

## Dale Church: its Structural Peculiarities.

BY JOHN WARD.

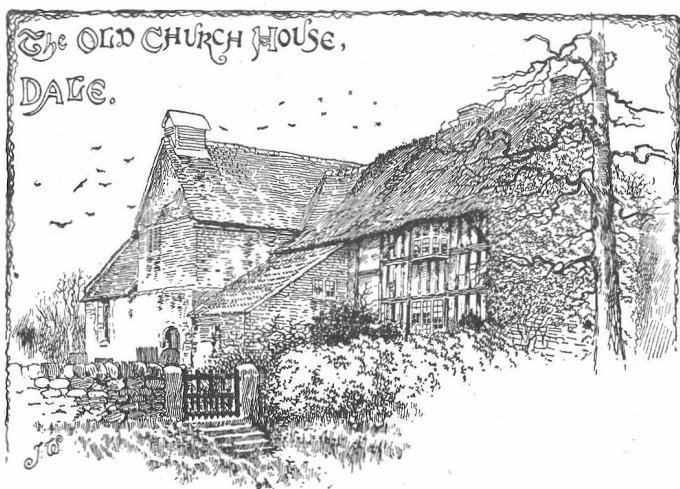
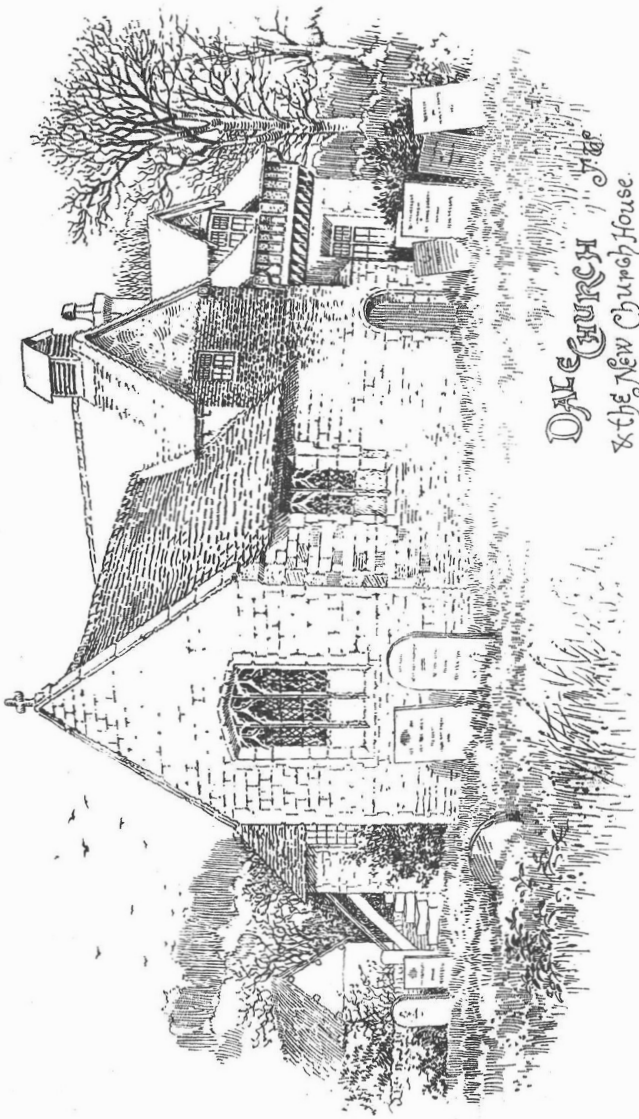


FIG. I.

**W**HO has searched out the historic places of Derbyshire and failed to make the acquaintance of the curious little Parish Church of Dale? What old-world memories cluster around its venerable stones! No other spot in this county is invested with a greater glow of interest—with traditions so picturesque, so romantic. Who has not heard the story of its origin—the mid-day vision, some seven-and-a-half centuries ago, of the pious baker of Derby, wherein he was commanded to betake himself to the wilds of Depedale, and there serve God in solitude? This has been often told, notably in an early volume of this *Journal*,\* when also was related how the

\* Vol. V.



Dale Church  
& the New Church House

piety of this hermit ultimately led to the foundation of the noble, but now ruined, Premonstratensian Abbey close by. But it is strange that while so much has been contributed upon this Abbey and its various remains,\* the curious old fabric now used as the Parish Church has not yet found a place in our *Journal*; yet it is indisputably the most interesting fragment of monastic Dale. Still it has not been neglected; it has had a worthy exponent in the Rev. Chas. Kerry, one of our most valued members, who contributed an article, "Depedale and the Chronicle of Thomas de Musca, Canon of Dale Abbey," to the *Reliquary* in 1880.†

The perusal of this article led the present writer to personally make several examinations of the structure, and the result of these was the section of his *Dale and its Abbey*,‡ dealing with the Church: the present paper is an amplification of *that*. In several points this paper will be found to take exception to Mr. Kerry's views at the time he wrote; but essentially it is an advance upon his article—he laid the foundation, and another has built thereupon; but in the superstructure he has also had a considerable hand. Its chief aim is to exhibit the peculiarities of the fabric of the Church, and in order to explain them it will be necessary to turn aside to local history and tradition, but only so far as will fulfil the purpose,—*these* will undoubtedly be exhaustively treated in the long-promised, but now soon-to-be-published, monograph of the Rev. Dr. Cox and Mr. St. John Hope.

THE CURSORY INSPECTION.—Approaching the Church from the village, the green little graveyard, the time-toned masonry, the high-pitched gables, contrastive roof lines and background of wooded hill-slope, make up a decidedly picturesque *ensemble*. Pretty, indeed, is the new Church House adjoining; but who would not rather the former thatched and timber-framed consort, so ruthlessly swept away ten years ago, were back again? We now

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\* By Mr. St. John Hope, in Vols. I., II., and V.

† Reprinted in pamphlet form as *The Hermitages of Depedale*, now rather difficult to obtain.

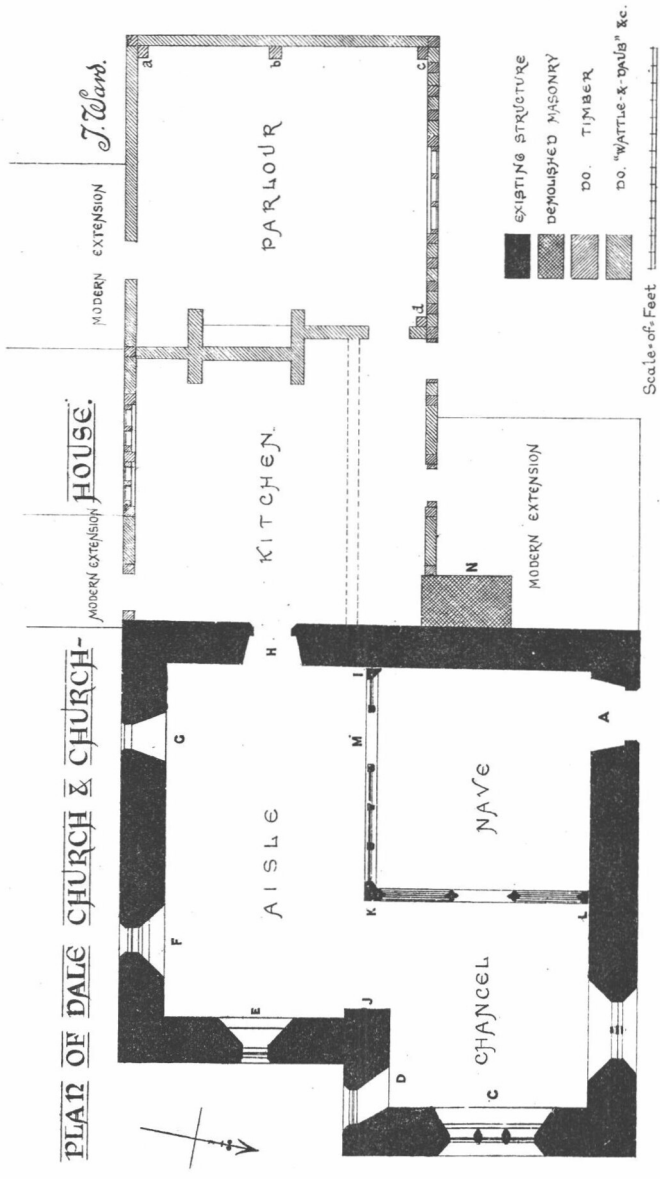
‡ Derby: Bewley and Roe; London: Elliot Stock.

enter the south door. For a moment the eye fails to penetrate the gloom; but soon a medley of props and posts, beams and ceilings, odd-shaped pews and benches, is dimly descried. Nothing is straight or upright. What does it all mean! Presently the "madness" resolves itself into "method."

We find that we have entered a square area—(see Plate V.), marked off from the rest of the interior by two oak screens; this we will regard as the nave. This part of the Church is rather dark, for, having no windows, all its light is borrowed from the aisle and chancel. Passing through the eastern screen, we enter the queerest of little chancels. The communion table—or, rather, chest—is, Puritan fashion, in front of the reading desk, which occupies the place the form<sup>r</sup> usually does. The tottering panelled pulpit of 1635 is at the north end of the desk; and at the opposite, is the clerk's seat, snugly sheltered in the corner of the chancel. On this side, in front of the latter seat, is an ample armchair of very domestic type and all a-glare with paint and varnish, and decorated with scrolls and scallops. Is it the sedile? It is popularly known as the "Bishop's Throne." The Earls of Stanhope, the lords of the manor, were in former days "lay-bishops" (as the marble tablet on the opposite wall has it) of the peculiar of Dale Abbey. Immediately above this chair is the iron safe; and a little further to the right, and just within the aisle, is the old Abbey font. What a curious collection of parochial functions would there be represented if only the bier that hangs on the west wall and the harmonium upstairs were also in the chancel! The chalice is said to be one of the largest in England, being nine inches high and fifteen inches around its rim. The chancel has an east window (c) of three lights, surmounted with a shallow-pointed arch; a north square-headed window (B) of two lights; and a small south square-headed light (D).

The chancel for half its length and the whole of the nave are open to the aisle. The nave is marked off from it by what appears now as an open screen (κ, 1); but it is in reality the framework of a panelled partition with a doorway (M), the large panels having long since been sawn out. The chancel screen

PLAN OF DALE CHURCH & CHURCH-



HOUSE.

*J. Ward.*

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(K, L) has always been an open one as at present. The aisle has three small square-headed lights—an east (E), and two south ones (F, G). On the west wall may be traced the outline of a pointed doorway (H), which formerly communicated with the old Church House. Many years ago this house was an inn, and its bar-room served as the vestry. Whether the minister of the time was observed to be a little uncertain after retiring to don his Geneva gown, or, less concretely, there was a growing antipathy against this close association of things spiritual and spirituous, tradition is silent; but half-a-century ago the old doorway was built up as we see it now. In plan, then, the structure presents a northern half elongated eastwards to form a sacarium, and a south aisle a little larger than the nave area, the total internal breadth being 25 feet, and length 26 feet 6 inches.

We will already have noticed that there is a second story. To reach it we must go outside and mount some ugly modern steps against the south wall. The reader who is not acquainted with the eccentricities of Dale Church will wonder what this story is used for. A school? Well, yes—Sunday classes are, I believe, held there. But, as a matter of fact, part of the congregation meets there. A sort of overflow meeting? Not exactly. One has heard of a Revivalist meeting in a barn, in which, when the ground floor would accommodate no more hearers, the people mounted to the floor above and heard the Gospel through its gaping joints. This, however, is not the *modus operandi* at Dale. The floor there does not extend over the whole area, but stops short at the chancel. So in a sense the minister surveys, from his lofty pulpit in the chancel, the heavens above and the earth beneath, and earth, as is seemly, catches up the strains of the chorus above.

This upper chamber runs across the Church, and its lofty roof presents a gable north and south (as may be noticed in the accompanying sketches), the minor roofs, those of the chancel and Church House (old as well as new), having their axes east and west, and dying into the former from opposite directions. The chamber has a window at each end, immediately below the gable.

Its south end and southern half of the west side are of timber frame construction ; while the opposite end and the rest of the west side are of modern brickwork. The ceiling is a clumsy modern insertion. A parapet removes all danger of falling into the chancel.

THE ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT.—We will now endeavour to unravel the story of the fabric from its stones and beams. To do this requires patience, for it has undergone so many repairs—mostly clumsy—that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish “patch from piece.” The oldest recognizable fragment is a piece of Norman moulding, presumably an abacus, on a respond-like projection (J) of the south wall of the chancel. Mr. Kerry, who seems to have been the first to notice it, makes its date to be about 1150. The masonry into which it is built is presumably of the same date, but whether all the chancel wall is contemporary is a little uncertain, as its many coats of whitewash obliterate the details of the inner surface. Still, when examined outside, it becomes plain enough that the whole wall, from the east end of the aisle round the chancel to the west end of the nave, is of one work and time. So unless there should happen to be a break in the masonry (which is hardly likely) where the aisle-wall abuts against the chancel, we must conclude that the shell of the chancel and nave is also Norman.

Continuing our outside examination, it will be noticed that the jambs and sill of the small south window (D) and the jambs and arch of the round-headed north doorway (A), are of the same dark gritstone as the shell, and are clearly contemporary with it. But a mere glance is sufficient to show that the light sandstone jambs and sills of the large chancel windows (B, C) are later insertions. The south window has nothing characteristic : its jambs are simply chamfered externally, and, as will be explained shortly, the original head is gone. The south doorway has a similar chamfer ; and, while admitting the Norman age of both it and the window, there are details which seem to indicate that they are late in the style.

The aisle is plainly of a different date ; its masonry does not correspond with the preceding, and its east wall *abuts* against the chancel. The windows are more decisive : their wide internal splays and general appearance indicate that they are the lower portions of Early English lancets, their upper portions having been removed when the story above was added. The blocked-up west door is of the same date, which Mr. Kerry fixes as about 1250—unnecessarily late, I think : they may be as early as 1190.

The next alteration seems to have been the insertion of the two large chancel windows, which doubtless replaced Norman lights. The only guides to their age—their present tracery being more recent—are the wide internal splays and base-mouldings of the engaged shafts of the east window. These are unmistakably Early or Geometric English, and their date would fairly accord with Mr. Kerry's 1250\*. That these windows have also been cut down, will be seen in a moment.

At every turn the upper story has forced itself upon our notice as a later addition ; and nothing is more patent than that the walls of the older structure were generally lowered and brought to a common level to render them a suitable basement. This explains the decapitation of the aisle windows. The chancel windows were similarly treated, but their heads were rebuilt lower and their tracery was replaced with new, and the new work being in dark gritstone, may readily be distinguished from that of the thirteenth century. The effects of the alteration on these windows are more marked inside the church. The engaged shafts of the east window, which Mr. Kerry believes to have supported an inner drop-arch beneath the head, were cut through below their capitals, and were continued as a moulding along the new arch ; but instead of this moulding being mitred into the shafts, it was left clumsily abutting against them. The tracery

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\* Possibly they were introduced by the builders of the choir of the Abbey.



then inserted into these windows is Perpendicular, and the mouldings of the screens, which are an integral part of the superstructure, are of the same period; these indicate that the second story was added in the fifteenth century.\*

The superstructure is best studied from the illustrations. On referring to the plan (Plate V.) it will be noticed that the chancel screen and the side partition are finished in a large post ( $\kappa$ ) at the angle; and in the elevation (Fig. 2, a section made immediately in front of the north side of the partition), it will be seen that this post is carried upwards to the roof, and forms its chief support on that side. Its position marks the original width of the chamber, the present extension of the second floor to the east end of the aisle being modern. This extension was probably made when the outside steps were built, and the doorway over window F was cut through—seventy or eighty years ago, I am told. It is quite independent of the main floor, its timbers resting upon a post immediately east of  $\kappa$ . Access to the chamber was previously made through the floor above the west end of the aisle, and the place where the opening was may still be seen; but this was not the original mode of access. The old floor over the nave is of oak boards, covered with plaster; that over the aisle was probably similar, but it has been much disturbed—the western portion for making the above opening, and the eastern having been re-laid with deal boards. The joists of these floors are carried by central beams that rest upon the side partition; and those over the nave, like the timbers of the partition on that side, are moulded, while in the aisle they are all plain. Both screen and partition rest upon a plinth of stone.

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\* Mr. Kerry gives 1480 as an approximate date for this new work. The identity as to design, of the tracery of the chancel windows with that of the alternate windows of the Dale series in Morley Church, tends to confirm his conclusion. There is little doubt that the latter series originally came from the cloister; and as the cloister was in course of re-building in 1480, the same masons would in all probability be employed upon the above alterations; hence the identity of tracery design.

The interior of the upper story, as shown in Fig. 2, has the clumsy modern ceiling and stepped floor removed. The timbers introduced on the north end in the conjectural

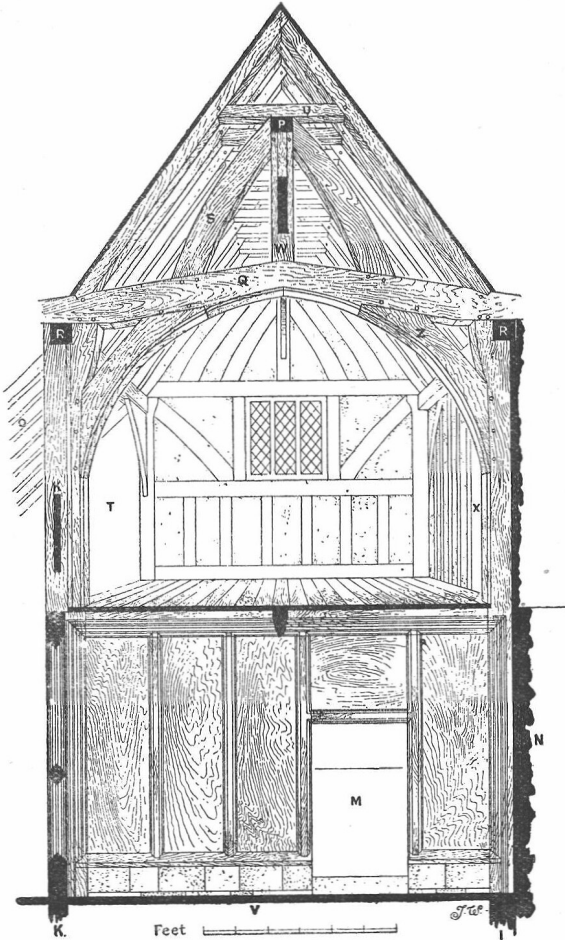


FIG. 2.

restoration (Fig. 3), are copied from those of the south end ; but the timbers of the north gable still remain, and exactly correspond with those of the opposite gable. This north

gable, however, has an interesting feature of its own. On the inner surface, about midway up the valley of the roof, are the ends of two protruding tenons ; these *may* relate to a projecting bell-cote, as indicated in the restoration. It is a pity that the existing timbers are covered externally with modern stucco.\*

The great transverse roof is the most interesting feature of the second story, but it is by no means a pleasant task to struggle through the small trap-door under the bell turret and grope amongst the cobwebs and dust, to examine it. It is divided into two bays by a tie-beam (Q) with accessories, one end of which is supported by the great post, K. Its construction is simple and effective. There are neither principals nor ridge-piece, but the latter want is met by the collars (U), which bind the pairs of opposite rafters together, being pinned to a longitudinal rib (P). This rib runs from gable to gable, and is supported half-way by the king-post (W) of the tie-beam (Q). Lateral instability is prevented by the struts (S, S) which are, with the king-post, re-produced in each gable, and this rib being braced to these posts, the danger of longitudinal unsteadiness is met. The braces (Z, Z) of the tie-beam, which are so shaped as to form, with this beam, an obtusely-pointed arch, carry the thrust of the struts (S, S) above. All the timbers are of oak, and in good state of preservation. The eastern portion of the aisle is covered with an extension (O) of the eastern slope of this transverse roof.

The chancel roof is of much simpler construction, but as it is ceiled, it is impossible to make out its details. Again, there are no principals. The rafters are prolonged beyond the outer edge of the walls to form over-hanging eaves ; while from a moulded oak wall-plate on the inner edge of the north wall (that on the south has been replaced, and the space above filled in with

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\* In Glover's *History of Derbyshire* (1829) there is a small block showing the timbers of the north gable exposed.

modern brickwork) vertical posts ascend to these rafters, and, with the collars, have a semi-octagonal disposition. The upper chamber has, with little doubt, always been open to the chancel. On each side of the large post  $\kappa$ , are the remains of tenons of former braces, such as may still be seen elsewhere in this chamber. It is probable that the opening into the chancel was finished above by an arched arrangement of braces, similar to that below the tie-beam. But instead of the other bay being similarly open to the end of the aisle, there are indications that the space was filled in. On the opposite side of the chamber, a doorway ( $x$ ) may be traced: this communicated with the corresponding story of the old Church House, which we will now consider.

I am indebted to Mr. Kerry, and to Mr. Keene's valuable series of photographs, for nearly all the following particulars of the old Church House. Stripped of its modern additions, it was oblong in plan, extending 35 feet westward of the church, and in breadth, 18 feet 6 inches, external measurements. Its walls presented two varieties of timber framing: that of the north, west, and—Mr. Kerry thinks—south walls of the western room or parlour (see plan) had its posts placed close together,\* while that of the north and south walls of the kitchen, the room next the church, had them so disposed as to form broad panels. The difference between them may be readily observed in Fig. 1. Mr. Kerry considers that the narrow panel work was co-eval with the fifteenth-century work of the church, while the rest of the framing (the large panels), including the double chimney stack, bedroom floors,† and roof, were re-constructed in 1652, the date on the old parlour mantel-beam, now rather senselessly placed outside on the west wall of the new house. There was, however, one important difference in plan between

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\* I am unable to introduce the disposition of posts on the west and south sides of the parlour into the plan, as no photograph shows it. The west end was mantled with ivy.

† Note the posts, *a, b, c, d*, in the parlour; these supported the new floor. Mr. Kerry states that they rested on the stone plinth, which projected considerably beyond the inner face of the post-and-panel walls above.

the house of 1652 and its predecessor. Where the narrow panel-work ended eastward on the north side, that is, at the end of the old parlour, "the old *return* of the parlour angle at the north door-way could be seen from the mortises on the *under side* of the beam above the foot of the stairs," indicating that the original north wall from this point to the Church was set back somewhat, as indicated by the dotted lines on the plan. The older walls rested upon a substantial stone plinth, that of the west end still remaining. The north bow window (second story) of the old house is now inserted in the south wall of the new house.\*

We now return to the Church. The fragment of Norman abacus is strongly suggestive of a former arcade, and Mr. Kerry thought this conclusive when he discovered a large abutment (N) on the west wall, hidden by the old Church House. It turns out, however, that this projecting mass of masonry—too large and broad for the *buttress* of so small a building—was quite out of the line of the supposed arcade, being, instead, somewhat centrally placed at the back of the nave. I have little doubt that it was the basement of a bell-turret, probably demolished during the fifteenth-century alterations. While the abacus indicates an arched opening of some sort, a peculiarity of the projection in which it is placed is, or, at least, seems to be, in itself fatal to the arcade theory. Instead of presenting a neatly trimmed *vertical face to the ground*, as we would expect the respond of an arcade to do, it begins to rudely slope forward about two feet below the abacus, as though the opening had a sill which was afterwards hacked away. For the same reason it could not have been a doorway. It was certainly not a window. That the chancel south wall did extend further west, is tolerably proved by the fact that the eastern face of post K, which is in the central line of this wall, is left *plain*. If it did not extend thus far, this surface would almost certainly have received mouldings—the plainness of the surface next the aisle counting for nothing, as all the timbers

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\* An old post-and-panel house, undoubtedly a relic of monastic times, near the ruins of the Gatehouse, should be compared with the older portions of the old Church House. It is apparently of the same date.

on that side are left undecorated. It is probable that the aisle was always shut off from the nave and chancel in pre-Reformation days, and that the fifteenth-century oak partition merely replaced a wall. If so, this opening may have been of the nature of those frequently found in the sides of chancels where anchorholds were attached externally; as at Rettenden (Essex), Crickhowel (South Wales), Clifton Campville (Staffordshire), Warmington (Warwick), and probably Taddington, in our own county. These

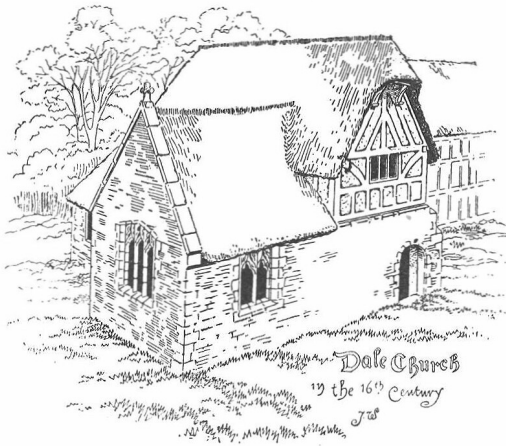


FIG. 3.

openings were usually from the second story of the anchorhold, the ground story communicating with the chancel by a door; the aisle at Dale, however, originally had no chamber above, but it is not unlikely that it was divided into two chambers, an eastern and a western, by a transverse partition, the westward window of its south wall not agreeing with the others.

We can form a tolerably correct idea of the general appearance of this building previous to the fifteenth-century alterations:—The walls of what is now the basement were higher. The chancel and nave were covered with a longitudinal gabled roof of high pitch; and there was a bell-turret at the west end. The large chancel windows were surmounted with lofty pointed arches, and were filled with geometric tracery; probably they

were inserted by the builders of the noble Abbey choir. The aisle may have had a lean-to roof; but it would be more in accordance with the time that it also should have a lofty gabled roof. Its windows had pointed heads, and its western door opened into the outer space, for there was no house adjoining. It is easier to picture the structure after its fifteenth century modifications and additions. Fig. 3 will give a good idea of its appearance. The high pitch of the roofs indicates that they were thatched.

DOCUMENTARY AND TRADITIONAL NOTICES. The beginnings of Dale Abbey form the subject-matter of a most interesting chronicle by one of its thirteenth-century canons. Fragments of the original and a fifteenth-century transcript are now bound up with the chartulary and preserved in the British Museum. Excellent translations are to be found in Glover's *Derbyshire*, and Vol. V. of this *Journal*. We gather from it:—

(1) That the hermit, the first inhabitant of the place, cut out of the sandstone rock on the south side of the valley, “a very small dwelling, with an altar towards the south.” This accounts for the rock hermitage of Dale. Date, *circa* 1135.

(2) A little later he received the tithe of Borrowash Mill, and finding a small spring west of his dwelling, he made near it a new hermitage—“a cottage, and built an oratory to the honour of God and the Blessed Virgin.” These, tradition has, I believe, ever made the starting-point of the present Church, and identified the spring with the “Hermit's Well,” a little east of the Church.

(3) The next event was the assignment of Depedale and its appurtenances to the lady known as “the Gome of the Dale” for life. Depedale was the ancient name of the spot, but it did not include the site of the Abbey—a point to be noted. She had a son whom “she caused to be ordained a priest, in order to perform the Divine service in her chapel of Depedale; and such ministry he performed.” Tradition again has constantly identified the present Church with this chapel; and the Norman work corresponds with the time of her coming to Dale, which could not have been later than 1156. Was her chapel the

actual hermitage? or was it built upon the site of it? or, as Mr. Kerry suggests, alongside it—she seeking “to attach her new chapel to the hermit’s oratory, so as to place her sanctuary under the shadow of a building consecrated by so much devotion”? The Norman opening not being a window or doorway, clearly proves the contemporary presence of a chamber on the site of the present aisle. But as it is highly probable that the hermit was dead, does not Mr. Kerry’s seem a curious arrangement? What was this empty hermitage used for? Would it not have been as much “in accordance with the religious spirit of the times” to have *utilised* the hermitage as the chapel?

(4) But a little circumstance of the *Chronicle* throws a side light on the matter. Its author, writing a century or more after the event, could state, after narrating the donation of the tithe of Borrowash Mill, “and from that time even unto this day hath that tithe remained to the brothers serving God at Depedale.” The Abbey was *not* at Depedale. Who were these brothers, then? It is unlikely that a hermitage having been endowed, the endowment would be diverted to other uses, or that the oratory would be left tenantless. May not the words, “brothers serving God at Depedale,” refer to a succession of *hermits* there? If not, who and what were these brethren? There are, indeed, other indications that the baker had successors. Uthlagus, the converted robber, was supposed to have ended his days at Depedale, in secret intercourse, serving God there. And there, also, at a later date, reposed the body of Peter Cook, of Bathley, hermit. Grant a successor to the first hermit, we can then understand why the “Gome’s” chapel would be placed alongside his oratory, and why an opening was made between the two, in order that the solitary might receive the benefit of the chaplain’s daily ministrations at the altar. And, granting that this succession continued to the fifteenth century, we can also understand the panelled partition, with its door, between what we now term the aisle and the nave.

(5) About forty years later, Dale Abbey was founded, and



Depedale and its appurtenances were bestowed upon it. One of the conditions was that "a priest of the congregation should every day for ever celebrate, within the chapel of Depedale, mass" for the donor's, etc., souls. The remains of the altar in the chancel, hacked away in true Reformation style, indicate that masses were said there to the last.

(6) We now come to the fifteenth-century metamorphosis. Whatever its object, it is clear enough that a new function was added to the structure. So far as I am aware, history is silent as to its nature; but Mr. Kerry has probably again struck the right note when he suggests that it was the Abbey Infirmary. The large upper hall would admirably serve the purpose, as the sick and infirm would be able to both see and hear the priest at the altar; and the new wing would furnish other necessary chambers. And equally well would an anchorite below in his own apartment, and a simple layman in the nave, see and hear; yet each would be invisible to the other spectators.

It was a by no means unusual arrangement for domestic and other chapels to have their rear portion divided into two stories, each opening into a common chancel of one story. Parker, in his *Medieval Domestic Architecture*, gives several examples, notably those of East Hundred (Berkshire), Berkeley Castle, Chibburn (Northumberland), Trecarrel House (Cornwall), Godstow Nunnery, Wigston Hospital (Leicester), and Sherborne Alms-houses (Dorset): and Cutts, in his *Middle Ages*, mentions similar arrangements at Chobham Preceptory, in a chapel at Tewkesbury Abbey Church, and elsewhere. These western chambers of domestic chapels, at least, "usually had fire-places (it is just possible that the large 'abutment' at Dale was the basement of a chimney-stack that supplied the upper chamber with a fire-place), and it would appear that they were not exclusively devoted to sacred purposes. When the chapel was used, the upper room was the place for the lord and his family, or guests; the lower, for the domestics, or sometimes the upper room was for ladies." \*

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\* *Parker*, Vol. III.

(7) The alterations of later times consist, firstly, of those of Reformation date, to render the basement suitable for congregational worship, as the removal of the panels of the side screen, the introduction of the stout oak benches, and the substitution of a table for the altar ; secondly, the Puritan disposition of the chancel, effected, perhaps, in 1632, the date of the pulpit ; and thirdly, the " beautifyings " of more recent times, in the shape of deal pews, ugly props, and the mutilation of the upper chamber.

CONCLUSION.—The thorough structural restoration of this interesting fabric cannot be much longer staved off, nor is it desirable that it should be. But it is to be hoped that the drastic measures which " improved away " the old Church House will not be adopted. The great aim must be to restore the fabric to its Reformation condition. The roof should be re-opened—the south wall of the upper chamber re-constructed to match the north one—the bell restored to its original position, the paint removed that now hides the rich tones of old oak—the decayed timbers replaced by new—the modern pews and props that cumber the interior swept away. In order that a better view of pulpit and chancel may be obtained from the upper floor, the south bay should be open to the eastern end of the aisle, as the north bay is to the chancel, and similarly protected by a parapet. This would admit of the pulpit occupying a more orthodox position. An appropriate means of access to this floor will be a difficulty. Had the old Church House been acquired by the parish, it might, with suitable internal modifications, have been made a valuable auxiliary to the Church. With the aisle door and the one into the upper chamber re-opened, and an intervening staircase within the house, the question would have been settled, to say nothing of a commodious vestry on the ground floor, and classrooms above.