Buildwas Abbey Church, Shropshire. From a Drawing by the Rev. John Louis Petit.

# ARCHITECTURAL NOTICES OF THE CONVENTUAL CHURCH OF BUILDWAS ABBEY, SHROPSHIRE.

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WHATEVER style of Mediæval architecture we may prefer on the score of beauty or grandeur, we shall, I think, readily admit the peculiar interest of that period when the Gothic was beginning sensibly to develope itself. And this transitional period, which we may set down as comprising the latter half of the twelfth century, was particularly rich in ecclesiastical buildings, both in England and on the Continent, so that there are few localities in Western Europe where the features indicative of the great change may not easily be studied. The county of Shropshire has its full share of fine examples. The Abbeys of Wenlock, Lilleshall, Haghmond, and the White Ladies, near Boscobel, and the churches of Shiffnal, Wrockwardine, Morvill, Quatford, Edstaston, near Wem, Shawbury, Wistanston, Cundover, with many others, afford beautiful specimens. I have selected the Abbey of Buildwas as being the most extensive and the most perfect. The remains of the church, which are very considerable, present, with the exception of the sedilia, nothing so far advanced as the Early English ; the whole evidently belongs to that half century of which I have spoken, the latter half of the twelfth. Yet even during this period there have been, as I shall presently show, some alterations in the original work. And a large portion of the monastic buildings, which have received little or no insertion, appertain to the same period.

Before we proceed further, it will be as well to assign to this and similar buildings their true position and character. The Mediæval styles may be said to have been always in a transitional state. In England and Normandy, a tendency to Gothic showed itself for near a century and a half before the style itself was fully established. The purest Norman is

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not free from this tendency. Its clustered columns, and the tall slender engaged shafts that run up, in face of the pier and wall above it, to the springs of the vaulting arches, or the brackets of the wooden roof, indicate the presence of that principle which was afterwards so variously and beautifully developed. Though the introduction of the pointed arch took place, I believe, later in England and Normandy than in some other parts of Western Europe, yet, when it did appear in these countries, its influence was much more rapid than elsewhere, in giving completeness and unity to the Gothic system.

From the Conquest to the end of the twelfth century we may observe, in our own country, at least four phases of Norman architecture.

First,—That before the end of the eleventh century. Of this we have not many examples remaining. The best known are the transepts of Winchester, a small part of Ely, and a portion of the west front of Lincoln Minster. Much of St. Alban's would also be of this date; and probably other cathedrals, originally built soon after the Conquest, retain parts of the original structure. One chief characteristic of this period is the wide-jointed masonry; and when it occurs in large and carefully built edifices, it may be looked upon as a criterion of date, but not in smaller or less costly churches. The style is one of much simplicity, the ornaments bold and effective, though somewhat rude, and the composition grand and massive.

The second phase is the architecture of the reign of Henry I., in which the work is executed with greater care and precision, while none of the massive grandeur of the earlier buildings is lost. Even where much ornament is used, an air of simplicity pervades the whole, and this will always be pronounced to be the age of the finest and purest Norman. The naves of Tewkesbury and Gloucester, much of Norwich, Peterborough, Ely, Southwell, Wymondham in Norfolk, Romsey, Chichester, Durham, are of this character, which in fact may be looked for in most of those cathedrals that were commenced shortly after the Conquest, and have been partially, but not wholly, Gothicised. For the choir, which was first built, was also the first part to be renewed in the more enriched style, consequently the work of the eleventh century has often disappeared, while that of the early part of the twelfth

remains. A marked difference is observable in the early part of the reign of Henry II., which we may consider as the commencement of a third phase of Norman. It is not easy to state in what the difference consists, though the practised eye will detect it. Sometimes it appears in mouldings of greater intricacy and less power, of which an example may be seen in the west end of Buildwas, where we have a kind of network ornament occupying both the face and soffit of one of the orders of an arch, which must have been more difficult either to design or execute, than it is even to draw, and that is no easy matter. It has not nearly the effect, either as regards richness or grandeur, that is produced by the far less elaborate cuttings of earlier work. In the simpler work too we often detect a certain degree of feebleness, perhaps arising from an increased desire of high finish, as compared with the vigour of the early Norman. In some buildings the pointed arch is used freely, in others the round arch is retained, but the number of mouldings is much increased. It has often struck me, in buildings containing both pointed and round arches, that the pointed have ornaments inclining to the Norman character, while the mouldings of the round approach to those used in an advanced stage of Gothic.

Steyning Church, in Sussex, presents a good example of the late Norman; the pier-arches of the nave are still semicircular, but their enrichment, in number and variety of mouldings, may compare with the richest Gothic.

After this, towards the end of the reign of Henry II., and to the close of the century, we find what is strictly called the transitional style, having pretty nearly in equal parts the Norman and the Gothic element. In this the arches are mostly pointed, though occasionally the round arch occurs where its use is dictated by convenience, as in the presbytery of Chichester, which is a fine specimen of the style. The mouldings are still generally arranged in such groups as to give each order of the arch a certain squareness of section, and the square abacus is used. The shaft is common, and has a capital of foliage, which affords an admirable instance of conventional treatment, as indicating the flexibility of the leaf or plant, while the stiffness necessary to give it architectural character is retained. This sort of capital, of which there are specimens at Buildwas, though the shafts them-

selves have disappeared, prevails through the whole of the transitional period, and in France is extremely common, where the pointed style, through the whole of the thirteenth century, the Epoch of our Early English, is very similar to our own transition. The choir of Canterbury is our finest example of the transitional style, but it evidently shows its Continental origin.

The capital we have noticed, is very difficult to draw, especially when the stone in which it is executed becomes decayed, as the sketcher is tempted to produce a closer imitation of the real or supposed natural type, and this goes far to weaken the architectural character. Photography affords the best means of dealing with such subjects. And here I would make a remark upon sculpture as applied to architectural decoration. It is applied in two ways, one as a mere embellishment, having little or no reference to the constructive features, but simply occupying a suitable position, just as a picture hung up against a wall. Such are the statues in niches, and reliefs upon flat surfaces; and through certain arrangements of their general lines may be desirable, for the sake both of the work of the architect and of the sculptor, yet there is no reason why nature should not be faithfully represented, or why any of the ordinary rules of art should be abandoned. The statue or the relief may be treated as works of high art, and no deviations from nature allowed, but such as may be suggested by the point of view. So when a wreath of flowers is used as an ornament, as common in the Italian style, these should be perfectly true and natural; they take no part in the construction, and there is no reason why they should not have as much freedom and flexibility as the material will admit. But when an important and essential member of construction is sculptured, care must be taken to preserve its character as an architectural feature. The corbel, though carved into a human head, or the capital, into a bunch of foliage, must still retain that stony rigidity which fits it for the support of the weight above. The natural type must not be so followed up as to confuse or conceal the reality; we must not be presented with a cluster of leaves and flowers, where we want a solid block of stone. The stone may be made to remind us of flowers, or leaves, or any other beautiful or pleasing object; and to do this

with judgment is the great art of the architectural sculptor. I think the perfection of it, in the one article of the foliaged capital, is to be found in the transitional period. The Early English capitals are extremely good, but often a little too flowing and overhanging. In the fourteenth century the imitations of nature became too close, and the conventional treatment in great part abandoned.

The remains under our present consideration, those of Buildwas Abbey, belong for the most part to what may be called the third epoch of Norman Architecture, namely, that which prevailed early in the reign of Henry II.; and they retain on the whole more of the purity and grandeur of the older Norman than a great number of specimens of the same period. In describing the edifice, I will point out a few of the marks which enable us to form a conjecture as to the date.

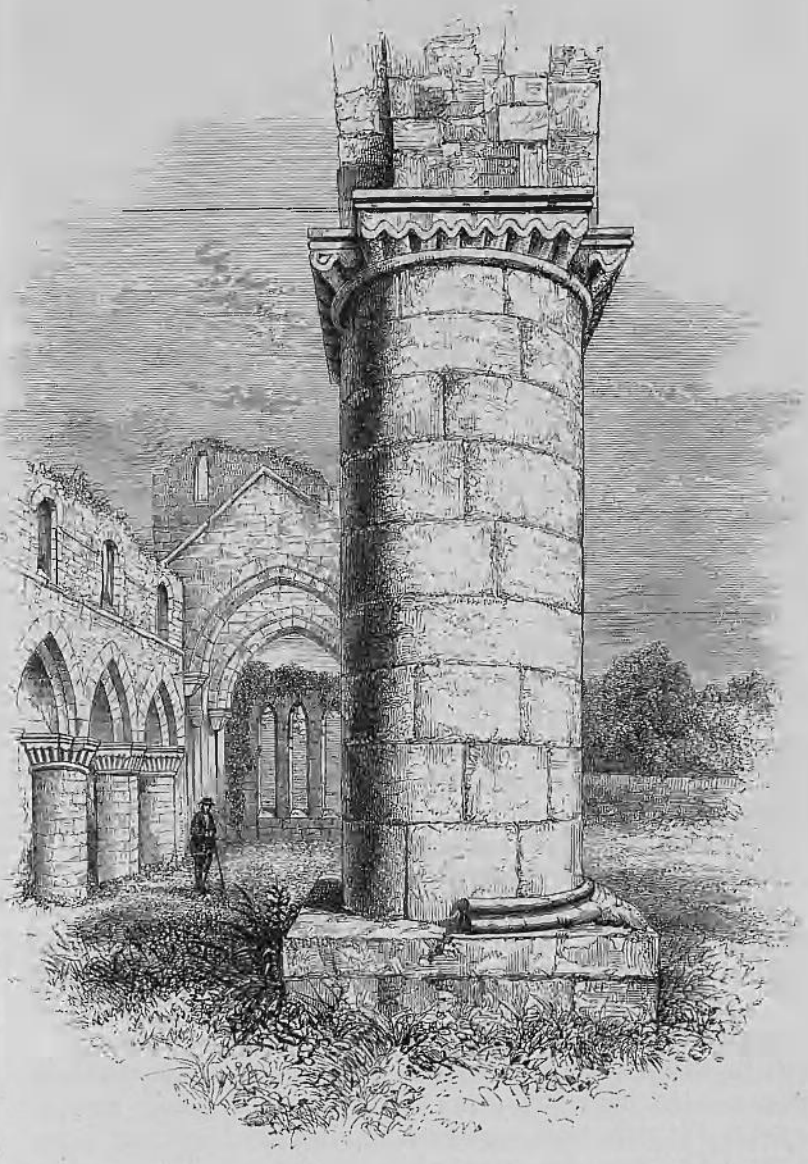
The church consists of a nave, central tower, choir or chancel, and a north and south transept, each with two eastern chapels. These, as well as the chancel, are square in their eastern termination, instead of being apsidal, the more usual form at the earlier period. The walls of the aisles are altogether destroyed, as well as the greater part of the transepts, still it is not difficult to form a probable conjecture as regards the appearance of the building before it fell into ruin. The face of the south transept still exhibits part of a flat buttress, which bisected it, as is the case with the west-front; and the western compartment has a doorway, the upper part of which has been demolished. The pitch of the gable is marked clearly enough on the wall of the tower. There is a staircase in the south-east angle of the transept, and a corresponding one in the tower, which, from the look of the masonry, I think had a very slight projection, but I cannot ascertain this unless by a close examination.

As there is an opening in the wall of the tower below the weather moulding, I conclude that the passage was carried between the outer and inner roof. The upper part of the clerestory wall, above the windows, has disappeared; but there are remains of a corbel table on the north side, which was doubtless continued round the whole. The wall of the aisles were most likely divided into bays by pilaster buttresses, corresponding with those of the clerestory, and

pierced with round-headed windows, the corbel table finishing the whole. As there is no western doorway, I consider it probable that one may have existed in the most usual position, namely, the second bay from the west end. If there are any remains of a porch, they are now under ground.

The nave has seven bays, divided by massive columnar piers: the pair nearest the tower, octagonal; the rest, circular. The capitals are of a description common in the late Norman, and the abacus is square, with re-entering angles, so as to be adapted to the reception of an arch of two orders. In the earlier Norman the large columnar pier has usually a round abacus; this is the case at Tewkesbury, Gloucester, and Southwell. The orders of the arches are plain and square, and the arches themselves pointed, but so slightly, that their real shape will hardly be detected from a distance. The bases of these piers have not the boldness of the earlier Norman; and they have this remarkable peculiarity, that they only comprise half the circumference of the column; namely, that facing the aisles; the other half, facing the central passage of the nave, being brought down to the square slab or plinth on which it rests, without any base moulding whatever. From this we may infer that some sort of screen, or range of stalls, extended the whole length of the nave, concealing the lower part of the columns. Those nearest the tower have a face of broken masonry towards the nave; probably here the screen was of stonework.

The inner order of each of the transverse tower arches rests on brackets, so as to make the piers range with those of the nave and with the walls of the choir; leaving an uninterrupted space, the whole length of the church, for ritual arrangements. And we observe here the practice which has been often noticed before, of disposing the ornament so as to meet the view of the spectator looking eastward. For both the eastern and western arches have, on their western faces, three orders and a label; and on their eastern faces, only two orders, without any label. The northern and southern arches, which have two orders, have a label on their face, which is seen by a person standing within the area of the tower; those towards the transepts being destitute of this ornament. The orders are square, and the arches slightly pointed.



Buildwas Abbey Church, Shropshire. Pier of the Nave, looking from the East.
From a drawing by the Rev. J. L. Petit.

At an earlier period of the Norman style, a conventional church of the magnitude and importance of the one under consideration, would scarcely have been without that important feature, the triforium. Here indeed the height of the building would not admit one; but at Kirkstall, a structure of about the same date, where the height is considerably greater, this feature is also wanting. I look upon this omission, in such buildings, as a mark of a late Norman style. I should notice, however, that in Germany the case is reversed, the older buildings having a plain blank wall above the pier arches, and those approaching the thirteenth century, a large triforium. The clerestory has a range of round-headed windows, corresponding with the pier-arches. These have been enriched internally with shafts, having a capital of foliage and square abacus. These windows show more clearly the lateness of the style than even the pointed arches below. As we have observed, there is no western door, and the front is divided by a flat buttress, on each side of which is a round-headed window, enriched externally with rather a complicated kind of ornament, which betokens the latest Norman. Neither the nave or aisles appear to have been vaulted. The chapels east of the transept are, as at Kirkstall, separated from each other by a wall. They have each a cross vaulting, with plain diagonal ribs, springing from brackets at the corners. The vaulting of the chapels at Vale Crucis are treated in a somewhat similar manner. Under the north bay of the north transept, and its chapels, is a crypt.

The choir, or chancel, is in all probability the oldest part of the building, but has received alterations at a very early period, that is, before the Early English style had fairly established itself. For we see brackets, and the springs of vaulting ribs, of a transitional character, and these are so placed as to bring the crown of the vault to a higher level than the top of the wall of the nave. I endeavoured to discover, in the east wall of the tower, any marks of the chancel being higher than the nave, but could not perceive any; the weather-moulding corresponding with the others, and the ashlar masonry of the tower above it being clear and smooth up to the angles. There is, however, a mark as of a principal longitudinal vault; but the arches of the cells must have been very flat, if ever completed. I am inclined

to think that the brackets were inserted, and the ribs commenced, before the necessary addition was made to the height of the walls, and the work for some reason discontinued.

We may perceive very plainly an alteration of the east end, which now contains a triplet of lofty round-headed windows; but had them originally in two tiers. The intermediate portions of the wall have been cut away, so as to bring two windows into one. The labels of the lower windows are still visible. A window on the south side has also been lengthened, the string below it being cut through for the purpose. On the north side the original window remains untouched. Now, I suspect that this alteration was an early one; for had it taken place during the later styles, there would probably have been other indications of late work about the church, and I cannot find any such. Had it taken place in the thirteenth century, or at any succeeding period during the prevalence of Gothic architecture, I think more would have been done; the windows would have been wholly remodelled; their arches pointed, and shafts introduced. As they now stand, they are very characteristic of the period when the vertical line began to assume that prominence which subsequently gave its life and spirit to the Gothic style. We find similar windows in the nave and transept of Brinkburn Abbey, in Northumberland, and in Llantony, in Monmouthshire. The sedilia, a triplet of pointed arches, are evidently inserted; they are pure Early English.

The abbey buildings stand to the north of the church. The most important is the chapter-house, which ranges with the north transept. It is oblong, according to the type which was most usual before the Early-English octagonal chapter-houses were introduced. The front, as in the beautiful specimen at Haghmond, has a round-headed door, with an arch of the same form on each side; all enriched with Norman ornaments. The room itself has a vaulting in nine compartments, supported by four rather slender columns, two of them cylindrical, the other two octagonal. At first sight this would appear to be a decidedly Early English composition, as even the square abacus is not used except in the angles. The vaulted ribs that run from north to south (the narrowest dimension), are pointed; those from east to west, round: they have bold mouldings. But when we

examine these, we find that they are not strictly Early English, though, if we met with them in France, we might pronounce them to belong to the thirteenth century. One would almost question whether they are of the same date with the front and walls of the chapter-house; for at Kirkstall, a building on the whole of a more advanced character than Buildwas, the columns and vaultings of the chapter-house come much nearer to a pure Norman style. I do not, however, find marks of insertion, and possibly this interior belongs to the original design, the Norman arches being employed in the front, as conformable with similar buildings of the period.

The nave of the church and the range in which the chapter-house stands, formed, we may suppose, two sides of a square occupied by cloisters. Unless I am much mistaken, I have a recollection of an arch standing by itself at no great distance from the west end of the church, which might have been an entrance into the cloister. All traces of it have now disappeared.

The present farm-house was probably built from the monastic remains, and has doubtless much confused the general plan; there are, however, a few more fragments still remaining, principally of the transitional style. The length of the church internally is about 162 ft., of which the nave is 105 ft. The width of the chancel, and of the nave, from pier to pier, is $26\frac{1}{2}$ ft. The distance between the piers of the nave is $9\frac{1}{2}$ ft.; but the westernmost arch is somewhat larger than the others. The girth of each columnar pier is 14 ft., which gives as its diameter upwards of $4\frac{1}{2}$ ft.; this seems also to be generally the thickness of the walls. The total width of nave and aisles internally, is about 50 ft. The transverse length, at the transepts, 82 ft. The chapter-house is 41 ft. by $31\frac{1}{2}$ ft.

In beauty of situation, this ruin is not surpassed by any of those, which the artist, as well as the antiquary, loves to visit. It stands on the bank of the Severn, a little above the spot where its valley is narrowed between the steep and almost precipitous slopes, which are connected by the celebrated iron bridge of Coalbrook Dale. The monastic buildings lie between the church and the river; on the south side of the church the ground rises rapidly, and at a short distance forms a bold and varied outline of hills,

mostly covered with wood. On the opposite side of the river the bank is still more abrupt, and rises in irregular ridges, to the foot of the Wrekin, which towers boldly over the landscape.

It is many years now since I first became acquainted with this beautiful spot; I have often and often revisited it, and I may say that I have never done so without increased interest and pleasure.

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