

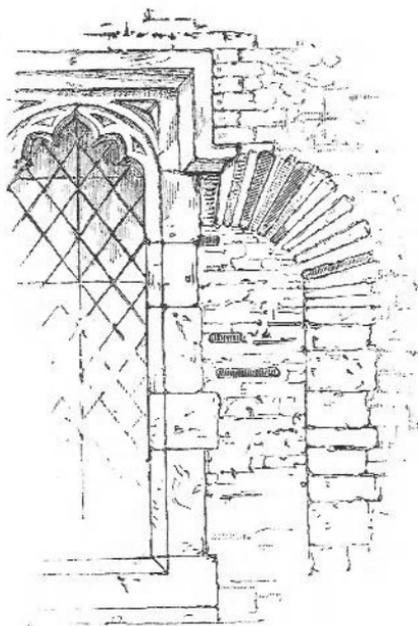
SAXON REMAINS IN MINSTER CHURCH, ISLE OF SHEPPY.

By J. PARK-HARRISON, M.A.

Hearing that two early windows had been exposed to view during some repairs to the parish church of Minster, a village about three miles from Sheerness, on shortly afterwards paying a visit in the neighbourhood, I found that the boarding behind the wall-pieces of the new roof, which in the interval had been put on the south nave, had been carried some four feet down the face of the north wall owing to the unequal height of the nave, and entirely concealed the old work in that part of the church. In the north nave, however, two irregularly formed blank arches, formed of Roman bricks and about five feet wide, were still visible, the new plastering having not then been commenced. Their jambs, formed of rough stones, had been cut through in the Early English period by the arches which were inserted when the present nave was built. From the width of the brick arches being greater than that of the windows in the south nave (as described by the vicar and the clerk of the works), there could be but little doubt that they were interior window-arches, even if the original building which they once served to light had formed part of a church with side aisles.

No corresponding brick arches occurring on the inside of the north wall of the church, it was at first thought that it might have been rebuilt; but on obtaining a ladder to search for early work outside, on removing some of the plaster with which the entire surface of the wall was covered, I detected part of a brick arch, adjoining a Perpendicular window, which proved to be nearly opposite the westernmost of the old windows in the south wall of the original nave; and, on further search being made, another window-head of the same kind was discovered close to a second Perpendicular window, and in a corresponding position as regards the second brick arch. The openings of the original windows had been utilised when the Perpendicular windows were introduced; and this accounted for the absence of internal brick arches in the north wall of the church. Fortunately, the love of uniformity, which prevailed in the fifteenth century, led to the new windows being placed exactly opposite the centres of the Early English arches between the two naves. This preserved the west jambs, and half the brick arches of the old windows in the exterior wall, the new free-stone jambs being inserted in the existing openings and the walling cut away eastward for the introduction of the remainder of the new stonework. The height of the Perpendicular windows above the ground, which is much greater than would have been otherwise the case, viz: 14 ft., was also due to the use of the old openings.

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, March 1, 1883.



Early window in the north wall of Minster Church, Sheppey.

Further examination of the exterior of the north wall led to an interesting discovery. A small piece of red tile was noticed as projecting beyond the uniform coat of plaster with which the wall was covered. It was about twelve feet from the ground and on removing a portion of the plaster proved to be the upper corner of a Roman flue-tile, which had been slightly twisted in the burning, and but for this accident the flue-tile would have remained concealed beneath the plastering. The discovery led to a closer examination of the wall in the interior, when the end of a similar tile was found in the same position ; and, shortly afterwards, four others were detected at an average distance of six feet, measured from centre to centre, and about ten feet above the floor of the church. They had previously escaped notice owing to their being covered with the remains of the old plastering, which rendered them indistinguishable from the rubble forming the walls. All the flue-tiles were filled with small pieces of stone and mortar ; and, with the exception of one, which was concealed behind an Early English buttress, were found, by measuring equal distances of six feet, to occur also on the exterior, beneath the plastering, which was removed at these intervals for the purpose of ascertaining the fact.

For what purpose these tiles were intended it is difficult to form any certain conclusion. The description of tile suggests that they may have been used to convey warm air into the church from an adjoining building ; or they may have been employed for the purpose of conducting the sound of chants and services into a cloister or room on that side of the church ; and the remains of a rude string or weather-moulding along part of the exterior of the north wall, above the line of flue-tiles, would give some colour to either view.

Another explanation of the tiles is that they served as "putlog" holes, to receive the ends of joists for the support of a gallery ; but their clear internal dimensions (six inches by three inches) would appear insufficient for such a purpose. A fourth guess might be that they were intended as spy-holes to observe the approach of marauders, the inmates not being able to use the windows for that purpose owing to their height from the ground. They could only have been available, however, for distant view. In an illumination shewing a Saxon church in Cædmon's Gospels, there are several square or slightly oblong holes, over a doorway, which is situated at some height above the ground. It is possible that they may have been for the same purpose as the holes at Minster.

There is another perplexing feature at Minster Church, viz. : a series of seven square openings, each one foot three inches wide, with jambs one foot two inches high. They extend quite across the east wall, at a height of about fifteen feet from the level of the pavement, and belonged apparently to the original church. As the wall above them was not an old one, the jambs may once have been higher, and the openings which retain the same width to the outside were possibly arched. No entirely satisfactory explanation has yet been given of this feature. In a record preserved at Canterbury, however, reference is made to an "upper choir" in Minster church which may possibly have been a loft or gallery for the nuns of the adjoining monastery. If so, light may have been originally obtained through these openings. The ends of two oak beams, black with age, which exist in the east wall, about seven feet below the brick jambs, seem to countenance the idea that there was once a

gallery here, but there is nothing to show that it was of the date of the openings. It should be mentioned that until recently there was a school-room at this (east) end of the church approached by a wooden staircase at the south-east corner. Its supports were inserted at a somewhat lower level than the remains of the beams above alluded to; and the unusual position of this schoolroom may indicate that it was the successor of some other erection, the beams of which had decayed.¹

We have now to see what evidence history affords of a Saxon Church at Minster. This, owing to a Royal personage having been the foundress of the monastery attached to it, is more definite than usual, though it is left somewhat uncertain whether there may not have been a British Church or Basilica already existing when the convent was established.

Dugdale (Mon. ii, p. 49) informs us that Minster Abbey was founded by Sexberga, the widow of Ercombert, King of Kent, who obtained land from her son Egbert for the purpose. She became the first Abbess and took possession of the monastery, accompanied by seventy-seven nuns, in the year 675.

Speed dates the foundation some years later, viz., in 710; but Tanner² and Leland³ both point out that Sexberga obtained the endowment for the monastery, as well as the site, from Egbert, who is known to have died in 673. Also, a monastery is mentioned as existing at Minster in the Acts of the Council of Beçanson, which was held in 694.⁴

On Sexberga subsequently resigning her office of Abbess she was succeeded by her daughter Ermenilda, on the death of the King of the East Angles her husband. Nothing more is known of the history of Minster until the ninth century, when it is recorded that the nuns suffered much harm during the frequent incursions of the Danes. Dugdale, alluding to this, says this monastery was at last in a great measure destroyed by them;⁵ and, according to Hasted, the edifice remained in a ruinous condition till the latter part of the reign of William the Conqueror, who is said to have removed the nuns from a monastery near Sittingbourne to Minster, on account of their Abbess having been found strangled in her bed. Nothing much appears to have been done to the buildings at Minster, under the above circumstances; for they are described as having continued "in a mean condition till the year 1130, when the monastery was re-edified, and replenished with Benedictine nuns" by William Archbishop of Canterbury, and dedicated to St. Mary and St. Sexberga.

Leland, who gives this information, remarks that from the parish church at Minster retaining the same dedication, "it is supposed by some to have been the very church itself, but by others that it adjoined it."⁶ Hasted states that the church formed part of the endowment of the monastery at its first foundation. Weever says, "some part of it is now converted into a parish church;"⁷ but it appears to have been such long before the dissolution.

¹ A plain square-headed two-light window, high up in the north wall, was probably introduced to light the school-room in the sixteenth century. A copy of it has, unfortunately, been introduced into the east gable wall during the recent restorations.

² "Not. Mon.," Kent, liv.

³ "Collect.," vol. i, p. 89.

⁴ Tanner, ed. 1815.

⁵ The first visit of the Danes to Sheppy is said to have been in 830.

⁶ Leland, "Coll.," v. i, p. 34.

⁷ "Funeral Monuments," ed. 1631, p. 283.

No Norman work is distinguishable in any part of the church, unless part of a circular-headed window in the north wall formed of stone, with no chamfers or mouldings, at the same height as the windows with the brick arches, is considered to be of that date. It is filled in with coarse rubble, and partly concealed by ivy. The repairs effected by Archbishop William may have been confined to domestic buildings now destroyed. The length of the original church appears to have been 72 ft. internal dimensions, and the width, which was uniform throughout, 20 ft. The height of the walls externally on the north side are now as much as 33 ft. In the exterior the floor is two feet above the level of the ground on the same side.

An Early English arch was thrown across the old nave, 20 ft. from the east wall, at the time the arcade was introduced between the north and south naves. There is no structural division in the Early English nave.

Minster Church is best known from its containing the monument of a Knight, whose effigy is accompanied by the head of his war charger, carved in stone. There are also other monuments of interest, but it was not suspected to contain Saxon remains.