its parcel-Norman church embowered in trees, its picturesque valley running down through a fertile meadow-tract to the mouth of the Medway, its sur-



Newington-Street, Kent, viewed from the railway.

rounding hills, from which we plainly discern the distant towers of Reculver ; while the windings of the Thames to the north and the rich landscapes to the south and east offer a variety of scenery of surpassing beauty, and not the less agreeable to the English gazer from the evidences of mercantile and agricultural wealth which everywhere abound. Attracted by such a glimpse, we took an autumn day's run

to the old Roman-born village in question. Hop-gardens by dozens were around us ; and apple-orchards open to all the world, from which yokel and hobbledehoy came munching along all the day through. Nobody seemed to own the apples, and some of the orchards were half a mile from any house. Newetone is the name of the place in Domesday Survey ; that is, the New town on the Watling Street. Its present name is Newington-Street. Many Roman urns and other vessels have been found in the neighbourhood, of which particulars are given in Hasted's Kent, vol. ii., p. 561. He has a plate also of some of the vases.

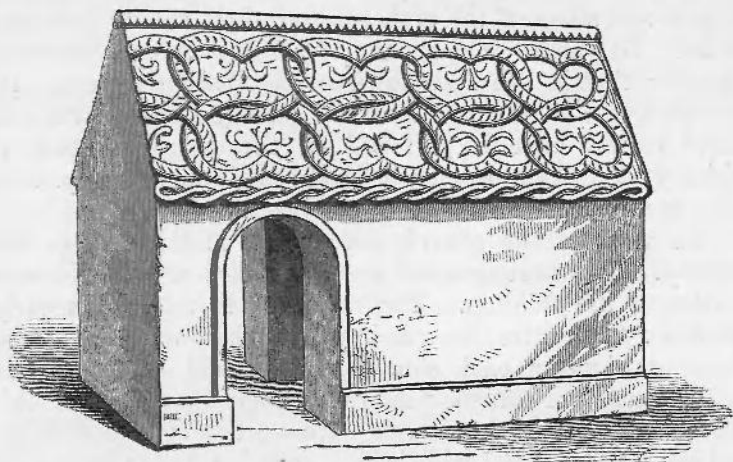
The view of the church here given is taken from the railway. The northern and central gables are the Norman portion of the building. The north gable retains its early window : the centre has an inserted window of Decorated character, but on each side of it may still be traced the small, narrow Norman windows which once lighted this chancel. Inside of the church, between this central building and the "South Chancel," is still found a pillar with rich capital of twelfth-century work.¹ The south division is of Decorated style. The rood-loft staircase in this section is still preserved, and the piscina, one of several that exist in various parts of the church. Among the funereal monuments are several brasses of the sixteenth century, a sculptured one to Sir John Brook, 1594, and others of the family of Hasted, the historian of the county. The reading-desk is a beautiful example of wood-carving of late fifteenth century, a remnant of the old stall-work. The font is curious from its cover "of the beaufet kind, of which few examples now remain." In the north aisle is still found the old blackletter copy of Fox's Martyrs, with its attached chain, from which the zealous Kentish puritans read stirring stories of martyrdom to the rude forefathers of the hamlet of Newington-Street. The tower is of the Perpendicular period, built of squared flints and stone in alternate bands. The church altogether is very spacious and kept in admirable order.

Among the various objects inviting our notice in this fine old church is an altar-tomb standing in the south chancel.

¹ This pillar has been carefully freed from its seven centuries of whitewash by some fair amateurs of the locality. To cite their names would be an impertinence ; but we hope that we are guilty of

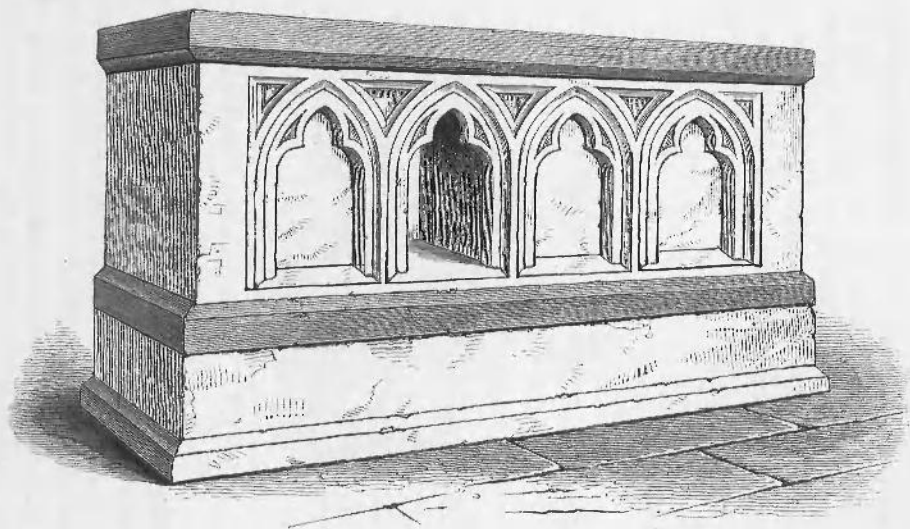
no indiscretion in thus alluding to so praiseworthy an endeavour to restore an ancient memorial to its original perfection.

Of this monument we offer a rude sketch. It is thus described in the county histories :—"In the south chancel is a very curious coffin-shaped tomb of freestone, covered with a



Tomb of St. Dizier, in Alsace.

slab of dark grey marble ; each side displays five deeply-recessed pointed arches with trefoil heads. One of the arches is open through the tomb : for whom this was erected is unknown." The tomb, in fact, is in this wise :—There are four arches ; the coffin is of stone, covered by a slab of Purbeck marble ; on that is an arcade of stone, and over all a slab of Purbeck four inches thick. The plan is tapering, the length 6 ft. 4 in. The panels of the arcade have suffered considerable dislocation, but No. 2 arch is still quite open. The purpose of this opening has given rise to many conjectures. Not being very fond of conjectures, I had not paid much attention to the monument ; but, turning over the pages of Didron's *Annales Archéologiques*, I found a very striking resemblance in the tomb attributed to Saint Dizier in Alsace. This example, engraved by Didron, vol. xviii., p. 51, and again in Viollet-le-Duc's *Dictionnaire de l'Architecture Française*, vol. ix., p. 45, is here copied. M. Didron thus writes of the French cenotaph :—"Le tombeau de Saint Dizier, dans la petite église de St.-Dizier en Alsace, n'est autre chose qu'une pierre creusée en forme de petite cellule, avec deux portes. Jusqu'en 1835 on faisoit passer par ces

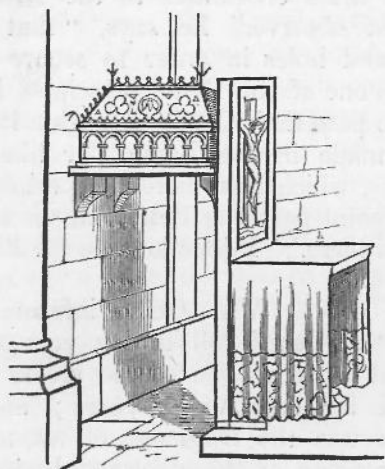


Altar-Tomb in Newington Church, Kent.

From a drawing by John Howitt, Esq.

ouvertures *les personnes atteintes d'aliénation mentale* : puis on les plongeait dans une source d'eau, qui coule au village du Val, &c. Une cérémonie analogue avait lieu en Auvergne, au tombeau de Saint Menoux, pour *la guérison des maux de tête*." (Didron, xviii., 51.)

Sometimes, in lieu of creeping through the saint's tomb, the afflicted person passed beneath a saintly reliquary, which was suspended between the retable of the altar and the wall of the chancel. In the work of Viollet-le-Duc cited above is the drawing of such an arrangement. "*Le retable masquait et supportait le reliquaire, sous lequel on pouvait se placer, suivant un ancien usage, pour obtenir la guérison de certaines infirmités.*" (Vol. viii., p. 36.)



Coming back now to England, we find considerable analogy in the "Holed Stones" of mountain countries and the Riven trees of other localities. In Cornwall we have the "*Mèn-an-Tol*," a perforated stone near Lanyon, "at a little distance from Saint Madern's Well," described in Borlase's *Antiquities of Cornwall*, in Gilbert's *Survey of Cornwall*, and in Mr. Brash's paper on "Holed Stones" in *The Gentleman's Magazine* for December, 1864 ; and engraved in the first and last of these works. The hole in this stone is 1 ft. 7 in. in diameter, and the custom has been for invalids to be passed through the orifice in order to cure them of their maladies. "When I was last at this monument, in 1749," writes

Borlase, "a very intelligent farmer of the neighbourhood assured me that he had known many persons who had crept through this holed Stone for pains in their back and limbs, and that fanciful parents, at certain times in the year, do customarily draw their young children through, in order to cure them of the rickets. He showed me also two pins, layed across each other, on the top edge of the holed Stone. This is the way of the Over-curious, even at this time, and by recurring to these Pins and observing their direction to be the same or different from what they left them in, or by their being lost and gone, they are informed of, and resolve upon some material incident of Love or Fortune." (*Antiq. of Cornwall*, p. 169.)

Borlase refers these credulities to the Druids and their times. "I must observe," he says, "that this passing through stones and holes in order to secure health is the more likely to be one of the Druid principles, because I find that they used to pass their Cattle through a Hollow Tree or through a hole made in the Earth (for like superstitious reasons probably), which was therefore prohibited by Law. 'Qu'on ne fasse point passer le Bétail par un arbre creux ou par un trou de la terre.' Injonctions de St. Eloi." (*Antiq. of Cornwall*, p. 169.)

Mr. Tregellas of the War Office informs me that he remembers to have heard tell in his younger days of a Holed Stone that stood on one of the moors near Bodmin, which was used for curative purposes; and inclines to believe that this was the fragment of an ancient Cross, the aperture being one of those formed between the cross itself and the encompassing circle.

Before we leave Cornwall, let us advert to a very curious ceremonial described by Borlase in his "Natural History" of that county. It belongs to our subject from its relation to the Alsatian monument in its influence on lunacy, and from its testifying to the need of saintly intervention for the assurance of a cure. At p. 302 he writes: "A very singular manner of curing madness is that mentioned by Mr. Carew, in the parish of Altarnun, in this county. It was the custom to place the disordered in mind on the brink of a square pool, filled with water which came from Saint Nun's Well. The patient, having no intimation of what was intended, was, by a sudden blow on the breast, tumbled into the pool,

where he was tossed up and down by some persons of superior strength, till, being quite debilitated, his fury forsook him. He was then carried to the church, and certain masses sung over him. If he was not cured at once, the immersion was repeated." This is pretty well Rarey's system with intractable horses ; and, however absurd such a treatment may at first appear, let it be remembered that the insane commonly exhibit a great amount of *cunning*, and that the promise of a repeated dose might well be of considerable efficacy with those not too deeply stricken with mental disorder.

In Ireland several instances occur of Holed Stones popularly believed to effect miraculous cures. Near Tullow, County Carlow, is the monolith called Cloch-a-Phoill (the Holed Stone). "It was the practice, says Ryan (Hist. of County Carlow, p. 338), to pass ill-thriven infants through the aperture, in order to improve their constitution. Great numbers formerly indulged in this superstitious folly, but for the last twenty years the practice has been discontinued. My informant was a woman who had herself passed one of her infants through the aperture of this singular stone." Sometimes the opening was formed by a large stone so resting on two or more subjacent ones as to leave a passage between them. "In the county of Waterford," says Gilbert, in his Survey of Cornwall, "is a Druidical remain to which superstition still attributes the power of curing rheumatism, called Saint Dedan's Rock ; and on the patron day of this saint, great numbers creep under it three times in order to cure or prevent pains in the back" (vol. i. p. 177). Several such groups of stones, existing in Cornwall and the Scilly Islands, are engraved by Borlase, Antiquities of Cornwall, plates 10 and 11. The Holed Stone in Castledermot churchyard, County Carlow, figured by Mr. Brash in The Gentleman's Magazine for 1864, p. 689, appears to have been artificially pierced for rites similar to those already described.

In Scotland, superstitions of a kindred nature appear. The Stone of Odin (Orkney), described by Wilson in his Prehistoric Annals, had an orifice through which hands were joined in solemn pledge of the just fulfilment of compacts and engagements. "This ceremony," says Dr. Henry in 1784, "was held so very sacred, that the person who dared to break the engagement was counted infamous, and

excluded all society." The custom, he adds, did not fall into disuse till about the middle of the eighteenth century. "In conformity with traditions of similar monuments elsewhere, the Orcadians devoutly believed that an infant passed through the aperture of one of these mystical stones would never shake with the palsy."

Goblin-land had also its relations with perforated stones. The old historian of the Western Islands of Scotland, Martin, informs us that the islanders used to pour out libations of milk, beer, &c., through a Holed Stone to propitiate the demon "Brownie," who presided over the making of butter, the brewing of beer, and the like (p. 391).

Mr. Brash tells us that, after diligent inquiry among the Welsh archæologists, he has not succeeded in tracing the existence in the Principality of any monument similar to those described above. I may add that I have made like inquiries as regards Derbyshire, and am informed by my friend, Mr. Llewellyn Jewitt, that none such are found in that county. In Yorkshire, we have, at Ripon, the subterranean pierced stone called "Saint Wilfred's Needle," a monument resembling the others in its saintly invocation and mystic properties; though, as is well known, the direction of the influence is in a somewhat divergent line. The sexton of the minster informs me that to this day he has frequent applications for an appeal to its verdict—we may readily believe, made in sport only.

In India the mystic powers of perforated stones are recognised. Mr. Brash quotes a paper read before the Royal Asiatic Society by Captain Wilford, in which he says:—"Perforated stones are not uncommon in India, and devout people pass through them, when the opening will admit of it, in order to be regenerated. If the hole is too small, they put either the hand or the foot through it; and, with a sufficient degree of faith, it answers nearly the same purpose." (*Gent. Mag.* 1864, p. 698.)

A shriek from the "London, Chatham and Dover" startles us back to Newington and its altar-tomb. The assumed bearing of the foregoing evidences on this monument may be easily divined. They seem to indicate that the perforation was intended to effect cures, by permitting the patient to pass through from one side to the other. But then, the saint. ? Newington-on-Watling-Street has no local saint.

But if no saint, of martyrs more than enough for so small a locality. Soon after Domesday Survey a nunnery was founded here, and the prioress, according to the traditionary account, derived from Thorn's Chronicle of Saint Augustine,² was strangled in her bed by some of her nuns. The nunnery being consequently "disestablished," soon afterwards "King Henry the Second, by the persuasion of Archbishop Thomas Becket, placed in their room here seven priests as secular canons, and gave them the whole of the manor. After this, one of these canons having been murdered, four of his brethren were found guilty of the crime, and the two others acquitted" (Hasted, ii. 550). These pleasing little incidents of the "good old times" are related also by Sprot, in his *Historiola de Newynton*.³ Of the last, he says:—"Et in brevi tempore post, unus illorum fuit occisus inter illos, unde quatuor fuerunt culpabiles de morte quinti fratris eorum."

Here we have ample material for a large amount of holy influence: a martyred prioress, Saint Thomas of Canterbury for a patron, and a martyred canon. But proof or identification have we none. We do not claim for analogies the influence of facts. But, should the curative pretensions of our Newington monument be rejected, we will at least hope that the curious particulars above recorded may not be altogether unwelcome as illustrations of a wide-spread popular delusion.

² Cited in Stockdale's *Antiquities in Kent*; and compare Hasted. Stockdale has a very good near view of Newington

Church, taken from the north-east.

³ "*Fragmenta Sprottiana*," p. 163, ed. Hearne, 1719.