The Crypts of the Churches of St. Peter in the East, and of St. George Within the Castle, Oxford.

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Crypts of early date are far from common, but Oxford possesses at least two. A fragment of St. George's church still exists in Oxford castle, and that of St. Peter's in the East is perhaps the most important example in England of a crypt beneath a parish church. Moreover it is stated by Murray's contributor that when the restoration of the cathedral took place in 1856 there was found at the east end of the nave a very small vaulted chamber which might well have formed part of a crypt of the class of Ripon and Hexham, the earliest of any of those that now exist. It is to be remembered that these underground buildings, though not by any means numerous, are to be met with in various parts of the country, and that some of them go back to the earliest period of any remains of our ecclesiastical architecture, and that several of the remainder are of the earliest work succeeding the Norman Conquest. The crypts of the cathedral of Ripon and of the abbey church of St. Mary at Hexham, are commonly accepted to be of the seventh century, the age of Wilfrid. At Repton in Derbyshire, and Brixworth in Northants, and at Wing in Bucks, they are of pre-Conquest origin. In the cathedrals of Worcester, Gloucester, Winchester, Canterbury and Rochester they represent the earliest existing parts of these buildings, being of the eleventh or early twelfth century; whilst at Hereford there is a characteristic example of the early thirteenth century.

Small crypts of later date are commonly found under parish churches, but these were in most cases used as bone-holes. At Tenby in Pembrokeshire there is a small crypt about 17 feet by 13 feet, but of very late date; and at Malpas in Cheshire there is a like example. At
CRYPT OF THE CHURCH OF ST. PETER IN THE EAST, OXFORD, LOOKING WEST.
Tamworth in Staffordshire there is a crypt on the south side of the church which has served as a receptacle for human bones, such as may be seen in the churches in Brittany, and not unlike the vault at Bosham in Sussex, and there are others.

THE CRYPT OF ST. PETER’S IN THE EAST.

The crypt of St. Peter’s in the East is a rectangle on plan, 36 feet in length by 21 feet in width (fig. 1). This area is divided into fifteen bays, five in the length and three in the width, by transverse arches, carefully built of squared stone, but unmoulded. These spring from eight detached piers, with carved capitals (plate 11) and simply moulded bases on square plinths, and from sixteen square-edged responds having impost mouldings, but no visible bases (plates 1. and 111). This arrangement gives the idea of a nave and side aisles. Each bay is covered with a quadripartite groined vault, built of rubble, though the stones forming the groins are of necessity roughly cut to shape. The central alley, running east and west, and the east and west cross alleys, are slightly wider than the others: consequently only eight of the bays are even approximately square. The wider arches are semicircles, the others slightly stilted, while the diagonal section of each bay is more or less elliptical.

At the west end of the crypt (plate 1) is a central doorway which led to a small dark chamber about 8 feet long by 7 feet wide. From the cross alley at this end there are also doorways, now built up (but left visible through a grating in each), which opened on to passages leading to steps which reached the floor level of the nave.

In the years 1862–3 persistent statements were made that from the western central opening in this crypt there was a continuous underground passage at least to the extent of the west wall of the church itself. The Oxford Historical and Architectural Society very zealously took up the question and finally, by making excavations and careful examinations, positively proved that no such extension westward existed or ever had existed, and a plan and longitudinal section of the crypt drawn to scale
appeared in their Journal for their first meeting in Trinity term, 1863.

At the east end (fig. 2) there is now a central opening which at one time served as a doorway, but this is not likely to be original, for the soffit of the arch is four-centred, the edges of the jambs are chamfered, and the adjoining vaulting has been disturbed. One or three altars may have stood at this end where a very small one-light window is placed to each division.

In the north wall there is a central opening (plate iii) which led to a winding staircase between the chancel and crypt. On the south side there is now an external entrance from the churchyard but on the inside of the chancel wall there is indication of an original doorway which, it has been suggested, points to there having been here a corresponding staircase on this side to that on the north. If this were the case there were originally two entrances to the crypt from the nave, and two from the chancel, all internal. East and west of the south entrance there are two very small semicircular-headed windows having broad splays inside, as have also the two windows at the east end. The original windows on the north side have been blocked up by later buildings and their ashlar quoins have been pillaged for use elsewhere.
SECOND PILLAR WEST, NORTH AISLE. CRYPT OF THE CHURCH OF ST. PETER IN THE EAST, OXFORD.
The external walls are 4 feet 6 inches in thickness, and are built with rubble facings internal and external, with as little ashlar work as possible. The shafts to the piers are 13 inches in diameter, and 3 feet 1 inch high: their bases, which are about 1 foot 2 inches high, spread to 1 foot 10 inches square. The capitals are 1 foot 7 inches high, and the abaci measure 1 foot 11 inches square. All the arches between the piers are 12 inches in width and 5 inches deep. From the top of the base to the underside of the vault is 9 feet 3 inches. The important features of the structure, such as piers and arches, and quoins to the internal splays to the windows, and dressings of the doorways, are most carefully built in tooled stone with close joints. At various places in the piers and responds there are square sinkings carefully cut, which may indicate the use of screens or other provisions for facilitating order in the case of occasional visits of numbers to the crypt, and in furtherance of the object of the two staircases from the nave of the church.

As to the purposes for which these underground structures were designed it has happened that amongst my papers there has turned up quite lately a tracing of a careful plan of this crypt, with a description in Latin which would seem to have been produced some two hundred years ago, and it is to this effect: “Ground plan of vault of Grimbald. (1) Crypt beneath the church (stretching a considerable distance, it is commonly believed as far as Wolvercote), in which we believe the bones of Grimbald were interred. (2) Eight pillars, on two of which (one marked with the letters A. B. C, the other with the letter D.) are seen rude figures. (3) South door or ancient entrance from the south. (4) East door or ancient and public entrance from the east. (5) A very old flight of steps by which access was obtained not only to the vestry or presbytery, but also to the roof of the church, where once it is said a bell was hung in a turret.” On the same subject of crypts Viollet-le-Duc has written, “the first crypts or grottos of saints had been cut in the rock, or built in the ground to hide from the eyes of the profane the tombs of the martyrs.” And Mr. J. H. Parker has said in connexion with the crypt at St. Peter’s in the East that he had little doubt that the central recess under
the steps of the chancel was built to receive, and did receive, some shrine or reliquary, and served as a place of security, the marks of the lock being still visible. On certain occasions it was customary for the people to pay honour to this relic and the shrine was brought out on those particular days into the centre of the crypt to be exhibited to the worshippers who passed down one aisle, across at the east end in front of the altar where they made their offerings, and returned by the other side of the crypt. What were the precise relics in this case? Mr. Parker for various reasons suggests that a portion of St. Peter's chain was the object kept in the recess, enclosed of course in some costly shrine. Some of a practical turn of mind, of course tinged with modern ideas, have suggested they were built for the purpose of securing dryness to their superstructures. In none of the earlier crypts does anything now exist indicating their exact use. But in the case both of Ripon and Hexham they could only be lighted artificially, and that would seem to point to occasional visitations only. In all the others the provision of one or more altars seems to be certain, and that would imply services for worshippers.

Between the opinions of Viollet-le-Duc and Mr. Parker the real origin would seem to lie, certainly in reference to the earliest examples. But the vast structures to be seen at Canterbury, Winchester, Worcester, Rochester and Gloucester certainly do seem to suggest a large provision for congregations and services, the multiplication of altars and the attendance of worshippers. With regard to the uses of the crypt of St. Peter's in the East it may be said that its comparatively large area was in all probability for the congregation of worshippers, and its western recess for shrine, relics, or saintly tomb.

Lastly, with regard to the architecture of this little vault, it may be said, whether its construction or its art be looked at, that every part of it is admirable. It has served its purpose and has sustained the chancel above it for not less than 800 years, and is still structurally sound. In architectural character it is altogether satisfactory to the eye, in its varied divisions, proportions and ornamentation, every stroke of which comes of its natural construction.
CENTRAL CROSS BAY LOOKING NORTH. CRYPT OF THE CHURCH OF ST. PETER IN THE EAST, OXFORD.
For upwards of eight centuries the ancient stronghold within the city of Oxford has been regarded as a feature of principal interest. Its historical importance in relation to the country at large, its numberless changes of ownership, occupation, and uses have maintained an unceasing general interest in all that has concerned it. It is not intended here to treat at all of the castle itself, but simply to make an attempt to lessen the doubts, past and present, relating to the church of St. George within the boundaries of the castle.

Fortunately the present most prominent feature of the castle is the lofty square tower to the west, of very early date. Eastward of this stalwart tower there is at present an underground crypt, of considerable size and of architectural style coeval with the tower itself. These two very important members of the far distant structural works of the castle are all that can be seen at the present time.

In studying the church of St. George, it is necessary to consult what has been published regarding it. In 1796, Edward King, F.R.S. F.A.S. wrote a book entitled *The Vestiges of Oxford Castle*, and with him there was
associated in the work a Mr. Harris, called custodian, architect and builder. Though at this date it may be be said that the critical knowledge of early architecture in England did not equal that of the present day, these authors are to be regarded, the one as learned, and the other as practical, and therefore it must be allowed that their writings are to be taken seriously into consideration.

In the Vestiges a plan is given (fig. 3), shewing the tower to the west, and eastward of it a nave, then some "apartments," and an apsidal crypt. There is no scale given on this plan, and the dimensions of the crypt are only stated in the description. On setting up a scale from these given dimensions and applying it to the other parts of the plan the sizes of the buildings so arrived at turn out in parts to be unfortunately incorrect, but the marked difference in the direction of the buildings in respect of the tower are not so much against actual measurement. In the description it is said that a certain length of the outer wall came to "the high tower joining to St. George's church which was used as a campanile belonging to that church," and that "there was a covered way on the wall from the round tower built in the time of Henry III to St. George's tower."

This plan distinctly shews the tower, from the east side of which there runs at an angle bearing southward a range of buildings named "nave" with a north door-way, three "apartments," two of them described as "more modern" and, lastly, a "crypt" with an apsidal eastern termination and an external entrance having steps on the south side. This crypt is fully described as "being at a distance of about 70 feet from the tower and 20 feet long, including the semicircular part at the east end, and 20 feet in width, supported by four pillars, shewing itself from its small dimensions to have been under a Saxon chapel no larger in size." An interior view of the crypt looking east is given as an exact drawing by Mr. Harris, and shews a door between two carved pillars, but no wall piers. Dimensions are given as follows: shafts 1 ft. 11 ins. in diameter, height 2 ft. 7 ins. and capital 1 ft. 3 ins. the span between each pillar each way 5 ft: from the floor to the spring of the arches 5 ft. with a rise of 2 ft. 6 ins. and the arch rib 6 ins. making
VIEW OF OXFORD CASTLE, FROM BULLOCK'S LANE, 1772.
the exact total of height 8 feet. A sketch of the east side of the tower is also given shewing the arch which previously has been called a doorway, with the raking lines of a roof, and also the ruined ends of the two flanking walls of the nave, having a doorway in the north wall. The doorway on the south side of the stair turret from the curtain wall previously mentioned, is also shewn.
Another doorway and several other minor openings also appear in the sketch of this end of the nave.

In addition there is a drawing dated 1772 (plate iv) shewing the east side of the tower, the "apartments" next to it, and, to the east, the chapel over the crypt.

There is also a bird’s-eye view of the castle and its surroundings (plate v) in which the great tower and also the "apartments" appear, but in this case the semicircular apse has become a wall only, without a roof. It is curious, however, that the bird’s-eye view appears to be of an earlier date than the view in which the apsidal end is complete with its roof, walls, and three semicircular-headed single-light windows.

Unfortunately the present prison now covers the ground of the previous church, and it remains for us to compare the authorities with the existing remains.

First there is a crypt, or part of one, which we cannot ascribe (as King does his crypt) to the seventh century. A comparison of King’s plan (fig. 3) with the plan of that now existing (fig. 4), with the present state of things on plan (fig. 5) and lastly, with the main features of the plan of the church of St. George within the castle as deduced from the reliable statements of the facts of the past, and from the actual facts of the present time we can see at once that the crypt as figured by King and described by him has no relation whatever in its plan, proportions, or dimensions, to the part of the crypt now existing, for the former is stated to be 8 feet high, with four pillars in the middle, and 20 feet long by 20 feet wide, including the semicircular end, while the latter has six pillars in the middle, is 10 feet in height, 32 feet 9 inches long by 26 feet wide, entirely without any circular end. Indeed from the existing evidence of its original plan, the crypt had, like that at St. Peter’s in the East, eight central pillars and, as nearly as can now be discovered, it was not less 40 feet long, divided into five bays (double the length of King’s apsidal crypt). Consequently it would appear that the crypt, or part of a crypt destroyed by Harris for the prison authorities, was quite another building to the present existing crypt. This crypt was at its east end shortened and broken into, and the big circular prison limb now stands in the midst of it. Still King’s apsidal
AND OF ST. GEORGE WITHIN THE CASTLE, OXFORD.

FIG. 5. PLAN OF THE PRESENT BUILDINGS.

FIG. 6. PLAN OF THE CRYPT OF ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH AS IT WAS AT THE END OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, DEDUCED FROM KING'S PLAN AND THE EXISTING REMAINS.

FIG. 7. PLAN OF ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH, DEDUCED FROM EXISTING REMAINS, AND EARLY ILLUSTRATIONS.
crypt has to be placed, for there can be no doubt that it existed up to 1772.

The knowledge of what happened within a year or two of that date, and a study of the present state of things, indicates that King's crypt fell a sacrifice to the prison plans, and that it was in fact the eastern portion of the present crypt, standing beneath the east end of the chancel of the church.

The question of how this obliterated portion is to be linked on to the present remains involves a broad general view of the special locality. First of all we have the great early tower to the west, from which runs eastward a building 86 feet in length and 29 feet 6 inches in external width, abutting at the east end upon a big circular building some 30 feet in diameter, the whole forming a three-storied building 118 feet in length (fig. 5).

It will be observed from fig. 5 that this three-storied range does not leave the great west tower at a right angle, and thus accords in this respect with King's plan. The angle of difference, which begins between the tower and building, differs slightly from the actual angle, but the line of length in this building is practically west and east. Curious to say a line drawn between the centres of the great tower and the modern circular erection to the east of it not only runs east and west but is the centre line of the present crypt. Setting out the plan of this crypt from present measurements, it is of the same internal width as the prison building, its flank walls form the foundation of the prison range and, including its four remaining bays, it measures 40 feet in length. If we add King's crypt to the east of this original crypt of 40 feet in length we have the crypt of St. George's church as it was at the end of the eighteenth century (fig. 6). These conclusions are not inconsistent with King's relation of what took place under Harris's direction, assuming that they wrote of a part as of a whole.

It now remains to set out the actual plan of St. George's church, which as a matter of fact would seem almost to find itself. We have its western end against the great tower, its eastern part over the apsidal crypt, and its middle part over the present crypt. Hereby the total length and the widths of a typical eleventh-century church
BIRD'S-EYE VIEW OF OXFORD CASTLE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS.
are brought out with an apsidal termination (fig. 7) attached to a western tower, which may or may not have been built first, but it was dragged into line with the fortress wall. It is however quite open to question whether the tower was really built as a military feature. It certainly looks like one, and the central features in its parapet story look like openings, but they were built as they at present appear, namely as solid wall-spaces with make-believe openings. Such also is the case with the eyelets, which, as they stand, could not be used effectively by the fighting archer. Moreover the archway on the ground floor 11 feet in width and about 12 feet high, is not to be regarded as a feature of military character, and King writes that the tower was used as a bell-tower. Looking at the drawing in King's *Vestiges* there is indication enough for fixing the east side of the tower as being the west end of the church, with its middle tower arch and two flank walls built into the tower, the northern one having its usual doorway, and the lines of the roof crossing the width of the church are apparent. On the southern side there would appear to have been a doorway to the stair turret of the tower with the lower steps leading to it. If a parallel of such a church tower were wanted we can find an almost contemporary example in the parish church of St. Michael close to the city walls.

If it be thought that the length of such a church as that now set out is disproportionate to its width it should be remembered that it belonged in fact to a collegiate church without aisles, and further that the proportion and dimensions of the original church of St. Peter’s in the East vary very little from this plan.

It is submitted that the conclusions here arrived at are quite consonant with King's descriptions with the early representation of this part of the castle, and with existing facts, the main differences being that King did not write of the existing crypt, and that his guess of the distance between the tower and his crypt was 70 instead of 95 feet.

The general construction of this crypt (plate vi and fig. 8) is similar to that of St. Peter’s. The span of the vault is divided into three, and it has been shown that the crypt was originally five bays long. As at St. Peter’s there
is a quadripartite groined vault to each compartment, which is not unusual at this date, but the vaults at the castle are of ashlar. The longitudinal and cross arch-stones are in a single order, and are of well constructed ashlar, set with joints neither wide nor close. The caps to the piers at the castle have a square abacus 7 inches in depth with the edges slightly taken off, and a bold roll neck moulding bedded on to the circular shafts. The reduction from the square of the abacus to the circular shaft is very charmingly done, mostly by broad and easy chamfers down-
CRYPT OF THE CHURCH OF ST. GEORGE WITHIN THE CASTLE, OXFORD.
centre of pier to the side wall, and the south alley 8 feet 4 inches. The opening of the arches at the springing measure in width, of the central alley 5 feet 1 inch, of the south alley 6 feet 6 inches, and of the north alley 6 feet 4 inches. The total height from the floor to the underside of the arches of the central alley is 7 feet 4 inches, of the south alley 7 feet 11 inches, and of the north 7 feet 2 inches. The total height of the piers from the base to the top of the abacus is 4 feet 5 inches.

In work of the eleventh century irregularities in setting out do occur, but they are only detected by the tape or measuring rod. In the early twelfth century exactness of dimension is prevalent as a rule. The present paving of the floor is of rough, hard stone laid on edge, reminding one somewhat of a Roman roadway.

The general architectural character of this crypt, though alike in style with St. Peter’s, differs from it in its more massive proportions of solids, and in its more archaic ornamentation, due of course to its precedence in date. Its effect is really charming, owing to its grandeur of proportion, its beautiful early carvings and its simple vaulting.