

## On the Crypt beneath the Chancel of Repton Church, Derbyshire.

BY J. T. IRVINE.

**R**EPTON chancel (the only part of this church now left of Saxon date) is undoubtedly both a singular and valuable specimen of that style and period, though the constantly recurring statement about its "Saxon Crypt," when put to the dry test of measurement and study on the spot, somewhat disappointed the expectations raised, while the supposition of so interesting a design of pre-Norman date existing lasted.

It is like so many other churches which belonged to ecclesiastical corporations, whose legal responsibilities for the upholding of even the chancel received here, as elsewhere, but the recognition of that fact in an expenditure; just so much, and no more: as barely kept the fabric from tumbling about their ears. ("It's a bad wind, however, that blows no good to any one," here we can truly, and without shame, thank a negligence which thus preserved to us a most valuable stepping-stone in the history of Saxon architecture). The nave, and all westward belonging to the parochial laity, has suffered rebuilding on a noble scale, though now certainly much in want of the help of some munificent layman or laymen to continue and hand on the early contrast.

The assignation of this crypt to a Saxon date had been, I find, already and strongly questioned by an acute and able member of the Derbyshire Archæological Society, the Rev. J. C. Cox, in his

valuable work on the *Churches of Derbyshire*, wherein he has given notes of its early history. So closely are these in accord with the facts presented by the architectural remains seen in the building of the chancel, as to render it almost unnecessary to do more than compare and mention the same in a corresponding order. Indeed the summary of the whole reduces it but to this, that—

1st. There is here seen to have been, in early Saxon times, at this spot a church, consisting of probably but a nave and chancel. The whole built of oak beams connected together, but more strongly so, towards the base. (Curious traces of this beam construction presented at the point of junction of the nave and choir walls, will be again reverted to further on.)

2nd. A new period came, when a rebuilding confined to the chancel took place of stone, but leaving the wooden nave and its chancel arch. Thus parts of the lower ends of the upright beams, at the point of junction of the two buildings, from their connection with the timber work of the nave at its east end had to be left, and so remained with the new Saxon stone work of the choir butting up against and over them.

In addition to the former square chancel, three small chapels were added on its north, south, and east sides. The choir itself being formed into the shape of an upper and lower chancel, the lower being sunk down into the ground, no doubt to obtain space for the required height of each chapel, without destroying the ability to connect this new double choir with the old Saxon wooden nave, which had to be preserved. The division between the upper and lower chapels, and chancels, must have been by the means of a wooden floor; below which, in the south wall, two narrow lights lighted the lower choir. These two lights remain at present, and though now built up, fairly enable us to discover that this rebuilding of the choir in stone must have taken place only in late Saxon times (probably somewhere about 1050), in the reign of the Confessor: for their glass plane had advanced close to that of the wall front, and the use of a mid-wall light slab had been abandoned. A sure mark of late Saxon date.

The entrances to the lower chancel and its chapels was through

the present western entrances, down from the church, along which were no doubt wooden gangways to the upper choir ; thus leaving the centre in both cases open to those who might be in the nave. The plan of the lower chancel and its curious side chapels is deserving of careful study and comparison with that of the so-called Saxon crypt at Wing church, with which these chapels present a most singular correspondence.

3rd. There arrived a period when the old nave of wood is rebuilt of stone. This wooden nave could scarcely have dated earlier, at the most, than *after* the wintering of the Danish army at Repton in 874-5, and may even have been a hundred years later. The architectural character of this rebuilding is distinctly preserved in the chancel-arch wall, whose advanced Norman design is fairly in accord with the vaulting and pillars of the *crypt* then first introduced, the work being fairly attributable to the period of the Earl of Chester, Ranulph, mentioned by Mr. Cox as the person whose wife afterwards refounded the Priory. Malmesbury says of a period preceding (about 1140), that St. Wistan's body after being taken up had been conveyed here, "at that time a famous monastery, *now a Vill belonging to the Earl of Chester, and its glory grown obsolete with age*," and in another place, "*at present, as I have heard, with few or scarcely any inmates.*" This rebuilding, most probably in the life of this Earl (and thus prior to his wife's buildings), not only thus made good the parochial wants and responsibilities, but recast the choir, whose double chancels had lost, I suppose, the body of St. Wistan. Malmesbury's words, "but at present thou dwellest at Evesham, kindly favouring the petitions of such as regard thee," seemingly intend such an inference.

The new recasting obliterates these divisions of the upper and lower ; and the ordinary nave floor is continued eastward by the construction and insertion of a now *real crypt* ; formed in the sunken space of the lower Saxon choir ; whose windows, thereby rendered useless, are built up, as yet seen in the south wall, at a level now just slightly above the surface of the new choir floor.

The, now at last, removal of the old beams projecting into the

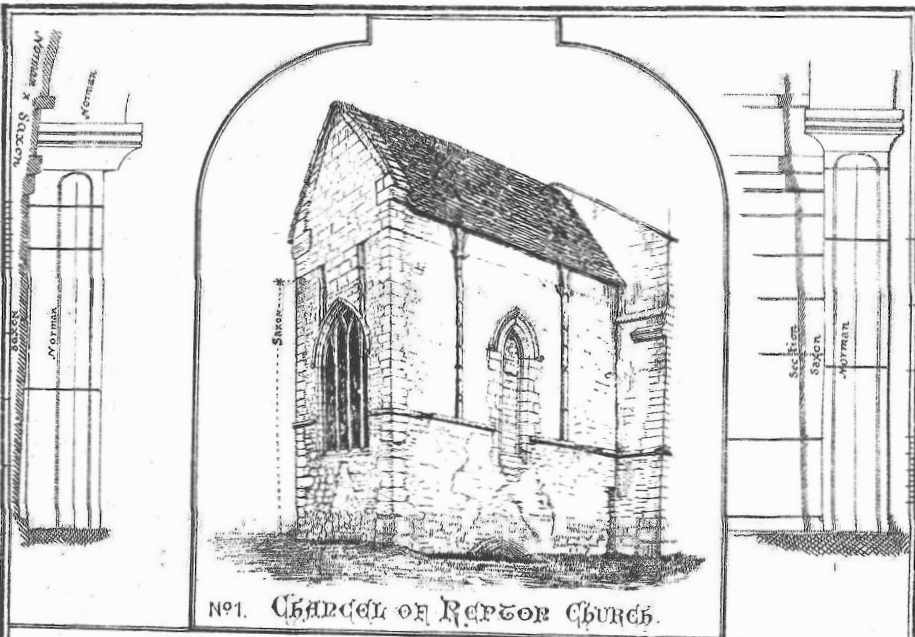
Saxon walls of the chancel left recesses, which had to be filled up with stone work of the date of this new Norman chancel gable, which filling up, as if to continue to later ages the memory of the work done, leaving those shallow and singular recesses on each side, at present seen in these angles externally.

4thly. Other alterations of later date took place, none of much note, more than the destruction of the side chapels. The construction through the site of that on the north side of an external entrance to the crypt. The introduction of later windows in north, south, and east walls, and the heightening of these last, with which two alterations of the east gable were connected, as may be seen in the very rough sketch given on plate XI., No. 1. Of this period, the most singular item was the curious method adopted by adding stones cut rudely to resemble fragments of arches, as a finish to the Saxon plaster strips under the roof eaves (see sketch).




It now remains but to add a few notes descriptive of the drawings. The plan given on plate XI., No. 2, will enable it to be perceived that the lower chancel had been, as it would seem, rudely octagonal at the west end; the passages entering through the south-west and north-west sides of same. The remarkable Saxon cornice which went round, in its original state, not only the chancel but also the chapels, continued also at the west end, where now only its two lower courses (and wall below) remain. Above which lower courses the wall with the singular lamp recess is of the Norman date, and the introduction of the crypt. The cornice has been destroyed in all cases where it returned round into these side chapels when the vaulting was introduced, consequently on the jambs so low as the destruction of the cornice took place, the Norman vaulting plaster finishes downwards; but below those lines the original Saxon ashlar remains perfect.

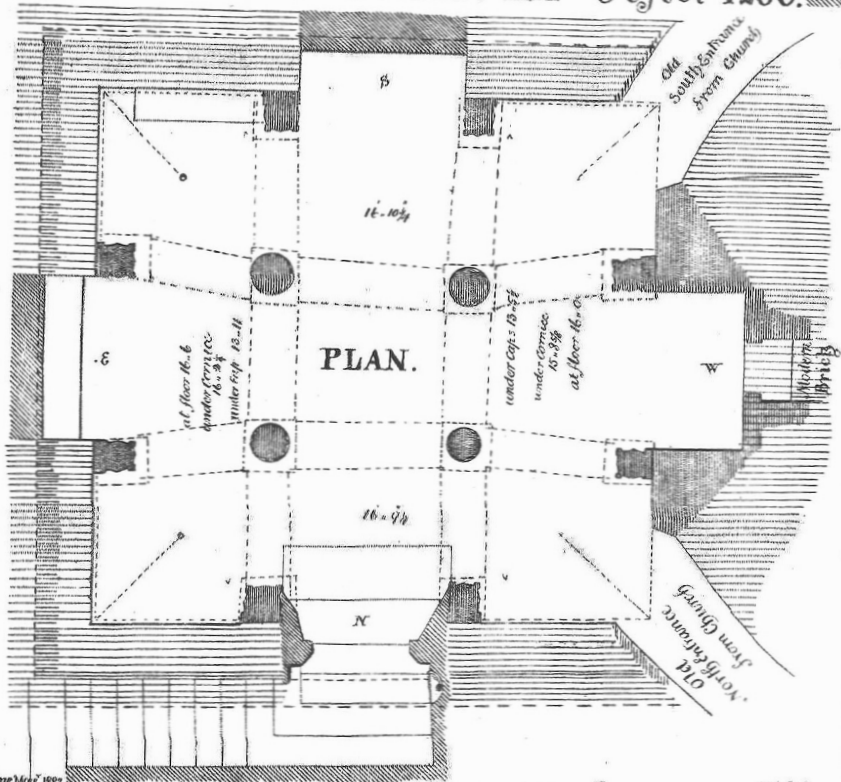
The projection of the recess of these side chapels can nowhere now be recovered without excavation. It would be interesting to discover if still in their remains could be found the tombs of the Saxon princes said to have been interred at Repton.

In all three cases, the marks of the finish of the old sloping stone



NO.1. CHAPEL OF RECTOR CHURCH.

NO.2. **Saxon.**  **Norman.**  **After 1200.** 



roof of these chapels can be traced outside, above the ground level (though least on the north side), where they served as a sort of rude buttresses to the wall originally.

At the south-east corner of the crypt the remains of a stone seat or sedilia appears to exist in the floor. There is thus reason to suspect that on the introduction of the vaulting the old floor was raised by filling in to a depth of, it may be, 14 or 16 inches. The Saxon walling disclosed the remnant of a Saxon custom in construction, and one so singular in such application that I was led to re-test my dimensions before becoming satisfied on the point. This singularity is, that the walls of the lower chapel, at least, were originally built so as to slope inwards, precisely as takes place in the openings of Saxon doors and windows. (See the various sections on plate XII.) This discovery has led me to seek if it could possibly be discovered whether other Saxon buildings presented the same feature, and I now have reason to suspect some accord of the sort to probably exist in the case of the "Saxon Chapel" at Bradford-on-Avon, Wilts.

The Saxon wall ashlar, as presented inside, is so remarkably smooth as to leave small doubt it was produced by rubbing with a stone face and sand and water. Whether this is original or whether executed when the Norman work was inserted it is very difficult now to decide. No masons' marks, so far as I saw, remain. The original height of the lower chapel may be approximated to, from the blocked windows which lighted it. From their situation it will be found to have been impossible for any sort of wooden groining to have then existed. But the wooden floor of the upper choir may have had a series of wooden diagonal supporting braces below its beams resting on the top line of the singular cornice. This cornice appears to have been a rude attempt to imitate a classic cornice, and so far as I know stands alone in remains of Saxon work in England. The walls of the interior of the present chancel are in such a state as prevents any trace of information being recovered therefrom. But on the exterior, though no trace of any lights to the upper chapel remain, yet the old height of walls is perfectly preserved. The angle

quoins of the Saxon work being perfect at the two angles. Their material, a white stone, most distinctly contrasting with the few courses of later addition on each angle, which last are of a reddish tint. The Saxon quoins are not what would be called "long and short work," but correspond with the usual run of late Saxon ones in having the joint fairly close at the angle and gradually widening inwards, precisely as in those of the Saxon Church of Boarhunt, in Hampshire, etc.

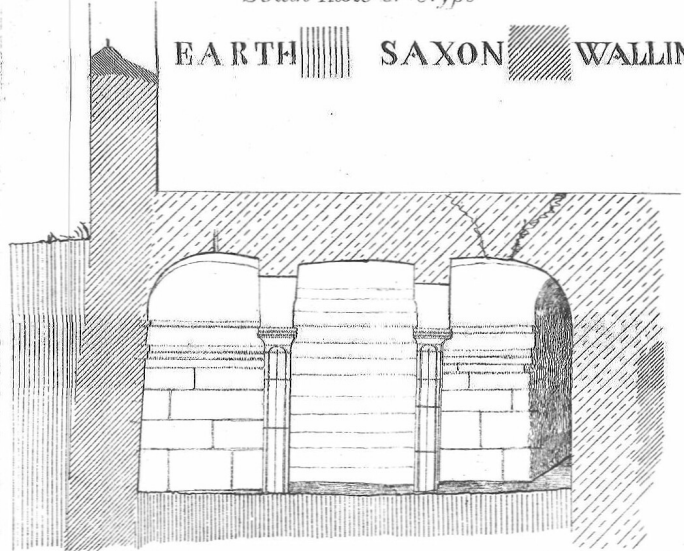
Each of the three faces of the Saxon chancel had, at some distance from the ground, a square string, from which rose two of the usual narrow stone ribs or pilasters, dividing the whole space into three parts, a wide centre and two narrower sides. The ribs seem to have simply run up and finished under eaves of roof and gable coping (if coping then existed). The triangle of gable had completely gone at an early period, a few quoins, together with a raising so far of the side walls, and a new gable (and its summer stones) has been added. This had a further slight addition again to the gable, probably when the present Decorated east window was introduced.

The Norman crypt has certain peculiarities which seem to argue the presence of a foreign architect or master mason, especially in the singular plan of the wall shafts or responds, if such a term is here justifiable. Though no painting can be seen on the vault plaster, yet considerable remains exist on the caps of the columns, where the colour of the upper sunk hollow line is green, that of the lower dark red, the under splay of cap light red; in some cases these flattish hollows appear to have been ornamented with either figures or foliage. In no case does the lines of these caps ever range or level with those of the older cornice, against which they are placed. The shafts in the centre of this vaulting have as much to carry as they well can bear, nor would it be at all safe to add to their load further weight above. The north-east and south-east vault spaces (alone) retain openings which once went through to the upper chancel, and in the south-west division is the repair of a hole broken through the vault; no doubt that which was made when this crypt is described as "just discovered." In the eastern

Nº 1.

*Longitudinal Section through South Aisle of Crypt*

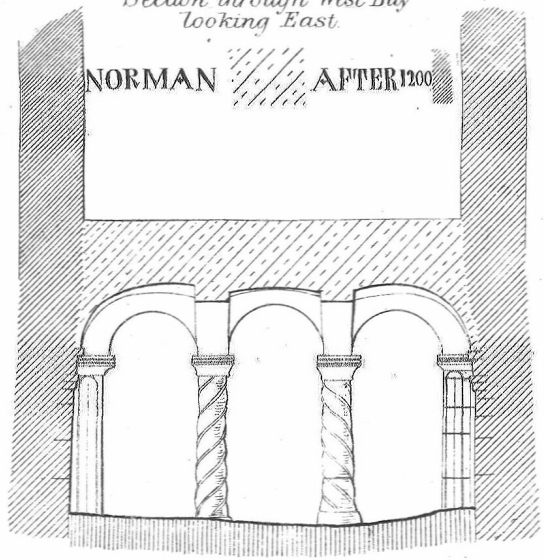
EARTH    SAXON    WALLING



Nº 2.

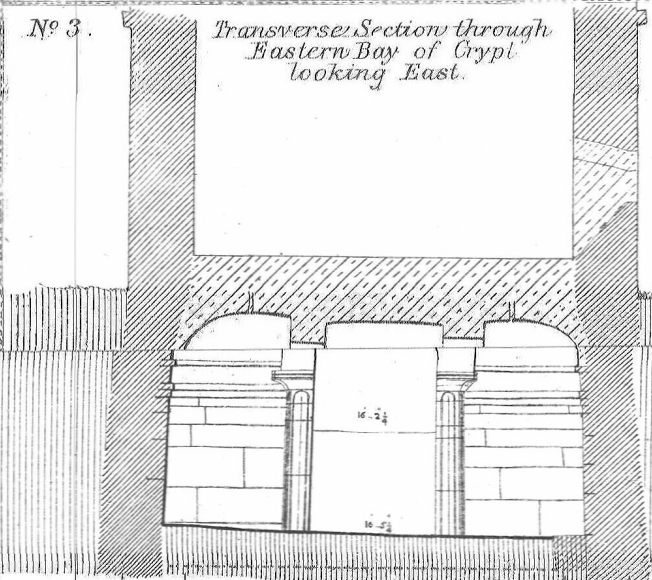
*Section through West Bay looking East.*

NORMAN    AFTER 1200



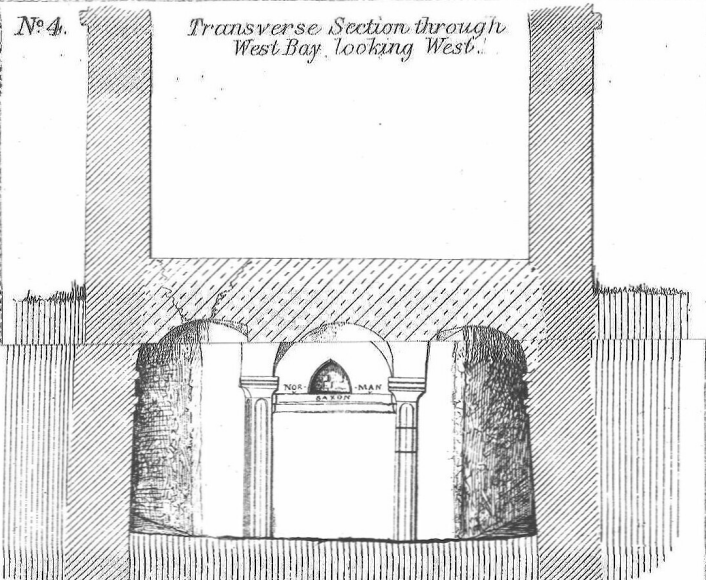
Nº 3.

*Transverse Section through Eastern Bay of Crypt looking East.*



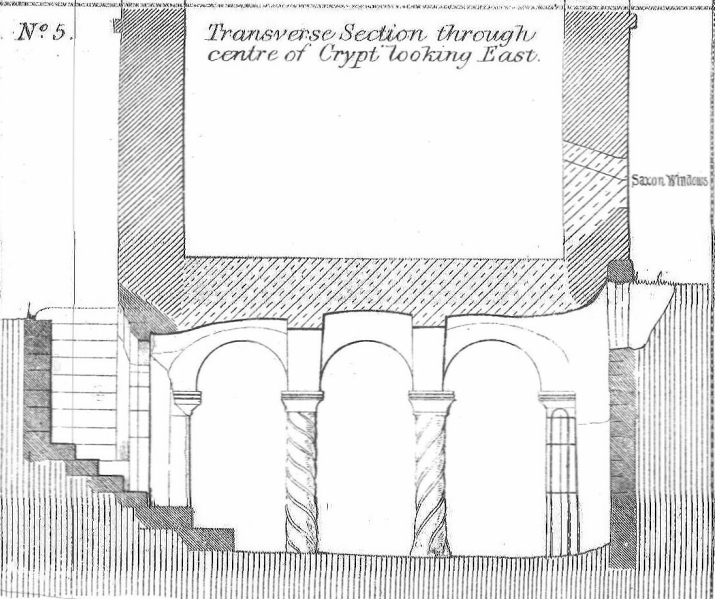
Nº 4.

*Transverse Section through West Bay looking West.*



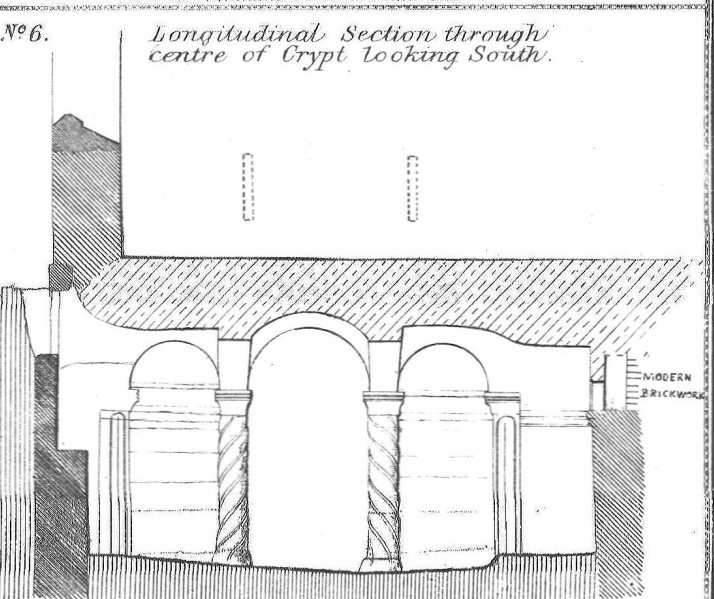
Nº 5.

*Transverse Section through centre of Crypt looking East.*



Nº 6.

*Longitudinal Section through centre of Crypt looking South.*





recess is a sort of stone altar, but it appears very doubtful whether it is original, and looks much like a modern building merely to strengthen the wall outside. The external entrance was made during the Decorated period. In its new walls at the west end is the remains of a holy water stoup. It may be also noted that during the introduction of the vaulting some tampering took place with the old Saxon entrances at the same time that the general plan of that end was altered from octagonal, the form being altered to correspond to the earlier plan of the other sides, thus enabling the groining plan to be executed. In its west recess is now found a sort of platform, but as to whether original, or built only when the figure of the knight in armour was removed from the upper church to its present position, I was unable to discover with certainty.

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On Plate XII. No. 1 presents a longitudinal section through the south aisle of the crypt.

On No. 2 is given a section through the westernmost bay, looking eastwards. In this the slope inwards of the side walls (as they rise) is well seen.

No. 3 presents a tranverse section looking east through the eastern bay of crypt. It is there seen that the whole width of the opening into the old small chapel had been preserved when the crypt was formed in Norman times, the caps of the angle shafts presenting no projection towards it. The block of masonry of doubtful date placed in the opening is seen, as is also the curious and utter disregard of the levels of the early Saxon cornice by the caps of the new crypt work, which takes place in all the other cases.

No. 4. Transverse section, west end, looking west. The centre portion represents that piece of Saxon wall here left, extending to and inclusive of the two courses of the old cornice left under the curious lamp recess. This lamp seems to have been worked from the church above, with a wooden shutter to the crypt side. Its back is now only brick, probably the end of some vault or grave. When the Norman construction took

place this large recess was made to enable their vaulting to be formed and obtain some uniformity with the other sides. In its *new* side walls they continued the two courses similar to the old cornice along the return walls of the recess, but the sections, as might be expected, do not quite agree, nor even the levels. In both entrance passages the junction line between the Saxon and Norman walling is very distinctly marked by their being in different planes, and producing thus an angle of very rough junction.

No. 5. Transverse section (looking east) through centre bay of crypt, and showing the external entrance formed from the north side of the church, perhaps on purpose for use in processions from the Priory, which lay to the eastward.

No. 6. Longitudinal section, east and west through centre of crypt and floor of present choir, above which the situation of the blocked lights of the lower Saxon choir are seen. The singular lowering which takes place in the construction of the inserted crypt work towards the west end might suggest that the Norman church had steps up to its chancel, which slope necessitated this result. But I am obliged to confess that a consideration of the general state of the existing church and its levels seems to render the idea doubtful. Of course the sinking of the floor of the early Saxon lower choir was but an exaggerated version of the usual plan (almost universal in Saxon churches) of *descending* by steps down into the chancel.

It is to be greatly hoped that whenever further improvements and repairs take place in the church this most interesting chancel and its belongings may receive tender handling. It wants but careful cleaning rather than ought else. The opening of its north light and the removal of the flat ceiling, the restoration of the lost gable cross, with the *very very* careful removal of the modern plaster inside from the stone ashlar *only*, but not from the surfaces originally plastered. This is in general all that is wanted to hand forward to posterity one of the most interesting monuments of Saxon architecture "Time and the Dane" (with other and later friends not a bit better, but rather *worse*, than the last) have left Derbyshire.