

# ST MARY'S CHURCH CHEPSTOW.

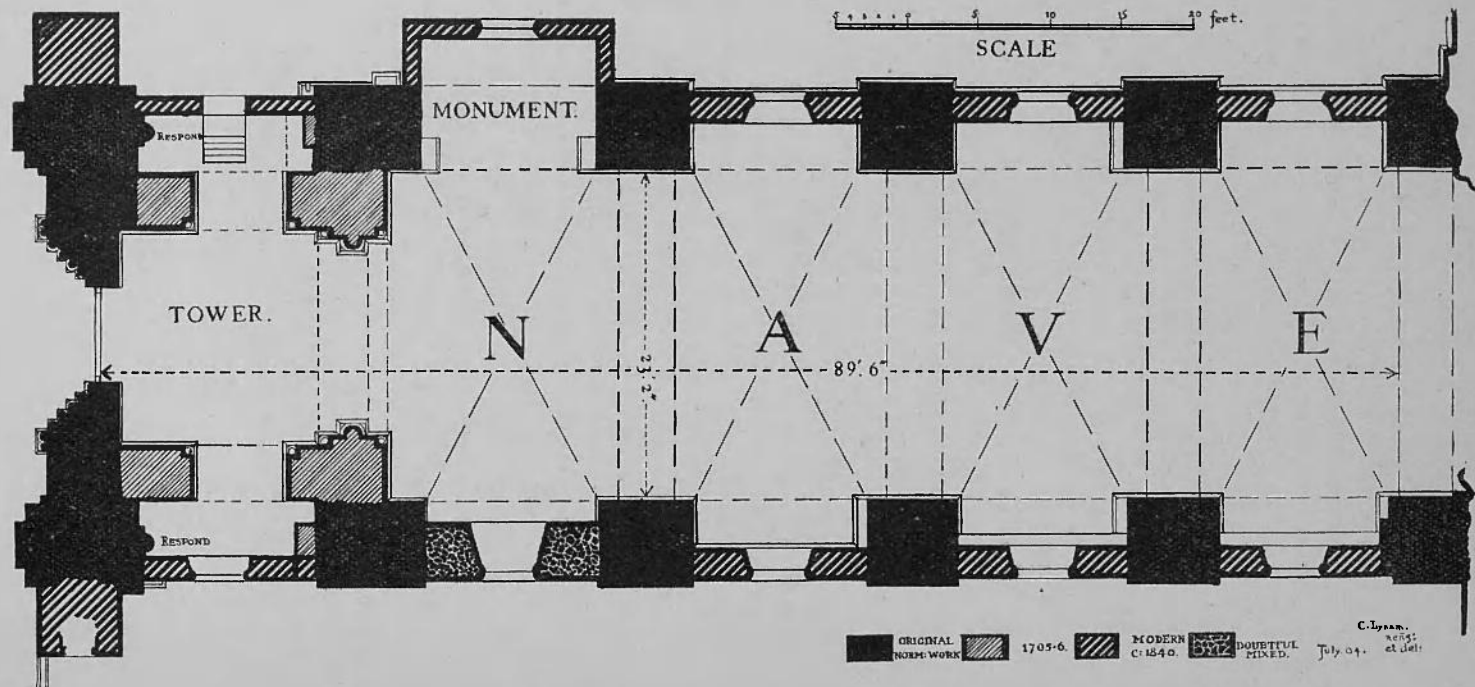


FIG. 1.—PLAN. ST. MARY'S CHURCH, CHEPSTOW.

## NOTES ON THE NAVE OF CHEPSTOW PARISH CHURCH.<sup>1</sup>

By CHARLES LYNAM, F.S.A.

At the recent Annual Meeting of the Institute, held at Bristol in 1904, a visit was paid to the parish church of Chepstow, and the members had an opportunity of examining the extraordinary treatment which the interior of the nave had received from modern "restorers" of various dates.

The President on that occasion drew my attention to the barbarous manner in which the original architecture of these walls had been cleft, and invited me to write a short note on the subject.

The history of this remote church at Chepstow carries us to the much wider subject of the vandalism which has held sway throughout the post-Reformation period. From the date of the dissolution of the monasteries the natural instinct for true architecture vanished and thenceforth all art depended upon the lingering taste of the mediaevalist.

In the parish church at Chepstow a fragment of the original north-west pier of the central tower still remains in all its magnificence. It is no less than 8 feet 3 inches square, in addition to the shaftings at the four angles and treble shafts on the south and north sides, and double ones on the east and west sides. Its presence makes a pleasant contrast amidst the flimsiness of the later work by which it is surrounded. Originally the church was cruciform with a central tower and was of monastic use, with the usual domestic buildings to the south, but there are no visible remains of them at the present time. The nave itself is of five bays (said originally to have had six) without aisles, its walls being made up of the original piers of its arcades and modern filling (except to one bay on the south side where the

<sup>1</sup> Read before the Institute, July 5th, 1905.



FIG. 2.—ST. MARY'S, CHEPSTOW. SOUTH SIDE.

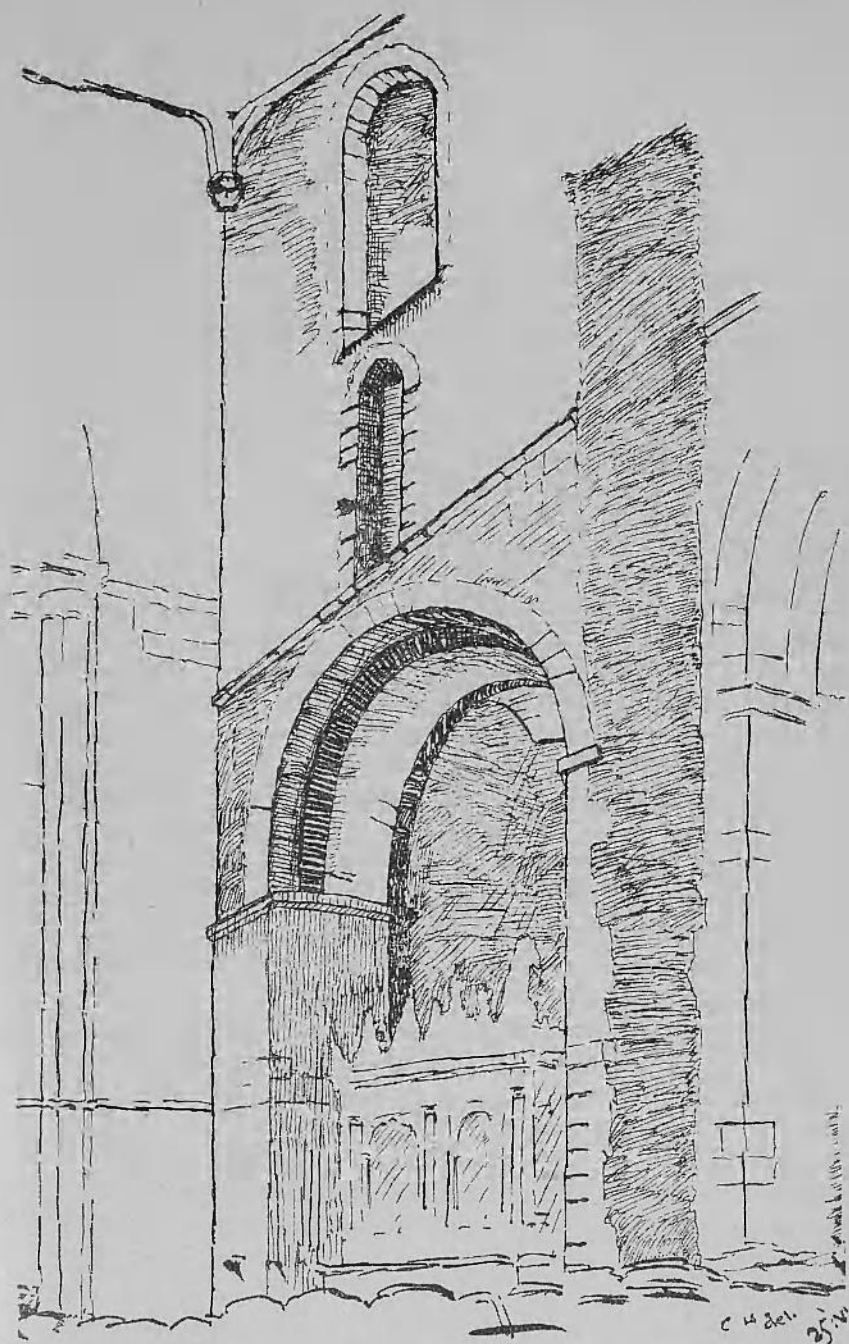


FIG. 3.—ST. MARY'S, CHEPSTOW. NORTH SIDE.

early walling remains, see plan). Within the western bay the present tower has been constructed, the west wall of the church having been made to serve for that of the tower. The lower parts of the north, south, and east walls of the tower have been dealt with in attempted Norman fashion; some old fragments perhaps having been re-used, and after making certain allowances our grumbling at this need not be very bitter. The upper part of the tower was erected in 1705-6, and there is a certain amount of breadth and quaintness about its design which in a degree perhaps compensates for the loss of the Norman front, yet, looking at the noble west doorway, with its six orders of mouldings and its lateral arches together with the triple-light window above, one feels the want of the completed gable and its aisles, particularly having in mind the once central tower and its spreading transeptal wings. The second bay from the west on the north side accommodates late monumental memorial. Besides the arch in the east wall of the tower, there are arches in its north and south walls leaving useless spaces between these arches and the outer walls of the nave, but to these openings we are indebted for a precious bit of detail not preserved elsewhere, which throws some light on the treatment of the arcading and which will be alluded to hereafter.

It was a strange thing to take away the character of these great piers of the nave and to turn them into mere wall facings, and we may well inquire, What was the original form of these piers on the nave face? The answer must not be given hastily or without reason. It is not always safe to come to conclusions on an obscure architectural point from the evidence of a single case, and having this in mind there occurred to me soon after leaving the church on the day of the Institute's visit sundry examples of wrecked Norman churches, and also the recollection that the hand of the despoilers had not gone to quite the same length as the "restorers" of Chepstow, who made a clean sweep of everything. The churches referred to are the Chapel of St. John in the Tower of London, and of Great Clacton and Copford, both in Essex. From these examples a tentative solution of the particular question before us may be arrived at. At

Chepstow the bare wall face is left. At Great Clacton there are projecting piers with just a suspicion of an arched continuation, whilst at Copford not only the projection but the impost to the arch and a portion of the arch itself, together with the lines of the cross vault of the nave, and of the form of the lateral vaulting all remain. These points collectively, together with the vaults to the Chapel of the Tower of London appear to be sufficient for the acceptance of the opinion that the nave of Chepstow had originally a semi-circular vault along its entire length simply intersected by smaller lateral vaults and projections to the piers as well as pilasters carrying cross strengthening arches to the nave vaulting. And it was these features—the wall pilasters with the arches they carried, the nave vaulting and the lateral intersecting vaulting—of which the “Progressives” of former years made a clean sweep. I have not yet entered upon the question of the original treatment of the soffits of the arches of the arcade nor the reveals of the piers, nor perhaps is this point involved in the subject in hand, but as there are some indications of what this treatment may have been it is as well just to mention them. To the reveals of several of the piers, there are remains of projecting plinths now unoccupied by anything above them, and in some cases the sub-arches in the reveals are still partly visible, and as before hinted the out-of-the-way western responds with their square and shafted projections may be the key to the point now raised. This character of detail is also borne out by the design of the remains of the great central tower pier, before described. At Copford this feature is dealt with as a square projection to both pier and arch. To give emphasis to the fitness of the comparison chosen some particulars of each may be given.

The churches of Copford and Great Clacton were first built without aisles, but at Chepstow the presence of triforium (now built up) and clerestory show plainly enough that aisles existed there, and hence its superiority of dimensions (the present nave being 89 feet 6 inches long, 23 feet 2 inches wide, and 39 feet 6 inches high to the crown of the vaulting). At Great Clacton, the nave is 58 feet 5 inches long and 24 feet 9 inches wide,





FIG. 4.—COFFORD CHURCH, ESSEX. SOUTH SIDE NAVE.

and has a chancel continuous with the nave 46 feet 7 inches long. At Copford the total length including an apsidal chancel is 79 feet 2 inches and the width 20 feet 8 inches with a height of 29 feet from floor to crown of the vault. It will be noticed that in width, which is the material dimension on account of the span of the vaulting, Chepstow is about the average. The great piers at Chepstow are 6 feet 6 inches east and west, and 6 feet north and south, whilst those at Copford are 6 feet 6 inches

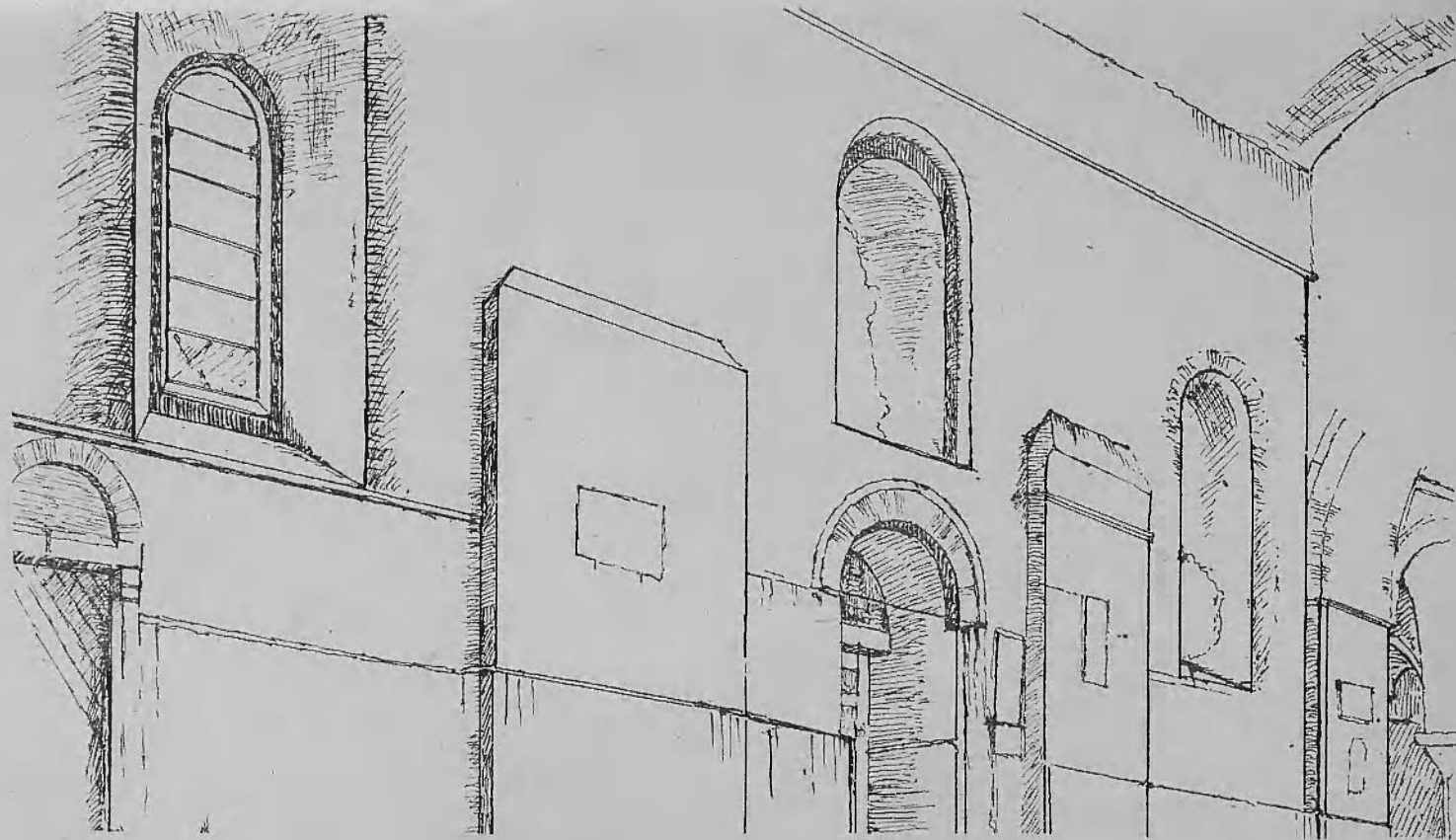


FIG. 5.—GREAT OCLACTON, ESSEX. NORTH WALL.



by 5 feet 6 inches, and at Great Clacton the piers (where no aisles exist) are 7 feet 3 inches north and south, and 7 feet 9 inches east and west, the intermediate walling being 5 feet 7 inches in thickness.

There is a marked difference in the two sides in the triforium openings at Chepstow. The south has double openings and arches treated with architectural character, whilst the north side has a simple square edged single opening. What the *rationale* of this variation may be it is hard to say : much speculation may attend it, but of structural reason there would appear to be none. The sunny side may have been chosen for display. It may be due to the tendency of the Norman builders to elaborate *fronts*, both inside and outside.

It may be that this is a case where that principle has been carried out in respect to the exterior. Everyone will remember Pugin's hatred of the modern *front* and his satire thereon, his stern assertion that the old builders despised such things, and preferred to spend the best of their powers in unseen situations ; but in Norman work this is certainly not the case. The elaboration of fronts was the common practice.

As a striking example of this fact the tower of the Church of St. Mary at Dover, may be mentioned, the front of which is very highly decorated with arcadings and carvings, whilst all the other sides are treated in the plainest manner. There is scarcely a Norman chancel or tower arch within my observation where the side most seen is not more elaborated than the other, and this practice goes back even to Saxon times.

One cannot conclude even this fragmentary glance at the church at Chepstow, or Strugul as it was otherwise called, without expressing (vain though it be) a lament that so grand an example of Norman art, with its magnificent proportions and simple details, should have been irrecoverably sacrificed.