

THE TOWER OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH, BLECHINGLEY.

BY

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IN Volume XIX of the *Collections*, published in 1906, I contributed a Note on some fragments of early moulded stonework which were found during the repair of the body of the church carried out in the year 1905. In dealing with the tower last year (1910) some interesting features were brought into view which deserve to be noticed.

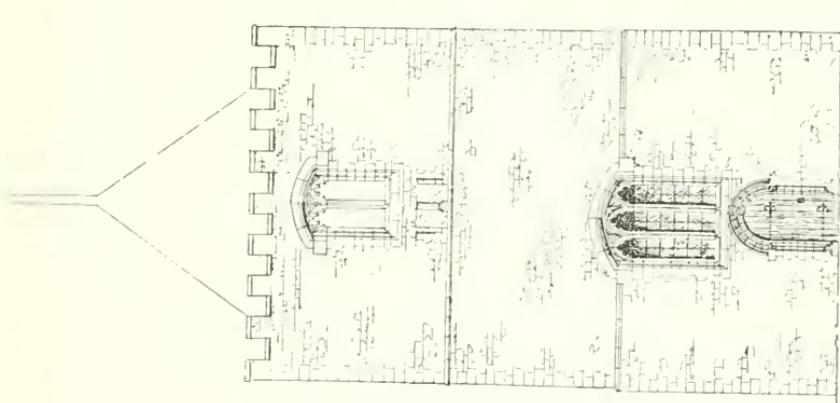
The tower is stated by Aubrey to have had a lofty spire of timber, which was destroyed by fire in 1606 owing to its being struck by lightning. This fire must have occasioned injury to the upper part of the walls, and shortly afterwards the portions above the level of the belfry windows were repaired. A low pyramidal roof, covered with tiles, was then substituted for the destroyed spire. The parapets were at this time rebuilt of brick, with flat coping stones, and the whole of the external surfaces of the walls were covered with rough-cast, no quoins, string-courses or other features of stone being left visible, excepting the three belfry windows, the west doorway, with the window over it, and a small window in the bottom stage in each of the side walls. This rough-cast had in recent years become so much decayed that it was falling off in patches, revealing in several places considerable fissures in the rubble stonework behind.

Upon the complete removal of the rough-cast last year, the remains of a chamfered offset were found on the three disengaged sides of the tower at the level

of the springing of the arch of the west window. At a higher level a band of stone, which had been a projecting string-course, was found on all four sides. These two stone bands divided the total height of the tower into three stages. The upper string-course was peculiar from the fact that on the north and south sides it sloped downwards six inches from west to east. The eastern and western string-courses were horizontal but at different levels, the sloping string-courses connecting them.

In the east wall a complete two-light Transitional belfry window was uncovered, the masonry being of local "firestone" in a terribly decayed condition. The division between the two openings consisted of a shaft or column, the front half being semi-circular in plan. This shaft had a moulded base, and a capital which had been carved, with the abacus in a separate stone. The jambs to the right and left of the window had a bold roll moulding, stopped at the bottom. The abacus of the capital was repeated to the jambs. Each light had a semi-circular arched head, with a small roll moulding on the angle. The jointing of the arch stones was unusual, and could not be considered to be good masonry. The jamb stones and the base of the shaft rested immediately upon the projecting string-course. On the north and west sides of the tower the lower parts of similar windows remained to the height of about four feet, the jambs and bases resting respectively upon the sloping and level string-course. The stonework of these windows, though decayed, was more perfect than that of the window on the east side. The base of the shaft of the west window retained its mouldings; this is now preserved in the parvise with other interesting fragments. The south side of the tower had had a window of the same design, but this part of the wall had at some later time been rebuilt in connection with the clock and dial. The upper parts of these early windows, on the north, west, and south sides, were destroyed when the late Perpendicular belfry windows were inserted, the eills of these last-

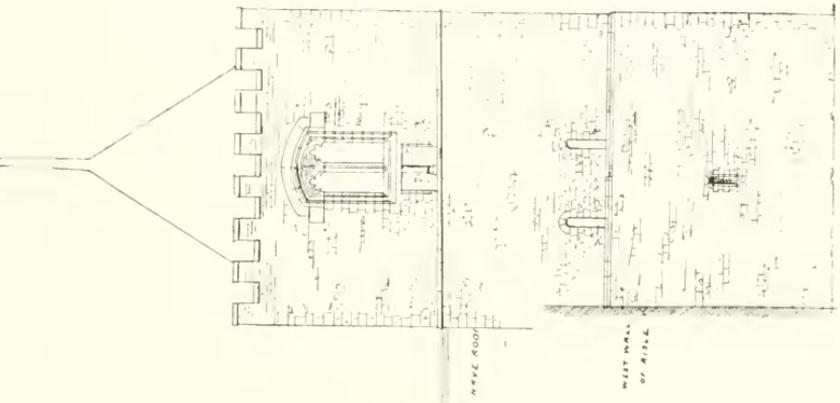
(2)



Cross & Sons, Architects
1874

WEST

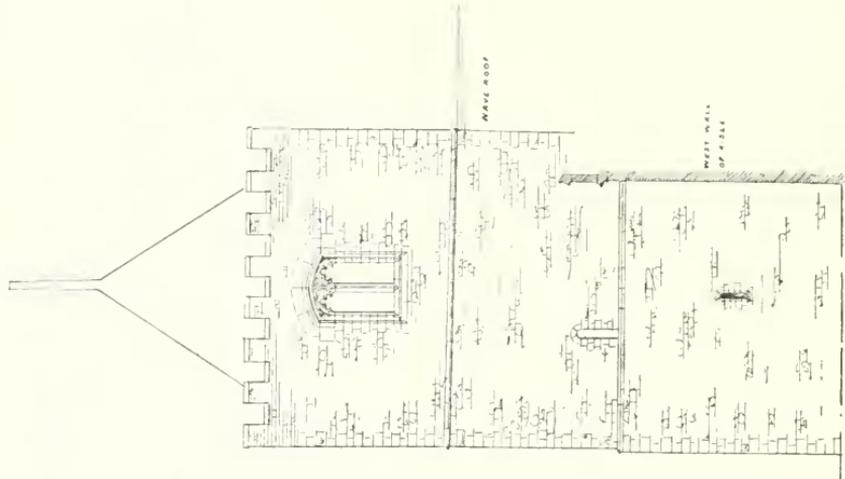
(1)



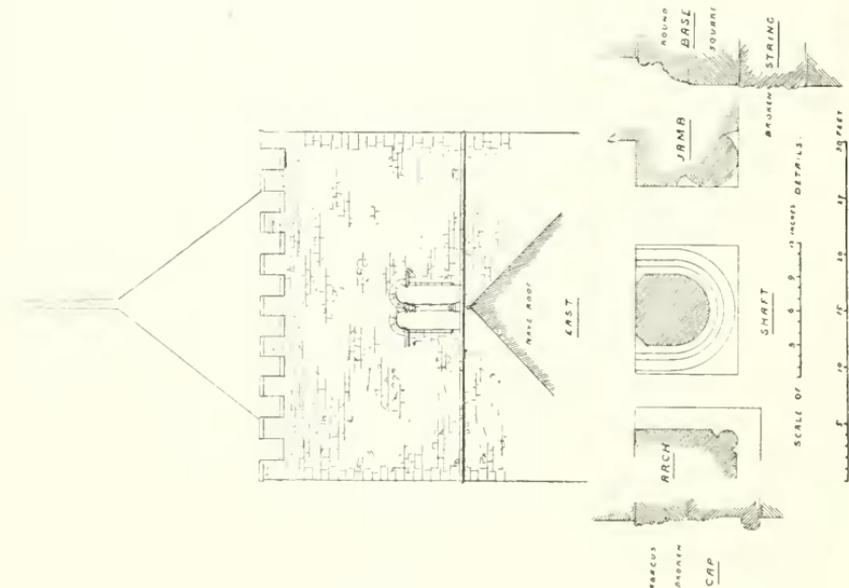
NORTH

ST. MARY'S CHURCH, BLECHINGLEY
Elevations of the Tower (1910).

(2)



(1)



SOUTH

ST. MARY'S CHURCH, BLECHINGLEY. Tower (1910).

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named resting on the earlier jambs and shafts, or with only a few courses of rubble between them.

On the north side, in the middle stage, two small plain Norman windows were found, the eastern one being complete with its semi-circular head. The western window had its jambs, but the head had been removed to make way for a modern brick window. On the west side of the tower no trace of the Norman windows could be seen externally, owing to the stone facing having been renewed, but the inner jambs and arches can be traced in the clock room. On the south face one window, the western, remained, but the eastern one had been obliterated. All these early windows had been walled up to form a flat surface to receive the rough cast. There is, however, enough remaining of the Norman and Transitional work in the middle and upper stages, to shew that the arrangement of the windows was symmetrical. In the belfry there was a two-light window on each face, and the storey below had on each face two small windows spaced widely apart. The inner jambs only of the two eastern windows of this middle stage can now be seen, these being a little above the arch which opens into the nave. The tower arch was enlarged in the middle of the last century, when the north aisle was added, some of the original stones being re-used in the reconstructed work.

The fragments of these early windows and the sloping string-courses gave a peculiar interest to the tower and I wished to preserve them as far as possible in the manner in which they were found, but the decayed condition of the stonework would have obliged their renewal in stone of a more durable character. Against my strongly expressed wishes the sloping string-courses were reduced to the level and the western string-course lowered by six inches, so that a perfectly horizontal line might be obtained on all sides of the tower. The remains of the Transitional windows on the north and west sides had also to be sacrificed, as their incompleteness was deemed to be a disfigurement to the tower.

There was a rough plinth to the base of the tower, but this dated only from the time of the rough casting and was merely built against the old walls without any bond.

In order that a record of the appearance of the tower, before its repair, might be preserved, some excellent photographs from different points were taken by Mr. Jarvis Kenrick of Pendell. The views of the eastern Transitional belfry window were taken to a large scale, so that its design and condition might be clearly represented. To make the record complete I have drawn elevations to scale of the four sides of the tower, showing their state before the alterations or the addition of any features which had to be re-designed. These drawings are reproduced to accompany this Note.

The tower is remarkable for its great size in proportion to the main body of the church. Its dimensions externally at the top are 31 ft. from north to south, and 27 ft. 6 ins. from east to west. The height from the ground to the springing of the present roof, behind the parapet, is 47 ft., but this is a few feet lower than the walls were before the destruction of the spire. These dimensions give the tower a massive appearance which, notwithstanding the simplicity of its design, is not without dignity.