

PLATE I.



CARFAX TOWER, OXFORD, IN 1819.

THE AGE OF CARFAX TOWER, OXFORD.¹

By J. PARK HARRISON.

Much of the difficulty which has been met with in deciding what repairs ought to be done to St. Martin's tower, Carfax, would have been avoided, and the decision, at length adopted by the Oxford Council, to preserve all old features intact, would doubtless have been carried out, had the age of the tower and its several parts been previously ascertained.

We learn, indeed, from Antony Wood that the earliest mention of St. Martin's Church that he could find was in a charter of Canute's by which it was granted to Abingdon Abbey *circa* 1033; and he points out that this was some time after Canute became possessed of it; adding that many believed that Eadward the Elder, the son of Alfred the Great, built the church.

The Rev. Carteret J. H. Fletcher, the last vicar of St. Martin's previous to the union of the parish with All Saints' and the demolition of the church to improve the highway, in his recent history of Carfax church and parish, draws attention to the fact that the charter is not a foundation of a church, and that it was not known when St. Martin's Church was built. There was also a possibility that the present tower was not the original one.

History, then, supplying merely the bare information that Canute gave a church, dedicated in honour of St. Martin, to Abingdon Abbey, it rests with archæology to ascertain whether any architectural evidence can be produced sufficiently distinctive to show that Carfax tower or any part of it is as old as Canute's time; and it will presently be seen that this is certainly the case.

But, first, it should be mentioned that two views have been propounded regarding the age of Carfax tower as it now exists; one that it is Early English, with the

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, November 3rd, 1897.

exception of the exterior of the belfry stage, which was cased and materially altered about forty years ago; the other that only the lower part of the tower is Early English, the upper half having been rebuilt, apparently in the fourteenth century. Mr. T. G. Jackson, R.A., who is engaged on the restoration, and a few other experts adopt the latter view, with this important addition that there is older work inside. So the 16-inch walling round three sides of the tower, with Early English windows on two sides and angle buttresses at the north-west and south-west corners, are not part of the original tower. Indeed, there is constructive evidence which shows that they were built against tower walls of an earlier date.

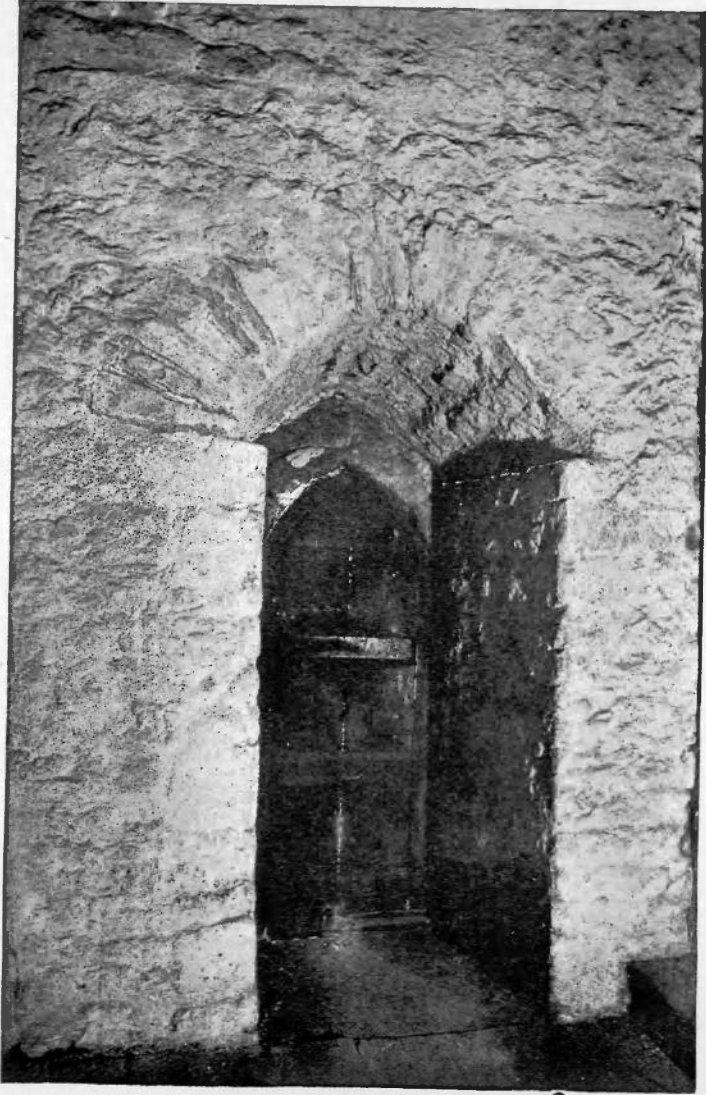
The Early English lancet window on the north side, it is important to note, was in recent times fitted with an oak doorcase and door, access being obtained to it by a low turret staircase of the same date, for which a tall turret, reaching some feet above the tower battlements, is now to be substituted. The window previous to its being converted into a doorway, and another lancet window on the west side, with an Early English gablet over it, and the angle buttress at the north-west corner, are shown in Plate I, as given in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of September, 1819, whilst the Early Decorated church was still standing.¹

The fact that an Early English window, which has since been converted into a door, took the place of an earlier doorway, which would have been reached only by a ladder, accounts for a fissure between its south jamb and the wall of the ancient tower. It was doubtless caused by the slamming of the door, which disrupted the mortar and small rubble between the old and new work.

Before proceeding, as some doubt appears to have been entertained whether the transcript of Canute's charter in the *Abingdon Chronicon* was genuine, it should be mentioned that Mr. Fletcher has no doubt on the subject; and Mr. Stevenson, the editor of the *Abingdon Chronicles* in the Rolls Series, accepts it. The reason for the doubt was simply that the term "famous" was

¹ It is from a drawing by Mr. Buckler, architect, and represents the tower previous to the nineteenth century alterations.

PLATE II.



SAXON DOORWAY IN CARFAX TOWER, OXFORD.

applied to Oxford.¹ But Mr. Fletcher points out that it was correctly used, Oxford being the frontier city of Mercia, and commanding the through route to the south as well as the traffic along the river.

The late Mr. Boase also in his history of Oxford says that it was an important town previous to 912, since its name is coupled with London in the *Saxon Chronicle*; and that it was the centre of a district. The fabulous antiquity once assigned to the city seems to have led to some disinclination to believe that even Saxon remains exist in Oxford; and it will only be by strict archæological methods and by trusting to the testimony of the stones themselves that the mistake will be dispelled.

Having thus prepared the way, I have now to show what the evidence of age is that the early work inside Carfax tower provides. It consists in the presence of very distinctive features belonging to two ragstone arches in the north and west walls of the ringing chamber, and a doorway in the north wall, at some height above the ground, which at present preserves its original appearance. One of the distinctive features is inside the doorway, and another is inside an irregularly splayed window-opening in the west wall. The latter was altered in past times, but remains in evidence.

The distinctive feature referred to is a structural peculiarity common both in Roman and Saxon architecture, causing of necessity the span of arched openings to be wider at the springing than the width between the jambs or pier walls below. There is, I believe, no special name for the feature, but it may perhaps be termed a wall or recessed impost. The Romans used it to support centering on which their ragstone arches were turned. The Saxons appear to have copied the structural feature, at first without knowing how to frame centering, though eventually learning to do so, either through foreign intercourse or otherwise. The great irregularity in the form of Early Saxon arches would thus be accounted for.

Mr. Micklethwaite, who is an authority on the subject, informs us that this recessed impost continued in use to the end of the Saxon period of architecture.

¹ "In urbe quæ nomine famoso Oxanafordæ nuncupatur." (*Chron. Abing.*, Vol. I, p. 439.)

It is interesting to find that Oxford possesses four examples of this feature, the last discovered very recently. I propose to describe them in the order of their apparent age.

I. There are precisely similar wall imposts and irregular ragstone arches like those at Carfax in the wall at the north-east end of Christ Church Cathedral. They have been accepted as Saxon by experts in early masonry, and the remains are believed to be part of the small church of the Holy Trinity that is known to have been built by Didan *circa* 727, and is supposed to have been the earliest founded in Oxford. For reasons connected with the conversion of the church to conventual purposes by St. Frideswide, Didan's daughter, the wall and arches appear to have been religiously preserved; and they were restored, and the church enlarged by Ethelred II, as recorded in his charter of 1002; the roof, furniture, and books alone having been burnt when the Danes met their doom on St. Brice's Day in the tower where they had taken refuge.

II. A third example of this feature with the springing stones of the arch of what appears to have been a doorway is in the north wall of the present ringing loft of the tower of St. Peter's-in-the-East. Here, in addition to the wall impost, the walling to the height of 5 feet, which contains the ancient remains, is of a construction that may have been copied from Roman work elsewhere. The west wall is built in the same way up to the same height. Both wall and arch may have been built in the ninth century. (Plate III.)¹

III. A fourth example exists in a doorway high up in the north wall of St. Michael's tower in Cornmarket Street. Here it is to be noted that, although the arch is formed of ragstones, it is circular and apparently turned on framed centering; and there is a slightly moulded impost, which projects beyond the face of the wall, so that the span of the arch, though wider than the width of the doorway, is less so than in the three other examples. It should be remembered that St. Michael's was one of the towers that Mr. Rickman relied on as proving that there was a Saxon style of architecture; but the unfortunate

² The greater part of the tower is much still to be learnt from the appears to have been rebuilt; but there earlier work.

PLATE III.



REMAINS OF SAXON DOORWAY IN ST. PETER'S, OXFORD.

mistake made by a distinguished antiquary in assuming the two Saxon towers which are still in existence at Lincoln to be the ones recorded in Domesday Book, as having been built after the Conquest, led to doubts arising in the minds of Mr. J. H. Parker and others about the Saxon date of St. Michael's. This mistake was detected a year or two before his death by the late Precentor Venables, who showed conclusively that the two churches mentioned in Domesday were taken down three or four hundred years ago. Consequently the age of the two Lincoln towers remains unknown; and their architecture is no guide to the style of work that the Saxons had attained to by the Confessor's reign or some time previous to it. The important point in connection with the four examples of arches springing from wall imposts in Oxford is, that they occur in the case of churches standing on what are known to have been Saxon sites.

But it is not only this constructive feature that settles the Saxon date of Carfax tower, for, in addition to the doorway high up in the north wall, which also occurs, as before mentioned, at St. Michael's, and, as it would seem, formerly at St. Peter's-in-the-East, if the Early English buttress, lancet windows, and casing are in imagination removed, and the Early Decorated and modern work of the belfry, the proportions of Carfax tower would come out as Saxon; and the thickness of the walls on which the Early Decorated upper half of the tower was rebuilt is the same as at St. Michael's, and the mortar is of the same composition. Nor is this all. The line of the south wall of the original church was within the line of the Early Decorated nave, as seen on the east wall of the tower; and it was, as commonly the case in Saxon churches, lofty in proportion to the width of the building. In excavating foundations for an ornamental modern doorway for the tower, at its east side the lower courses of an Early English tower-arch of two orders were found. They were simply chamfered, and the width between the jambs was barely 6 ft. 3 ins. This archway was not in the centre of the tower, and appeared to have been inserted in the old uncased Saxon wall, probably at the time that the Early English casing was added on the other sides of the tower, perhaps whilst the original

church was standing. It looks as if there had been some doubt about the prudence of inserting even this narrow archway in the old 3 foot 8 inch east wall, and that this might also account for the addition of the 16-inch casing. If there was any previous communication between the church and the tower it may be assumed that it was through a narrow door that could be readily blocked and defended. Higher up there is a square, or rather an oblong, opening, with massive oak lintels. It is nearly in the centre of the east wall of the clock-room. It will, I believe, be made use of for the illuminated clock and supported by the ancient quarter boys, dressed in the costume of Roman soldiers which have been long preserved in the Corporation vaults; and will now renew their vocation, little, as appears, the worse for wear.