

REMAINS OF AN ANCIENT BUILDING AT ROTHERHITHE.

BY

PHILIP NORMAN,

TREASURER OF THE SOCIETY OF ANTIQUARIES.

AMONG the river-side districts which have been absorbed and assimilated by London, not the least interesting is that of Rotherhithe, or Redriff as it was usually called in the 17th and 18th centuries. To the artist it presents some fine subjects, although the older parts have mostly given place to docks, tunnel approaches, model lodging-houses, and other concomitants of our present civilisation. Here and there one comes upon a house, now occupied by poor working folk, which may have been built for some well-to-do trader or a retired sea captain in the days when Swift selected the parish as a fitting home for Lemuel Gulliver. To the casual observer there is no appearance of mediæval buildings; but the remains of one which had been altogether lost sight of, form the chief subject of this paper. By way of introduction, we will first say a few words about ancient Rotherhithe.

This place is not mentioned in *Domesday*, as it then belonged to the royal manor of Bermondsey. It became detached when William Rufus granted the rest of the manor to the newly-established priory there, and it was afterwards itself divided, part being given by Henry I to his natural son Robert, and the rest added to the estate of the convent and prior of Bermondsey. The name appears as *Ætheredes hyd* in a charter of A.D. 898, printed in Birch's *Cartularium Saxonicum*, and

in mediæval documents it is several times written Retherethe, with or without the final "e." It had originally been to a great extent covered by water at high tide, like so much of the land in the neighbourhood of London on the south side of the river, and, with the adjoining districts, had been embanked at a period of which we now have no certain record. The preservation of the bank was a very important matter, as may be gathered from various records that have come down to us. In the year 1298 it had got into such bad condition that much of the low land near the river between Lambeth and Greenwich was submerged. Twenty-four years later, we find reference to a great breach in the bank between Greenwich and Bermondsey, when Adam de Brom, William de Leycestre and others, were ordered to inspect the damage, and to distrain for repair on the owners of the land where it began, and on others who appeared to be liable. Again, in 1380, commissioners were appointed to see to the repair of the bank between Greenwich and London Bridge; and in 1417 (5 Henry V) there was another commission for the bank between Deptford Strand and Bermondsey, "to act according to the custom of the marsh and the law and custom of this realm."

As far as one can judge, it is actually on the ancient embankment at Rotherhithe that the remains of a fine mediæval building have lately been observed, at a distance of 70 feet from the river and between 15 and 16 feet above high water mark, the ground sloping gradually at the back. Messrs. Wilmott and Cobon, of the Platform Engineering Works, who first drew attention to the existence of this relic, had occasion, some five years ago, to extend their premises, when having got possession of two cottages, Nos. 26 and 28 Rotherhithe Street, they pulled them down. The masonry in question partly formed the dividing wall which separated the small yards behind these houses from the very extensive granaries of Messrs. Thomas Groves and Sons, and its north or river side is now incorporated in the engineering workshops.

The accompanying measured plans and drawings show what is left of the mediæval masonry and its exact

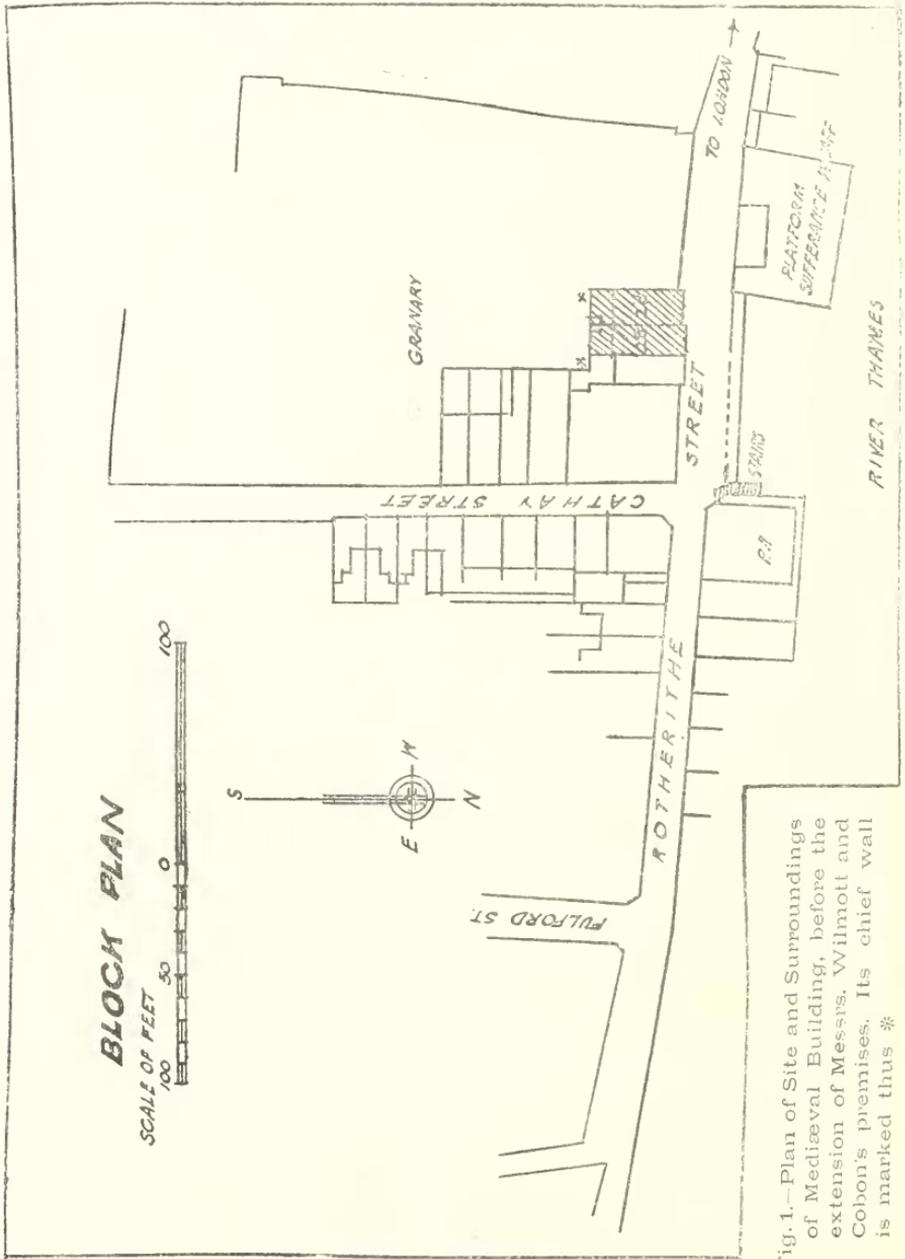


Fig. 1.—Plan of Site and Surroundings of Mediæval Building, before the extension of Messrs. Wilmott and Cobon's premises. Its chief wall is marked thus *

position, that marked "block plan" being taken from

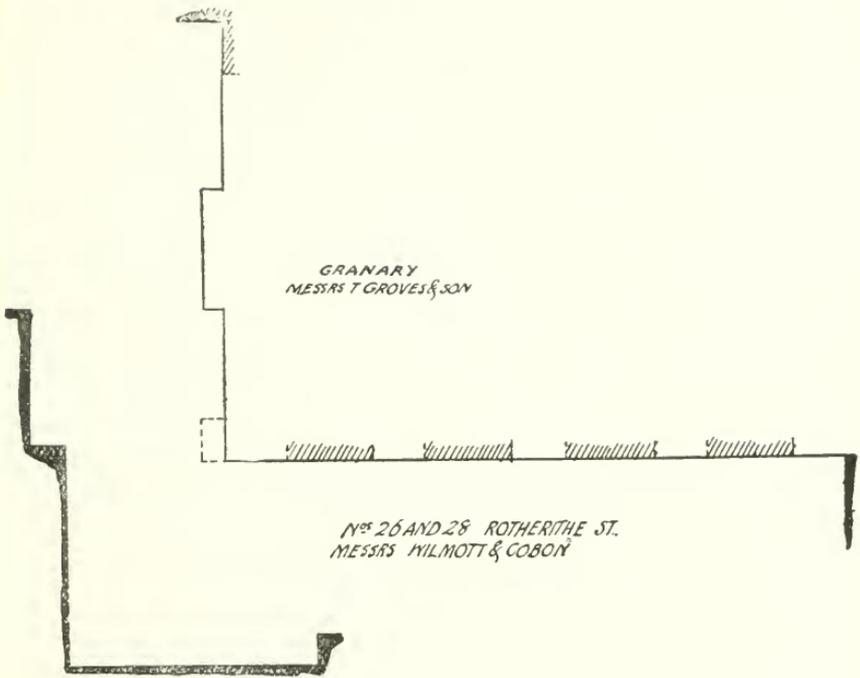
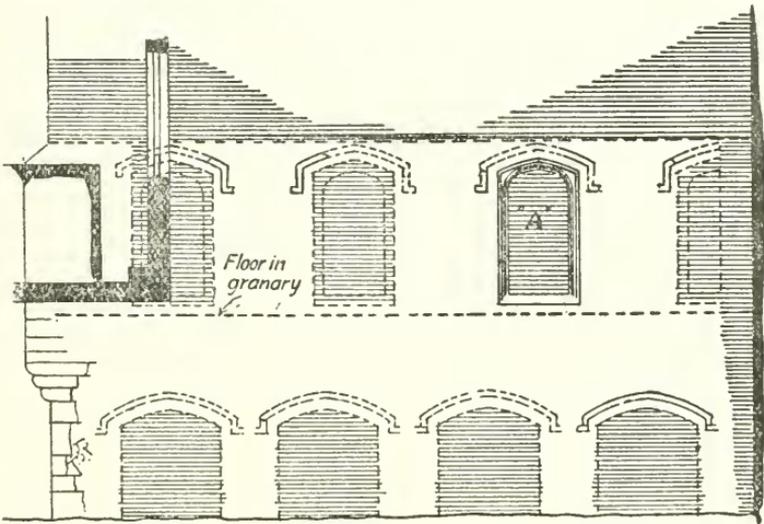


Fig. 2.—Plan of Ground Level.



10 5 0 Scale of Feet 10 20

Fig. 3. North Elevation.

the Ordnance Survey before the cottages were removed. We see from Fig. 3 that the remains formed part of a building of not less than two stories. The height on the north front now averages 19 ft. 6 in., and above it comes modern brickwork. The floor was raised about a foot on the formation of the present workshops, and soil may previously have accumulated; we do not therefore precisely know the original ground level. The length of the old masonry is here 35 ft. 6 in., and it runs back on the east side about 23 ft., the north-east corner being corbelled out 18 in., from a height at present of 6 ft. On this east side the average height of the masonry is about 8 ft., rising to 18 ft. at the corbelled portion.

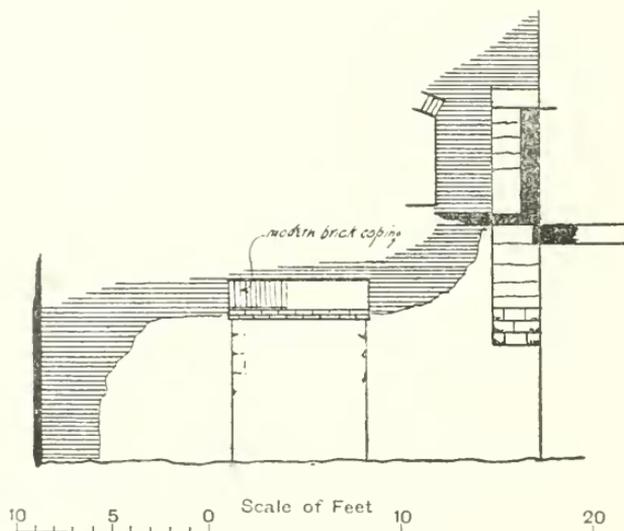


Fig. 4.—Elevation of East Wall.

As will be seen in our elevation of the east wall and plan at present ground level, there is on that side what appears to be the lower part of a large buttress, now coped with brick. In the wall facing north there are traces of four arched openings on the ground level, filled in with brick, and above them are or were also four arched openings, also blocked, which do not correspond with the lower arches in position, being much narrower, with wider spaces between them. The brickwork which

fills these openings is brought out to the same plane as the mediæval masonry, except in the case of the upper opening on the west or right hand, marked "A" in Fig. 3, where it stands back about $15\frac{1}{2}$ in. The mouldings therefore are in part exposed to view, and although much decayed we were able to get a fairly accurate

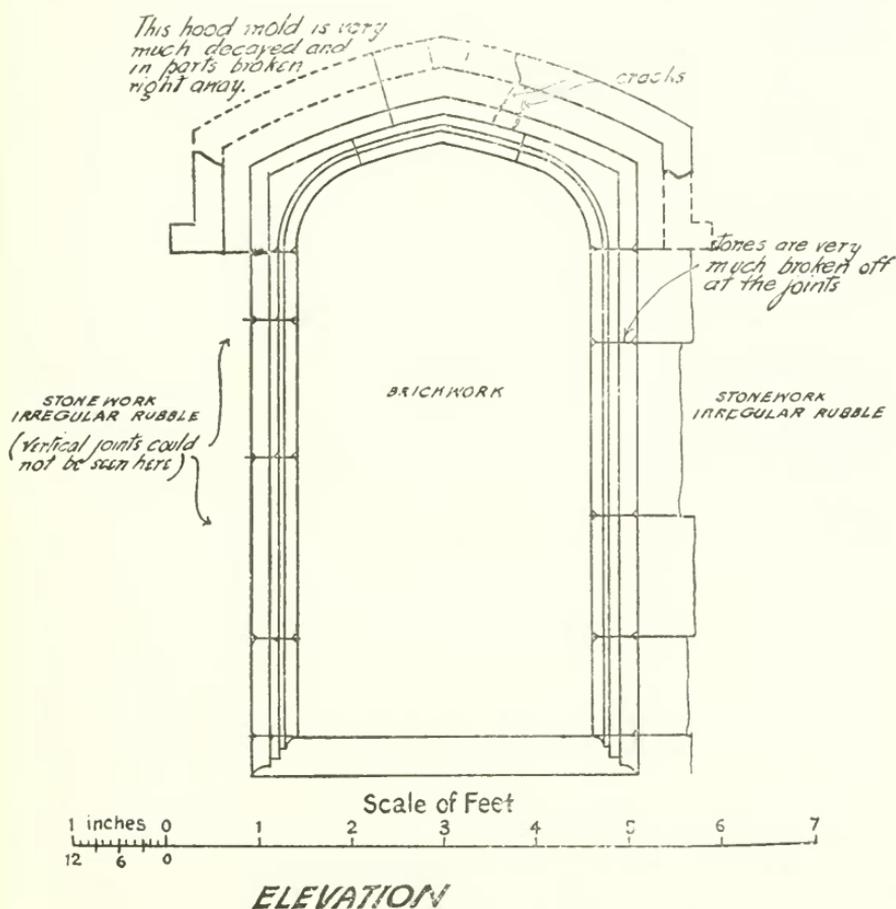


Fig. 5.—Window in North Wall from North.

drawing of them (see Fig. 5). From the spring of the arch the inner surface of the stonework appears to have been cut away, and one can now see no sign of tracery, but below in the centre there are indications of the former existence of a stone mullion (not shown in our

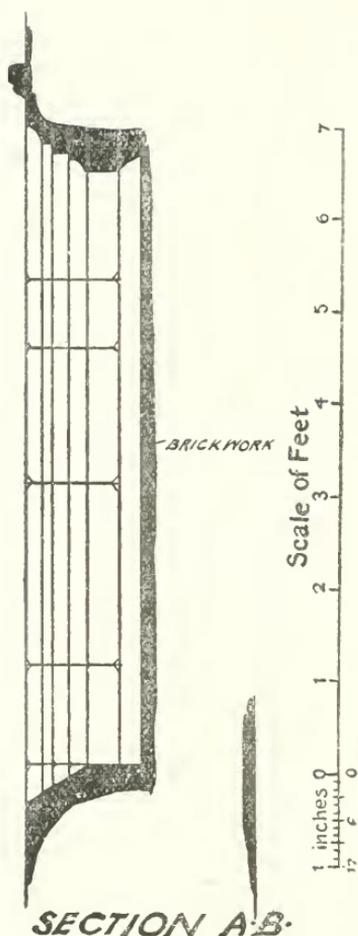


Fig. 6.—Section of Window in North Wall.

plan), and in the jambs on each side there is a groove for glass. We therefore have good grounds for coming to the conclusion that the upper openings were windows of two lights.

As may be gathered from what precedes, and from our illustrations (drawn by Mr. F. C. Wylde), what we have seen from Messrs. Wilmott and Cobon's workshops has been part of the north front of a mediæval building which originally extended further west, facing the river, and part of its east wall; and this is all incorporated in the party walls which separate Messrs. Wilmott and Cobon's workshops from the granaries of Messrs. Groves and Sons. In the latter we shall be able to glance at the remains from the inside. Three of the upper openings are here visible from a room on the first floor, their

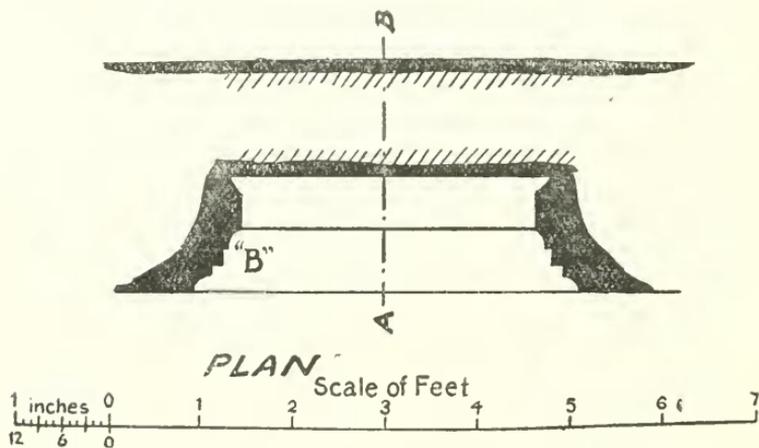


Fig. 7.—Plan of Window in North Wall.

lower parts however being covered by boarding, as shown in Fig. 8. The inside of the east wall and three lower openings can also be seen from the ground floor. Except for their greater breadth the latter resemble those above.

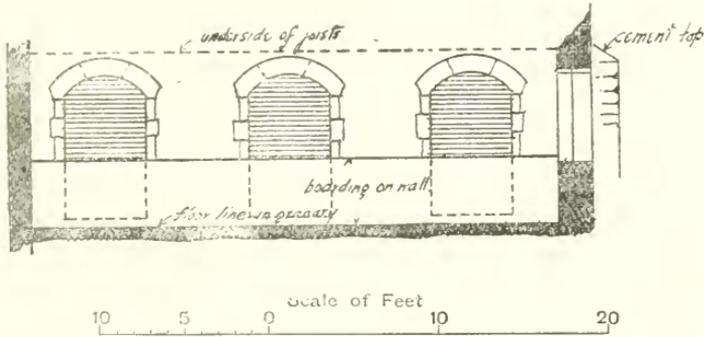


Fig. 8.- Elevation of Upper Openings from Granary on South Side.

We therefore have not thought it necessary to give an illustration of them. There is no trace of vaulting. Our various plans and drawings will enable the reader to understand more fully the nature of this architectural relic. In these, the modern additions which have

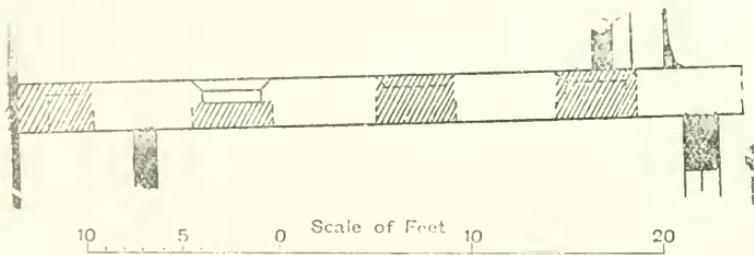


Fig. 9. Plan of Upper Openings from Granary on South Side.

nothing to do with the old masonry except that they are placed against it, have been made black, and the bricks used to fill in or complete the walls are indicated by horizontal hatchings.

With regard to the stone-work, that which is seen from Messrs. Wilmott and Cobon's premises appears to

be a yellowish sandstone, perhaps Reigate. It is of the nature of rubble, with irregular courses except where the corbelling occurs; the stones there being mostly of large size, well squared and carefully laid. It is covered with successive layers of lime-wash. The stones forming the arches on the south or inside are apparently similar as regards material to those on the north, but are less weather worn. The filling in between them seems here to be partly chalk. We observed a flint imbedded in it. On account of the damp all this surface on the south side has of late been plastered over.

The question naturally arises, what was the purpose of the mediæval building of which these long-forgotten relics formed part, but we are not prepared at present to give a definite answer. The chief wall stands east and west; doubtless owing to the fact that it faces the river. There is nothing in the appearance of the structure which proves it to have been ecclesiastical, and the idea that this may have been the case is not borne out by what we know of the district. There was a mediæval parish church, but the present one is on the same site; and although the two moieties of the manor were both in possession of the convent of Bermondsey from the 21st year of King Richard II until the dissolution, we have no evidence that there was any ecclesiastical establishment connected with the convent.

As regards mediæval residences at Rotherhithe, two at least of some importance are mentioned in old documents. Lambarde, the historian of Kent, says in his *Topographic and Historic Dictionary of England*, p. 306, that Henry IV lodged in an "old stone house here, whiles he was cured of a leprosie," and here he undoubtedly signed two charters, namely, that of July 5th, 1412, creating Thomas Beaufort, Earl of Dorset, and another on July 9th of the same year, creating Thomas, the King's second son, Duke of Clarence. There is, however, no record of the exact site of this mansion, and the date is too early for the remains still in existence, which, from their style, cannot we think belong to an

earlier period than towards the end of the 15th century. With regard to Henry's illness, it may perhaps not be superfluous to remark, that the leprosy of which old chroniclers speak was, in Dr. Norman Moore's opinion, not leprosy at all, but "herpes labialis" with other aggravations.

Another house in Rotherhithe which must not be forgotten was the "Moted Place," held by Matthew Dale in the reign of Henry VIII, and said to have been once the property of Robert Fitzwalter, Lord Egremont. It is mentioned in the 32nd year of Queen Elizabeth as then in the hands of George Rant, and formerly belonging (as lords of the manor) to the monks of Bermondsey. The site of this building is also totally forgotten. The old manor-house is said to have been near the manor mill.

It has been thought that the mediæval remains in Rotherhithe Street belonged neither to an ecclesiastical building nor to a residence, but formed part of a store-house or place of commerce, and the arrangement of the arches below rather lends itself to that view. If we accept it, we may suppose them to have been open for the passage of goods. The situation would certainly be convenient for river-side business, and this seems to the writer to be the most likely suggestion, although the building is perhaps rather expensive and important for the commercial requirements of Rotherhithe at the end of the 15th century. The proprietors can supply no information on the subject; for the present, therefore, perhaps it will be wise to suspend our judgment on these interesting relics, the existence of which was made known to the writer by the Rev. Canon Beck, rector of St. Mary's, Rotherhithe, who during many years has been studying the antiquities of the parish.

The manorial history of Rotherhithe, to which we have barely alluded, is given with some detail by Manning and Bray, and their account has been added to and brought down to the present time by the Carr-Gomm family, who at present hold the manor. Early in the 19th century it devolved on that gallant soldier

who became Field-Marshal Sir William Maynard Gomm, G.C.B., and died in 1875, after holding a commission in the army for no less a period than 80 years, having been gazetted an ensign in the 9th regiment before he had reached the age of ten. He left his estates to his widow, who bequeathed the manor in tail to her niece, Emily Blanche, the wife of Francis Culling Carr, now Carr-Gomm. Their son is at present M.P. for Rotherhithe, and an assistant private secretary of the Prime Minister.