

NOTES ON THE SAXON CRYPT, SIDBURY CHURCH,
DEVONSHIRE.¹

By WALTER CAVE.

In September, 1898, some work was being done to the chancel of this church which led to the discovery of an undoubted Saxon crypt. The Norman chancel originally extended some 14 feet eastwards beyond the chancel arch. The north and south walls only, now remain, and the foundations of the square eastern termination were found during these excavations. All the Norman foundations are in good condition and average some 4 feet in depth below the Norman chancel floor level and on each side rest partly on the walls of the Saxon crypt.

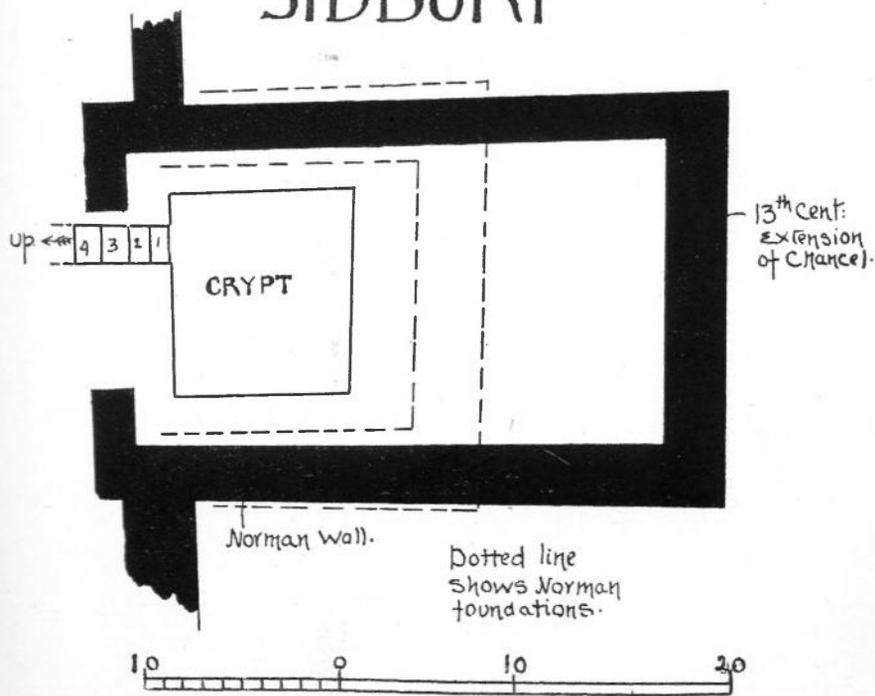
Excavations were being made for some heating pipes, and the clerk of the works, Mr. Mann, found some traces of walling below the Norman foundation of the north wall which being further exposed brought to light the outlines of the Saxon crypt. On reference to the plan it will be seen that the crypt is practically a square chamber, within the lines of the original Norman chancel, with an entrance in the west wall and a flight of steps leading into the nave.

Unfortunately there is little left of the walls except on the west side where against the jamb of the doorway the Saxon masonry is some 4 feet high, with two stone quoins still in position which are fair specimens of Saxon axed work in good condition. The treads and risers of the steps are rough, and these, with a part of the floor of the crypt, are still covered with a coating of lime plaster, which Mr. Micklethwaite, in writing of the Saxon Crypt at Brixworth, describes as "the degenerate descendant of the Roman '*Opus signinum*.'"

The four corners of the crypt are however quite distinct, but there is no where height enough of the

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walling to tell if there were any windows, or in what manner it was covered in, nor are there any traces of piers in the centre, so it may be assumed that it was vaulted in one span.

The walling is rough and there is no evidence of any faced stone work, excepting the two quoins above referred to, and the whole was possibly covered with the same plaster as the floor and steps. The mortar with which the walls are built is of inferior quality and easily distinguishable both in colour and texture from that used in the Norman foundations.

From the position of the entrance and the flight of steps it may be assumed that the original Saxon church had no aisles but otherwise was built somewhat after the manner of St. Wilfred's churches at Hexham and Ripon. The churches of this description, according to Mr. Micklethwaite's valuable treatise on Saxon church building (*The Archæological Journal*, December, 1896), had a raised platform at one end where the altar stood and beneath this was a vault called the "confessio."

This confessio or crypt was of a variety of shapes, in fact no two yet discovered are the same in arrangement, and was intended for the deposit of sacred relics, and where the levels allowed of it there was a window below the altar through which the confessio could be seen into from the church.

Now in this instance at Sidbury the centre of the entrance to the crypt is 2 feet 8 inches north of a central line drawn through the church from east to west, and the reason for this becomes apparent, when we consider that the steps leading up to the presbytery would probably be placed as nearly central as possible and therefore the steps down to the crypt would have to be on one side.

The only other five examples known of Saxon crypts in England (*i.e.*, those at Hexham, Ripon, Wing, Repton, and Brixworth) have quite a different place of entrance, and with the exception of Ripon each has the remains of two entrances from the church, and in each case outside passages round the central chamber. But at Sidbury there is but one entrance and this is *direct* from the nave, and the crypt itself is unbroken by any divisions.

From the above remarks we can draw the following conclusions, before the Norman church was built at Sidbury there existed on the *same* site a small Saxon church with a nave and narrow presbytery and crypt below, the latter arranged in a manner that differs from all known examples.

It is interesting to note that though the Norman chancel was built outside the lines of the Saxon one, it bears towards the south while the walls of the Saxon crypt now exposed are nearly straight with the present nave.