AN EARLY WINDOW AND WALL PAINTINGS IN WITLEY CHURCH.

BY

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IN November, 1916, the Rev. Edward J. Newill, Vicar of Witley, Surrey, made an interesting discovery in his church of a double-splayed window, of pre-Conquest date, in the south wall of the nave, with early painting, possibly coeval, on the inner splays. The circumstances leading up to this discovery have a certain interest. Mr. Newill was assisting at the National Mission Services in Great Bookham Church, and was much impressed by the beauty and interest of a Norman window with coeval painting on its splays, which I had opened out in the autumn of 1913, and of which I had written an account for our Society (Vol. XXVII, p. 103).[1] On his return he set himself to find whether a similar window might not remain blocked up in the nave walls of Witley Church, which on the evidence of the interesting south doorway had always hitherto been classed by antiquaries as belonging to the Early Norman period. I had twice written an account of Witley Church,[2] and had ascribed the earliest work visible to the eye to the last quarter of the 11th century. Mr. Newill's discovery puts back the chronology of Witley Church to a date before the Norman Conquest, and adds one more to our list of Saxon churches in Surrey.

[1] *Surrey Archæological Collections*, Vol. XXVII, p. 103, "Great Bookham Church."

[2] *Ibid.*, Vol. XVIII, p. 80; also, the *Victoria History of Surrey*, Vol. III, p. 67.

The plan of the church (fig. 1) is of considerable interest as an example of growth. The Saxon church, which had walls of exceptional thickness (3 ft. 2 in., or more in parts), consisted simply of nave and chancel, the nave very spacious, 44 ft. 6 in. by 18 ft. 6 in., and the chancel apparently no more than a square of about 14 ft. on plan. The nave remained with its plan unaltered till about 1844, when part of the north wall was broken out to form a short aisle. The first extension

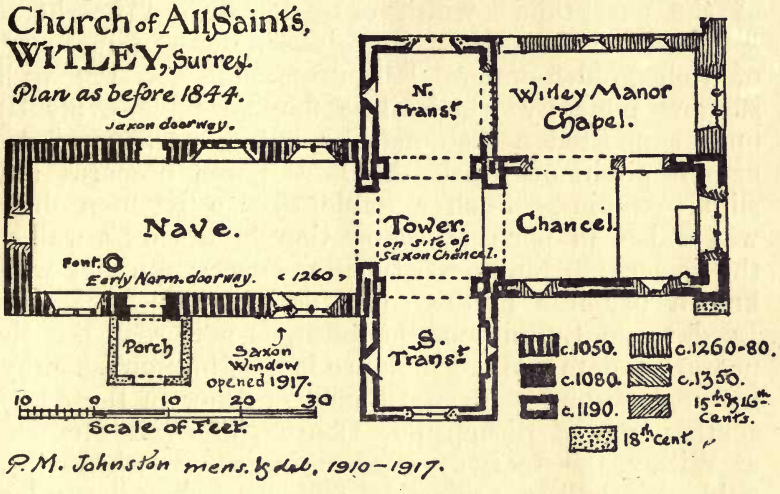


Fig. 1.

must have taken place in the last decade of the 12th century, when the Saxon chancel became the existing handsome central tower, with the addition of transepts and a well-developed chancel. The south transept, which retains its original plan undisturbed, measures 15 ft. 6 in. in length by 13 ft. 9 in.; the chancel, 26 ft. 6 in. by 15 ft. 2 in. A large parallel-gabled Lady Chapel, known as the Witley Manor Chapel, of about the same size as the chancel, was thrown out on its northern side, opening from the north transept, in about the middle of the 13th century. The south porch, curiously out of the centre of the

south doorway, has modern stone walls, but the roof is ancient, and the porch was evidently originally a timber one. The north aisle, vestry, organ-chamber, and north porch are modern.

The south doorway, which has hitherto dated the fabric of the nave, is now, with more likelihood, to be considered an insertion during the Conqueror's reign in a pre-existing Saxon wall. It displaces or conceals, I have little doubt, a Saxon doorway. It is a remarkable feature in itself, the opening being of the exceptional width of 5 ft. with a height of 9 ft. 7 in. It is set in a projecting mass of masonry, of rich golden-orange Bargate stone, and the wide shallow piers by which it is flanked have evidently once supported a pediment or gable, perhaps of 45° or 50° pitch, of which the later porch obscures any slight remains. Such a gable over a Norman doorway exists in perfect preservation in the west wall of the tower, St. Margaret-at-Cliffe, Dover; another well-known example is the south doorway at Adel, near Leeds; and Lullington, Somerset, is a third. But the nearest in date and resemblance is the Norman doorway, inserted within or over a Saxon opening in the Saxon south porch of Bishopstone Church, Sussex. Here, as at Witley, the doorway is of a single order, beneath a gable of shallow projection and somewhat flat pitch. Additional reasons for the Witley doorway being an insertion are to be found in the fact that the west quoins of the nave and a curious plastered plinth on the west and south walls are in rubble, the doorcase alone being in ashlar. This plinth is a truly remarkable survival; and a close inspection, taken in conjunction with the plastered rubble quoins, the plastered walling, and the recovered window, leaves no doubt as to its genuineness. There are other instances of plastered walling and of rubble quoins, still, or until an evil restoration destroyed the original coating, covered with the Saxon stucco—which would seem to have been of a peculiarly enduring nature—but I can point to no other example of a pre-Conquest plastered

plinth or water-table.[1] There seems to be no doubt that the plaster coating on the walls, worn thin and patched, is also the original. This is made clear by the recent discovery of the pre-Conquest window, which is immediately to the westward of a large window of *c.* 1260, consisting of two lights under an enclosing arch, with a perforation in the head, following the lines of the pointed enclosing and sub-arches. This window is wrought in hard chalk, which has weathered extremely well. Westward of the south porch is another inserted window, the inner arch, radiating with the splays of the jambs, being in fine-jointed early-13th-century ashlar, of small stones. This is filled with ugly tracery of churchwarden character. Before 1844 it had a wooden frame and originally, perhaps, two lancets.[2] Its insertion in *c.* 1210 doubtless destroyed an original pre-Conquest window. There were evidently two such pre-Conquest windows in the south wall of the nave; two also in the north, with a doorway answering to the south doorway,[3] and probably the little square chancel had one in the east wall and another north or south. As to the west wall of the nave, there is, curiously enough, a Saxon window remaining in the gable-end, which, until lately, was completely hidden by a thick growth of ivy (fig. 2): it escaped detection on this account, and was not identified for what it is until the recent discovery of the exactly similar opening in the south

[1] At Compton Church, Surrey, in the near neighbourhood of Witley, the pre-Conquest tower has no ashlar dressings, the narrow loops and the quoins being of rubble, now bare, but originally plastered.

[2] *Cf.* Wotton, Surrey, where are similar early 13th-century two-light windows, also inserted in the pre-Conquest south wall of the nave. The north-west view of Witley Church in the Sharpe Collection shows a two-light window of *c.* 1260, opposite to that in the south wall and exactly similar. These two windows resemble those of the same date in the east wall of the south transept at Albury Old Church, hard by. The Sharpe view also shows a large three-light wooden window in the north wall of the nave to the westward, and a blocked lancet of *c.* 1190 in the west wall of the north transept, a three-light Jacobean window in its north wall, and the 13th-century doorway of the Manor Chapel—all now destroyed.

[3] Some stones of this were found in the recent enlargement of the vestry.

wall. From its elevated position, in the apex of the gable, it must either have served to light a roof-chamber—a feature common in our Saxon churches—

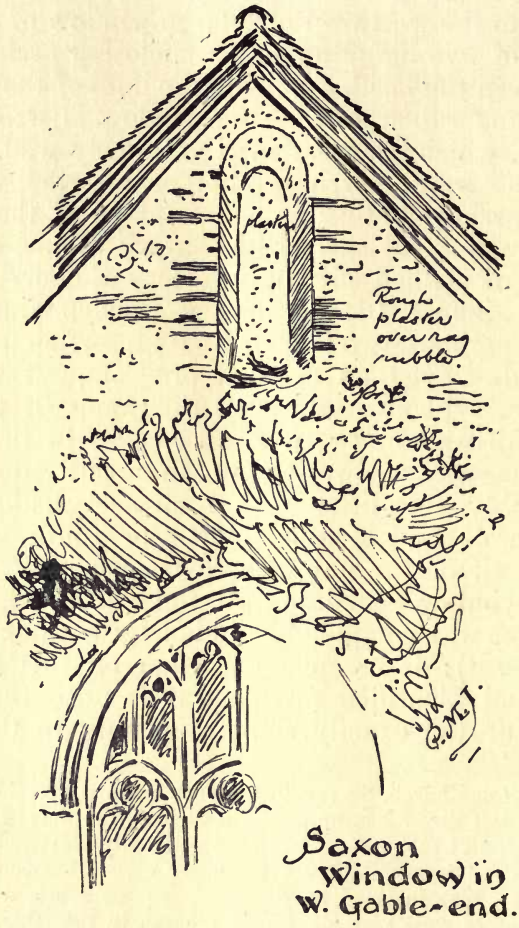


Fig. 2.

or else to hang a bell out of, as at Corhampton, Hants, Old Shoreham and Walberton, Sussex and Chaldon, Surrey. The three-light Perpendicular window below has obliterated any original window that may have occupied the middle space of the west wall, and the plain doorway

beneath with a two-centred arch is also, of course, a later insertion, of the same 15th-century date.

In May, 1917, the Saxon window in the south wall of the nave, which had been located and partially unblocked by the Rev. E. J. Newill, was opened out under my superintendence. It proved to be a very interesting type of double-splayed opening, with inclined jambs and

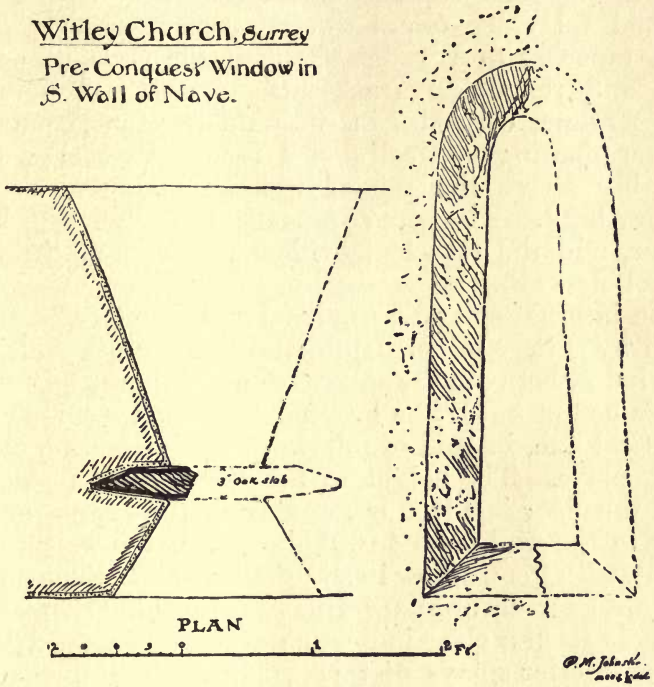


Fig. 3.

an ovoid head, and although the eastern half had been nearly all destroyed by the insertion of the 13th-century window, enough remained to make a paper restoration of the complete window, and the missing right-hand jamb has been built up to give back the original sight-line of the actual opening, without, however, replacing the lost splay inside or out.[1]

[1] This would have been impossible, as well as undesirable, because of the existence of the 13th-century window.

The sight size of the window is 3 ft. 3 in. by 9 in. at the sill, diminishing to 6 in. at the springing (fig. 3). What would be called the glass-plane in an ordinary window is 9 in. from the face of the wall, giving a narrow outward splay of 5 in. in width by 9 in., and the same for the sill; the whole—jamb, sill and ovoid head—being built in thin pieces of rubble, still coated with the original cream-coloured plaster. Behind this external splay we found a very perfect groove, 3 in. wide, tapering to a wedge shape at the ends, in which were still remaining fragments of the oak slab or shutter-frame, carried 7 in. into the wall horizontally, and terminating vertically in a rectangular form, considerably above the top of the arched splay of the window-head. The groove was neatly coated with hard mortar, and the slab had evidently been built in with the rubble-work.

The internal splay was narrow and deep, *i.e.*, 1 ft. in width by 2 ft. 2 in. in depth, the total inside width of the window between the splays being originally 2 ft. 9 in., and its height 5 ft. The internal splays are carried up to a vertical line, instead of following the inclination of the outer splays. The height to the splay of the inside sill from the floor is 9 ft. 9 in., and from the crown of the splay to the wall-plate 4 ft. 9 in., giving the wall a total height, with the window itself, of 19 ft. 6 in. Such a very high wall for an ordinary village church is exceptional, and is in itself a clear indication of pre-Conquest date.[1]

The interior splays of this window when opened out were found to be plastered with the original thin coat of hard lime-and-sand plaster, about $\frac{5}{8}$ in. thick; and not

[1] By a curious coincidence, within three months of the discovery of this pre-Conquest window, I opened out a very similar one, double-splayed and plaster-coated, in the north wall of the nave of Poling Church, Sussex—a building which, like Witley Church, had never been classed as Saxon, although I had always suspected it to contain pre-Conquest masonry. Here, also, a good part of the Saxon wooden shutter-board remained in the groove, and a large piece was got out entire. Two such discoveries made at haphazard strengthen the belief that many more churches than have hitherto been classed as pre-Conquest may contain remains of that period.

only so, but to be painted with what in all likelihood is the original colour decoration. Moreover, as this window occurs in a wall which retains for the most part its Saxon plaster, and as there are large remains of wall-paintings round the window, the decoration upon the splays being continued in one scheme with that on the wall surface, it is at least probable that we have in the whole scheme a rare and valuable survival of pre-Conquest painting (fig. 4). Beside the archaic style of the work, another fact lends weight to the exceptionally early date which I venture to claim for the painting, viz., that there is no coat of limewhite or *intonaco*, but the painting has been executed on the roughly trowelled or floated plaster, probably while it was still wet, so that, as a process, it answers, more or less, to that of *fresco buono*, as practised in Italy. Hitherto no ancient example of this process, as distinct from *fresco secco*, or ordinary tempera painting, has been produced in England; but the discovery at Witley suggests at least the possibility that a group of early paintings in Surrey and Sussex may be classed with those at Witley as true frescoes; or at any rate as differing from the common distemper paintings in being painted direct upon the raw plaster. The paintings I refer to are, or were, to be found in the following churches: St. Mary's Guildford (paintings destroyed in 1900, on the inner splays of double-splayed Saxon windows in the tower, blocked up by the insertion of Early Norman arches),[1] Clayton, Keymer, Westmeston, Plumpton, and Hardham (paintings of very early character, late 11th century and early 12th century, all discovered during the 'sixties, and destroyed, except Clayton and Hardham):[2] Ford Church, Sussex, where I

[1] I saw these before their deplorable destruction by workmen sent to colour-wash the church, and have a slight sketch of one—Abraham offering up Isaac, very similar to the paintings at Witley in style and technique.

[2] All except Keymer are illustrated in *Sussex Archæological Collections*. An account by myself of Hardham, with coloured illustrations, was published in *The Archæological Journal*, Vol. LI. All these churches were held by Lewes Priory, and the paintings were perhaps executed by men trained in the Priory.

found a fragment of similar character, and at Eastergate, on the north wall of the pre-Conquest chancel, in some very early tempera painting representing martyrs in flames, with a cornice of the Greek fret pattern. I should here mention, because of their almost certain Saxon date, although only in ordinary tempera, the remarkable paintings on the splays of a pre-Conquest window discovered in the south wall of the nave of Kingsdown Church, near Farningham, Kent, in 1909. I made facsimile copies of these when applying a preservative treatment in that year, and deposited them in the collection that is being formed at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The subjects were: east splay—the offerings of Cain and Abel; west splay—the murder of Abel, Cain being represented with blood-splashed clothes, killing his brother with the jaw-bone of an animal slain in sacrifice.[1]

On the splayed head of the Saxon window at Witley is painted the lower part of a tower, the upper part of which is continued on the face of the wall above, and this is divided by a cloud-border of bold curves, repeated on the right above, from the sky of a tawny red colour. The lower part of the tower is of greyish white, crossed with white lines in body-colour, above which have been two little "windows" with horse-shoe heads, of which one only remains perfect. These are outlined in white and filled in with red. To the right appear two similar "windows," of which the ground is a vegetable black, now mostly gone, which are immediately above the same clouds. On the vertical part of the splay is an inscription border, continuous with that on the wall-face to the westward, on which, when the blocking was newly removed, two or three letters in very faint vegetable black were still discernible, but they soon faded almost completely. The last letter, to the right, was R:, with a triple full stop. Before that may have been the letters

[1] *Cf.* for what is evidently an ancient tradition as to the lethal weapon employed by Cain, the passage in *Hamlet*, v, i, "That skull had a tongue in it, and could sing once; how the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first murder!"

Fig. 4.

WITLEY CHURCH.
Paintings on window-splay.

ĪIh, with a contraction mark of crescent shape cutting through the stem of the I, and possibly another like a comma above the h and close to the R: but this is somewhat conjectural.

The scene depicted on the splay below is fortunately more clear. It appears to represent the Visitation of Elizabeth by the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the right is a tower, or house, with a conical roof or gable, in white, red, pink, and yellow, against the red ochre background. On the left, very cleverly fitted in to the upward slope of the splayed sill, is Elizabeth, reclining in a half-sitting posture, such as a lady in an "interesting" condition might fittingly assume, with her right hand supporting her head and the left on her bosom. The Blessed Virgin advances toward her, with her right hand pointing backwards over her left shoulder, as if pointing to the Incarnation as a past event, while her left is partly hidden in the flowing white robe with a broad pink border which conceals her figure. Both have white veils, the folds of which are indicated by thin yellow lines over their heads, very Eastern in treatment, and their dresses are also in a cream-white, outlined in white body-colour, with a broad hem at the foot, of pink. Below is a ground, or pavement, of brownish yellow ochre, which is the colour used for Elizabeth's couch. Neither saint has a nimbus, which, however, is not always found in our earlier paintings. The faces are coloured in rather a deep tone of pink, the features being somewhat coarsely indicated by slight touches of a reddish colour, heightened with white body-colour, which is used also for the eyes, those of Mary being downcast, while Elizabeth's are upturned, as if listening in awe and wonderment to her cousin's marvellous story.

The paintings on the south wall of the nave adjacent to this window were partially cleared of whitewash, though unfortunately in part covered up again, in 1889; but their importance and antiquity had been insufficiently recognised, until the discovery of the window, when the fact of their belonging to a scheme of decoration of which the paintings on the window-splay formed a part was

made evident. They seem originally to have occupied three zones, carried entirely round the walls of the nave. Under the wall-plate was a frieze of bands of colour and a shadowed Greek fret, measuring 8 in. in total width (fig. 5). I uncovered a strip of the latter over the Saxon window which had been concealed by a thick coat of plaster, dubbed out with pieces of tile to make vertical the "battering" of the top of the Saxon wall. There is a border of this ornament in the early series of paintings at Clayton, Sussex, on the pre-Conquest wall over the chancel arch. Mr. N. H. J. Westlake, F.S.A., in his *History of Mural Painting*, considers the basis of the

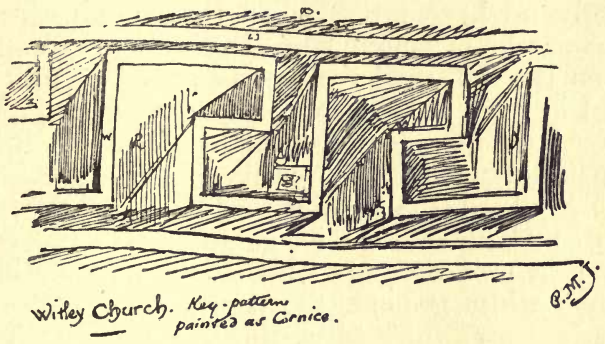


Fig. 5.

Clayton painting to be pre-Conquest, including this shadowed fret.[1] I have also found the Greek fret in outline as a frieze in the painting, probably of pre-Conquest date, in the chancel of Eastergate Church, Sussex, as above mentioned.

Together with this frieze, the strip of painting at present uncovered at Witley measures about 20 ft. by

[1] Since this paper was written I have applied a preservative process to these remarkable paintings at Clayton, and in a paper upon them read to the Society of Antiquaries, and subsequently to the British Archæological Association, have claimed for them, as for the Witley painting, a date about the middle of the 11th century. At Clayton the style of the figures and architectural ornaments suggests that the artists may have been imported from Central Europe, *i. e.*, Germany or North Italy.

10 ft. in height. This includes the two upper tiers or zones; a third tier beneath these has been largely destroyed by mural monuments; and there might have been a fourth tier or dado. The top tier measures 4 ft. 6 in. in height; then comes a 3 in. inscription border, and next a tier 3 ft. 10 in. wide, beneath which is a triple border, 8 in. wide, at the springing line of the inner arch to the south doorway. The subjects painted in these two upper zones are not easily interpreted, nor do they appear to follow a precise historical sequence, or to bear any close analogy to other early paintings in the scheme or its details. The same red and yellow ochres, with white thickly applied, cream, various shades of pink, and a vegetable black sparingly used, comprise, as in the window-splay, the range of colours employed. Beginning with the top zone, on the left, we have part of a subject with flames painted in deep red. Next is the gabled tower that is continued on the splayed head of the Saxon window, with pairs of "windows" outlined in white and red on a yellow ground, the openings coloured a deep red. It has three "windows" in its gable end, to the right of which is a roof of scale tiles or shingles, outlined in red on a white ground, the courses of shingles being emphasised by a thick black line at intervals. There is a corresponding tower with a gabled top on the right, and the artist appears to have intended a building in perspective, probably the stable at Bethlehem, as beneath may be discerned bending and kneeling figures of shepherds, with a crook, and a figure of a woman seated on a chair or throne under an arched canopy, with the newborn Babe on her knee. The Visit of the Shepherds is the fairly obvious interpretation. To the right are three mysterious figures, under arched or domed canopies, flanked by columns with capitals and bases. The first figure belongs to this subject and faces towards the last scene. It is probably Joseph, a bearded man in a long robe. Next appears a woman with a white hood or mantle over her face, looking and pointing in the reverse direction; and the third figure, turning towards the last, also in a hooded mantle, may be either a man or woman.

Between them is a very singular domed structure on top of a pier or tower; and the third figure stands behind a smaller one of a young girl on its right. This last faces to the right, and both figures are standing beneath undulating white clouds and a red sky, showing that an outdoor scene is intended. Beneath the sky is a "field" of cream colour, against which various animals in shaded white and yellow may be discerned; some appear to be horned, and a larger beast in the lower part of the field may be a wolf, with a great bird or beast of some sort in advance of it. Over these, on the sky, is an inscription in white letters, too fragmentary to decipher.[1] On the field and carried up into the sky is a boldly drawn tree, with large leaves or fronds, like a date-palm, painted in greyish white, cream and pale yellow. This appears to complete the subject; and the next scene is of a feast, with guests seated behind a table spread with a white cloth, on which are several dishes, plates and drinking vessels. Three or four guests are all that can at present be made out, but the space indicated for this subject, if it were placed centrally with the doorway, would hold, perhaps, nine more. The most probable subject is the Last Supper. In the second zone the Visit of the Magi is probably the subject immediately to the right of the Saxon window (beneath the Nativity in the zone above), and here there seem to have been two figures on the left, one nimbed, bending over a beehive-shaped shrine, on the right side of which three figures in profile are approaching together. They are crowned, and have upraised hands, as though bearing their gifts. The Holy Child was perhaps laid before the shrine, but this part is obscured by a mural tablet. More correctly, of course, He should be shown as the "Young Child," rather than as a baby, seated on His mother's knee, as in the 11th-century painting of this subject at Hardham (*Archæological Journal*, LVIII, 78). The figures on the left may be Mary (nimbed),

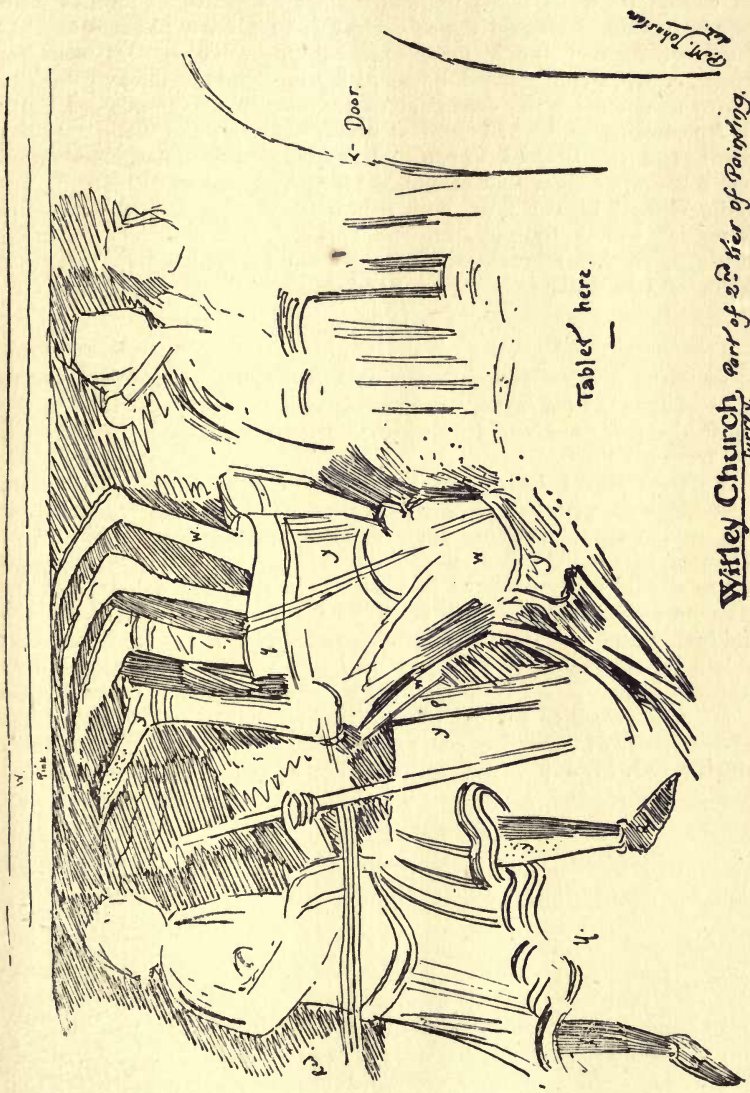
[1] There would seem to have been many contractions, with small letters over the others, and diphthongs: a P is fairly distinct.

with an attendant woman, who raises her hand in wonderment. The dresses are in yellow, white, red and pink, against a red ground, and the outlines, especially the features, appear to have been drawn with a sharpened stick in the wet plaster, leaving a firm outline which has been filled with yellow ochre.[1]

With his back to the Magi is a nimbed figure, having a low crown or cape over a hooded mantle, and grasping in his right hand a T-headed staff. He approaches other figures, too indistinct for any exact description. Next is a still more puzzling scene. A figure in a yellow and white dress, with short, full tunic, bordered with red, yellow and white, is seated upon a throne or dais, holding a staff or spear in his right hand. Confronting him are two persons in similar tunics, with white legs and yellow shoes, falling on their heads, their legs waving in the air (fig. 6). They seem to be bound round with a rope or chain, which also passes across the figure on the throne. Their heads and arms do not appear, being concealed by another mural tablet. To the right again, close up to the plastered arch, which I believe to represent the original Saxon door-case, are two other figures, which, though their heads are turned away, appear to belong to the subject.

Further exploration of the nave walls was not feasible at the time of my examination, but it is evident that the original scheme extends both eastward and westward under the colour-wash; and complete uncovering is very desirable in view of the exceptional antiquity and the curious character of the paintings. I have sprayed them and applied a coating of paraffin wax, making a full size tracing and many pencil drawings. A coloured facsimile of the figures on the window-splay, to be framed and preserved in the church, has been left with the Vicar, who has most generously borne the entire expense of the whole work.

[1] I cannot remember having seen such thin firm outlines in any other ancient paintings.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Tablet here.
Witley Church, Surrey. Part of 2nd Tier of Painting.

Fig. 6.

NOTE.—Before the Norman Conquest Witley was amongst the possessions of the powerful Earl Godwin (father of King Harold), who died in 1052. It seems very probable that he built the church and caused its walls to be painted. That our Saxon churches were frequently thus decorated appears clear from such a passage as that in the writings of the Venerable Bede, who tells us that Benedict Biscop, *c.* A.D. 672, "carried home with him" from Rome, "paintings of holy subjects for the ornament of the church of the Blessed Peter the Apostle, which he had built at Monkwearmouth." Bede specifies paintings of the Blessed Virgin and the Twelve Apostles, as mounted upon a boarding from wall to wall. Other subjects were "the figures of the Gospel history" on "the southern part of the church," the visions of the Apocalypse on the north, &c., &c. Such imported paintings, on linen or canvas, would soon be copied on the actual plaster of the walls.

[In the discussion that followed the reading of the above paper to the Society of Antiquaries various opinions were advanced as to the age of the paintings and the process—true fresco or other—in which they were executed.

The treatment I have since applied to the paintings at Clayton, Sussex, joined with the close observation of these at Witley, has at least proved that in neither case are they in an ordinary tempera or distemper process, but in some medium that allows of the passing of a sponge of cold water over the face without moving the colour. In the better-preserved parts of both series of paintings the surface has the hardness and almost the gloss of an encaustic tile. Oil, or some other vehicle for the colour that we can now only guess at, must have been employed in both. At Witley also, I believe, I detected the joining-up of one day's work to another in the fresh plaster, which is one of the characteristics of "true" fresco, as distinguished from ordinary tempera painting.—P. M. J.]