

ON THE GROWTH OF ENGLISH PARISH CHURCHES.

By J. T. MICKLETHWAITE, F.S.A.

Just as the Church of England traces her origin partly to the ancient British Church existing in the land before the coming of the Saxons, and partly to the Roman Church through the mission of St. Augustine at the end of the sixth century; so the buildings in which she worships shew evidence of having been derived from the same two sources. We cannot indeed often say that a church is purely Celtic or purely Italian, for the two traditions, existing side by side, affected each other, and soon became mixed, but even in those built at the present time we can trace their influence and point out features derived from each.

No church remains in England which can with any probability be supposed to belong to the time before St. Augustine; but the close connection which we know to have existed between the Churches of Britain and of Ireland justifies us in supposing that their practices were like, if not identical. Now in Ireland early churches of a very peculiar character do exist, and a few such are found in Scotland, which was christianised from Ireland. They are extremely small, and never consist of more parts than a nave with a sanctuary—it can scarcely be called a chancel—east of it, entered by a very narrow arch, and always having a square east end. Such, there can be little doubt, was also the form of the ancient British churches, and from it, as I hope to show, the English parish church of later times was developed.

When Augustine and his monks came here they brought with them the ideas of their native land, and the church which they built at Canterbury was, as far as the means at their command could make it, the reproduction of an Italian basilica. This we know from the description of it which remains, and which has been lucidly commented

on by Professor Willis in his *Architectural History of Canterbury Cathedral*. The earlier bishops of St. Augustine's line were nearly all monks, and if not foreigners, at least educated by foreigners, and they also naturally adopted the basilican form for the churches which they built. And thus the basilica became the model for cathedral and monastic churches. Now the basilica was very different from the Celtic church just described. It was large and had aisles, the transverse arches were wide and lofty, and it had an apsidal east end, and generally a crypt or *confessio* under the altar.

We have contemporary descriptions of several churches, such as that built by Benedict at Wearmouth in 676, which are not very easy to understand, but which leave no doubt that the buildings were basilican. Of actual remains of this class we have but few, as most of the churches afterwards belonged to rich foundations and were replaced by larger buildings. The most important is at Brixworth, where a church was built in 680, as a colony from the great Abbey of Peterborough, then called Medehamstead. It has been a good deal injured by "restoration," but still remains the most instructive example we have of so early a date. When first built it consisted of a wide nave, with aisles, part of which was separated by a cross-arch to form a choir, and at the east end was an apse with, as it appears, a crypt below, and a passage going round the crypt, but outside the main wall of the apse. The internal length was nearly one hundred and twenty feet, and the width between the walls about fifty-five feet, the clear width of the nave being thirty feet. This was not a church of the first class, and it serves to show us that the buildings erected here under the Roman missionaries were by no means contemptible in their dimensions. I will not multiply examples, but I think it will be found that where we have the remains or the description of a monastic church built under what may be called the Canterbury influence, there is always good reason for believing it to have been of the basilican form.

Whilst the monks were building their great churches other smaller ones were rising all over the country for the use of the people. These became the parish churches,

and so numerous were they, that I believe that, except in large towns, there were few parish churches at the beginning of the present century whose sites were not already occupied in Saxon times.¹ We know little of their history, except where we can find it in their fabrics, *carent quia vate sacro*. The abbeys were centres of learning and literature, and seldom wanted their historians. But the parish churches were built by the people for their own use, and served by priests who rarely had, or were expected to have, more learning than would enable them to perform their ministry. They cared well for their church, but for its present, not for its past; and until we come to the days of churchwardens' accounts and such like business matters, we look in vain to them for any written records.² It is important to remember this, or we may suppose that the Saxon churches were much fewer than they really were. Many we know were of wood, and of the stone ones later rebuildings have altogether wiped out a vast number. Nevertheless, the cases where some traces can be found are numerous, and there are a few where the buildings are archæologically complete. Such a one is the little church at Bradford in Wiltshire. It consist of a nave thirty feet long by twenty feet wide, and a square-ended chancel fifteen feet by twelve feet, entered from the nave by an arch only five feet wide.³ There is some difference of opinion about its date, but it is certainly not later than the tenth century, and probably much earlier. The church of Escomb in Durham, to which attention has lately been called, is equally perfect, and very like in plan. It has a

¹ The early date of the division into parishes is shewn very clearly by the state of our old commercial towns. Those which, like London, York, and Norwich, come from Roman times have many parishes each with its own church, often of small size; whilst those which, like Hull, Boston, and Yarmouth, rose to importance in the later mediæval period are not so divided, but have one large parish church supplemented, by a, perhaps, still larger chapel of ease. The great church at Boston, for instance, had originally only the status of Chapel of ease, and St. Margaret's, Lynn, has it yet.

² It is still much the same. Important churches have their histories, but any one who has to do with country churches

must have discovered how difficult it is to obtain trustworthy information about the condition of one, say forty years ago, which many people still living must remember. And if one gets any information at all beyond the personal memory of the narrator it generally comes, not from any inhabitant of the place, but from the notes of some wandering antiquary.

³ There is a porch in the middle of the north side of the nave so large that but for its position it might be called a transept, and I learn from Mr. J. T. Irvine, under whose direction the building has been repaired, that remains of another such porch have been found on the south side.

nave forty-three feet long by fourteen feet six inches wide, chancel about ten feet square, and chancel arch five feet wide. It is later than that at Bradford.

These two churches are perfect examples of a type which remains in other places shew to have once been common. It survived the change of style at the coming of the Normans, and was till the end of the twelfth century the normal type of our smaller parish churches. And it is to be observed that the plan is in every respect Celtic and not Italian. Here is nothing of the basilica; but the simple nave and sanctuary, the square east end, and the narrow chancel arch all have their parallels in the rude early churches of Ireland. Whether we owe this to the influence of the Irish missionaries who had so large a share in the conversion of the North of England, or to the independent survival of a tradition of the ancient British church all over the country, I will not attempt to decide.

As time went on it was natural that the two traditions should influence one another, and in consequence we find some churches with elements derived from both. I believe these are never monastic, and as a rule we know scarcely anything about them except what we can extract from themselves. It is so difficult to assign a date to any pre-Norman English architecture that I give the opinion with some hesitation, but I think that all these mixed buildings are comparatively late, at least not earlier than the revival of the Church under Alfred, and probably not than the later one under Canute. Their plans may be described as being generally of the Celtic or secular type, but much enlarged, and with the wide transverse arches, and sometimes the apse borrowed from the basilican or monastic. They are in fact exactly what we should expect would be produced by men to whom the two types were familiar, and who wished to improve the former by giving it more importance and adapting it to the use of a congregation. Examples are the churches in Dover Castle, at Worth in Sussex, and at Deerhurst in Gloucestershire.¹ All these have transepts which I think

¹ Deerhurst may have had aisles to the nave. Although the arcades are of the thirteenth century and the clerestory windows later, the substance of the walls

seems to be Saxon for a considerable height. Unfortunately there has been some "restoration" of a very mischievous and irritating sort which helps to confuse

are another sign of late date. When once the idea of building churches in the form of the cross was introduced, it was likely to become popular.¹ But it was done very timidly at first. The transepts at Deerhurst and at Dover did not open into the interior of the church, and so told only on the outside. And those at Worth, which are open to the church, are very small and insignificant.

I am not certain whether the aisleless cross plan with nave transepts, sanctuary and central tower, was ever perfected before the conquest. It is not quite done at Dover.² But it certainly was very soon after, for with scarcely an exception our more important secular churches, not being cathedrals, can be traced back to this form in the twelfth century, just as the smaller ones can to the simple nave and chancel. I do not know whether the plan of any secular cathedral of Saxon date is known, and so cannot say whether they followed the monastic plan, like those of Norman times. But with this possible exception aisles and abbeys seem to be closely associated. So much so that when Brixworth, once an abbey, was restored from its ruins as a secular church the aisles were pulled down and the arcades built up. And this seems not to have been simply to save cost, for at the same time a tower was built at the west end.

Before leaving the Saxon churches we may notice one feature in them which was not passed on to those of

the matter. The inscription preserved at Oxford gives the date 1056 for the building of Deerhurst, but it was probably not really a new building, but, as in so many other cases, a repairing and restoring to use of one destroyed in the Danish wars. There seem to be at least two dates of Saxon work. Perhaps the church may have lost its aisles when it was restored, as Brixworth did. There is a bit very characteristic of the time in this same inscription. He who made it wished to shew us that he knew the meaning of the word *basilica*, so he calls it *Hanc regiam aulam*. This is worthy of the age that began one of the Westminster Charters *In onomate summi Kyriou*. A little Greek went a long way in the days of good King Edward.

The transept of an early *basilica* such as Santa Maria Maggiore or old St. Peter's, quite at the end of the building, with only a slightly projecting apse beyond, does not really give the form of

the cross, and I think would not suggest it if we were not accustomed to the idea by later buildings.

² At Stow there were fully developed transepts and four arches at the crossing; but there is nothing to show that a tower was built above them. It was, however, probably intended, if not built. This is a late plan. There is nothing in the fabric which can justify the attribution of any part of it to an earlier date than the foundation of Eadnoth about the middle of the eleventh century. As I have mentioned Stow I will add that the remains at the corners of the north transept which have been thought to indicate a setting back of the wall face, so that its plastering might be flush with the visible stone quoins, are really pilaster strips, or rudimentary angle buttresses. The same treatment may be seen at the corners of the late Saxon tower at Scompting in Sussex.

later date. It is the square western porch, sometimes as at Monkswearmouth, Brixworth and at Barton on Humber,¹ with a doorway on each face, the eastern leading to the church. Wherever this remains now it forms the lower story of a tower. But sometimes there is a clear evidence that the porch is older than the tower; as for example at Monkswearmouth, where the porch with its very curious doorways is of the seventh century, and at Trinity Church, Colchester. This porch belongs to the monastic type of church, but I am not prepared to say that it may not be found in the other. It may be regarded as the representative of the narthex of the southern churches, and I look on it as a sign of comparative earliness in the churches which have it. It no doubt suggested the western position for the tower; although, I believe, that a western tower, however early it may be, is nearly always an addition to an already existing church, as we can shew was the case in Gothic times. A few late churches of mixed type have the tower in the middle, as at Dover.

There can be no doubt that by far the greater number of Saxon churches were without towers. It is true that many such towers still remain, and, where any Saxon work at all is found, there is generally a tower. But this is what we ought to expect. A Saxon tower would hold bells as well as one of the fifteenth century. And the men who ruled in parish churches were careful of their funds and not likely to destroy a thing which did its work and was in nobody's way. A central tower might be condemned because its heavy piers blocked up the church. But one at the west end was in no such danger. If it were sound it was too good to waste; and the old men might "improve" it according to the fashion of their time, as they did in the thirteenth century at

¹ This church has a chamber west of the tower and entered from it, also of Saxon date. Can this have been the *baptistery*? It is possible that these porches indicate the former existence of a western court or cloister entered from the two side arches of the tower with a baptistery in the area of the court entered from the western arch. This arrange-

ment still exists in front of the It basilica at Torcello.

² Those who object to the use of the term *Saxon* to things English for historical reasons must allow me to use it for architectural. There is no convenient substitute, and it is at least as correct as *Gothic*, which it has been found impossible to get rid of.

Barnack and in the fourteenth at Brixworth, but they were not likely to destroy it.

The history of the Saxon churches is interesting for its own sake, and it is necessary to study it in order to understand what comes after, but we generally cannot trace the architectural existence of our present buildings further back than the twelfth century. The Normans brought with them a new architectural style and a strong passion for building; and in little more than a hundred years they not only built large churches for a vast number of newly-founded abbeys, but rebuilt nearly every church, regular or secular, in the land. They differed from those both before and after them in that their ordinary practice was to pull buildings entirely down and to start fresh and untrammelled. What later men did we shall soon examine; and of earlier men we may learn from the fact that in the few of their churches which escaped rebuilding in the twelfth century, and have come down to our time, we can generally trace the work of several different dates.

The Saxon basilican tradition does not appear to have had any influence after the eleventh century, when the new comers introduced a new and already developed type, itself derived from the Roman basilica, but quite different from the other. I do not propose to examine the course of this now, but to confine myself to the secular tradition and to that chiefly as it affected parish churches. An examination of a large number leads to the conviction that they have, with very few exceptions, grown from twelfth century germs, consisting of either (1) a simple nave and chancel, or (2) a nave, chancel and transepts, with a tower at the crossing and without aisles, or (3) a nave and chancel with a tower in the middle, but without transepts or aisles.

The first is just the old "Celtic" plan as we have it at Bradford and Escomb. The narrow chancel arch remains, and, though the apse appears for a time, it was never common, and the square end soon again became the rule in English parish churches, as it has continued to be, in spite of individual eccentricities, down to the present time. Small country churches, with the Norman plan unaltered, are not very rare. Adel, near Leeds, and Kempley, in Gloucestershire, will do for examples.

The second comes directly from what I have called the "mixed" Saxon plan. The Dover church only wanted arches piercing through the side walls of the tower into the transepts, as was actually done in the twelfth century, to bring it to the normal form of that date. It already had it on the outside.

The third, as at Ifley, may be considered an imperfect form of the second.

Now, although churches exist with plans of each of these classes, by far the greater number, as we now see them, are totally different from them. This comes from a succession of changes which, when examined, are found to have been singularly alike in all. Some began their alterations earlier or carried them farther than others, but the order in which they were made is almost always the same. The key to the history of a mediæval parish church is the fact that it never ceased to be used. The parishioners could not hire a tin tabernacle for use whilst the church was being "restored," and the idea of shutting it up altogether, and giving the parson an indefinite holiday, was one which, even with the mitigation of a Sunday service in a schoolroom, did not commend itself to their notions of propriety. They were not content to go without their church, even though they were to have a very much finer than it after a time. So they arranged that some part of it at least should always be fit for use. Thus the most extensive works were always done piecemeal. We sometimes see churches, and large ones too, which at first sight look the same date throughout, as if they had been built entirely new straight out of the ground. But a careful examination of them will generally reveal the order of the work, and shew evidence of the earlier buildings even in those which have replaced them. The distortion of some plans, for which strange and fantastical reasons have been invented, appears natural enough when we remember the conditions under which the builders worked and the difficulty which they must have experienced, with the imperfect instruments at their command, in setting out a complicated building on a site already occupied. Some churches ran through the whole course, which I shall have to describe, in a few years; others took four centuries to do it; some never started at

all, and others went only part way. In any stage a general rebuilding might take place on account of fire, accident, or simply a desire for better things, with the result of making elements in the plan, which date from different periods, appear as if they were all of one. But the fabric will generally tell its own story, and where a chapter is wanting it is generally easy to supply it from what we have learned in other places.

The first innovation on the regularity of the plan was nearly always the addition of an aisle to the nave, generally on the north side. The aisle was added for more accommodation, and on the north side rather than the south, because the graveyard was on the south, and although our ancestors had no scruples about disturbing the bones of theirs if they thought it necessary, they would not do so by choice if they could get what they wanted without it.¹ Most considerable churches got this aisle soon after they were built; many before the end of the twelfth century. Some had it put on in the course of their first building, although I think they were not originally designed to have it. The old men had no objection to a lopsided arrangement if it came in their way, but I do not think they ever deliberately designed one. Ideas grew quickly in the twelfth century, and although building went on faster then than it sometimes did later, the ideas now and then won in the race. There is a good illustration of this at Arksey, near Doncaster. Here the church was begun to be rebuilt towards the end of the twelfth century on the cross plan with central tower. The chancel and transepts were finished first, as usual. But before the nave was built the builders began to think their church not large enough, so they gave it a north aisle and pierced an arch from it through the west wall of the north transept. This arch cuts into a window in that wall, thus shewing itself to be an insertion, although, so far as one could tell from the character of the work, it is of the same date as the window it mutilates.

The north aisle was soon followed by one on the south, which most important churches had received before the end of the thirteenth century. Aisles vary in width ac-

¹ This is the reason that vestries are also generally on the north side.

according to the date. The earliest are sometimes not more than five or six feet.¹ In the fourteenth they had reached twelve or fourteen feet and in the fifteenth they were sometimes almost or quite as wide as the nave. The same cause which had led to their first building, namely, the desire for more space, often made them to be rebuilt on a larger scale. So it is common to find evidence of two or even three successive aisles on the same site each wider than the one before it. The latest aisles were often extended in width to the full length of the transepts in cross churches, thus in a manner swallowing them up. Sometimes there is evidence of them in the retention of part of their end walls, or in the arrangement of the windows. But often the widening of aisles and the removal of central towers have quite taken away all appearance of transepts in churches which there is good reason for believing have grown from the cross plan. Ground once taken into the church was seldom given up again; so, where the aisles have not reached their full width the transepts remain in some form, though they have sometimes become only little side chapels of small architectural importance.

Aisles to a chancel are as a rule of later addition than those to the nave. When they are large they generally indicate some special foundation either of a guild or a chantry. In towns such foundations were often of great importance,² and the chapels connected with them are as large as the chancel itself.

The space under the tower in a cross church generally pertained to the chancel and so the addition of a large chancel aisle may sometimes supplant a transept although the aisles of the nave remain narrow.

I have said that where a church had a tower at its first building it was nearly always central. It remains to shew how it came about that in nine cases out of ten it is now at the west end. Most parish churches were without towers at first and some waited a long time

¹ From the thirteenth century onwards we sometimes find large gabled aisles, almost equal to the naves in width, but they were never the rule.

² Such a guild had often the municipal government of a town in its hands and is

represented by a modern mayor and corporation. For instance, the present corporation of Newark is lineally descended from the old Guild of the Holy Trinity in that church.

before they got them. When speaking of Saxon towers I gave reason for believing that a western tower was not often rebuilt. And if this be so, a church which now has one must have been without a tower until that was built, unless indeed it had an earlier one in another place, which a large number of country churches scarcely can have had. The fashion for adding towers varied a good deal in different neighbourhoods, but taking England altogether there will be found only a small percentage of them older than the fourteenth century and probably not half older than the fifteenth.

Now a steeple was an expensive luxury and it sometimes took a long time to build it, even a lifetime or sometimes more. And men who wanted to use the church in the meanwhile were careful not to interfere with it more than could be helped whilst the work was going on. So they built their tower outside at the west end, on new ground not before built upon, and did not touch the church till it was finished; and then they took down the old west end, and lengthened the nave westwards to meet the new tower. Sometimes this lengthening was only a few feet and was put all into the responds, or sometimes a new bay was added or the last arch on each side considerably widened. Sometime the arcades themselves have been rebuilt since the tower, and so bear no evidence of the lengthening. But often all is distinctly to be seen, and at Bolton Priory we have an example of the process arrested half way. A new tower was begun at the west end there in 1520, as we learn from an inscription upon it. At the suppression, twenty years later, it had only reached the height of the nave walls, and nothing has been done to it from that time to this. There is the usual arch at the east side, but instead of it being open into the church, as it would have been if the work had been completed, we see beyond it the west front of the church of the thirteenth century. It is a most interesting and instructive case, and I hope no one from zeal to improve the church will take it into his head to finish Prior Moon's steeple.

These western towers were added not only to churches which had before been without towers of any kind, but to a great many which had once had them in the middle.

Twelfth century central towers were often hastily and badly built. We know of some that actually fell down, and others must have had to be pulled down on account of their insecurity. Others, too, were taken away because they had become inconvenient obstructions in the middle of the buildings; for their massive substructures, which were quite in keeping with the rest so long as the church was a simple aisleless building, became terribly in the way when it had grown into the more complicated form of later times. Now and then an attempt was made to get over the difficulty, and at the same time keep the tower. The fine church of Burford in Oxfordshire, for example, has a most wonderful system of squints and other contrivances, to enable the congregation to *see round* the tower, and the result is certainly very picturesque. But, in spite of all, such a church is a great trial to those who have to use it, and so the old men found. They generally preferred to rebuild the tower elsewhere, and choose the west end for it because that was the most symmetrical position next after the central.

Where a central tower has been built to a church possessing aisles, it is so contrived as not to be obstructive, but examples are rare. Where such a one is found, it is generally part of some very extensive rebuilding. At Patrington, for instance, it is evident that money was plentiful, and it was found possible to undertake the entire *and rapid* rebuilding of the whole church. One may see in the building that one part was actually done before another, but the scheme is one, and it has been so quickly executed that the style is uniform all through. In a case like this the inconvenience would be much less than in the more usual one, when work went on slowly as money could be collected. And the people were content to put up with it, using chancel only, when the nave was being built, and *vice versa*, for the sake of having a fine church, to the completion of which they were all looking forward.

Sometimes towers were built in other positions than the two we have discussed. They are exceptions, the reasons for which can sometimes be seen, and we may well believe that they existed even when we cannot find them now. Such towers are additions, like those at the

west ends, and like them have been built outside their respective churches. Sometimes they are quite detached.

When the aisles had taken away the side windows, and a tower the west window from a nave, men began to think it dark, and the next addition was a clerestory. As the clerestory generally followed the tower, it did not become common till the fifteenth century, but examples exist of all dates.

Large churches with aisles to the chancels have often clerestories there also. And the last development, which is found chiefly in town churches, was to do away with transverse arches altogether, and to carry the arcades and clerestory uniformly from the tower to the east end, leaving nothing but a short sanctuary projecting, and making the division of nave and chancel by a screen, to which much importance was given. This may be regarded as the final and perfected form of an English parish church, towards which all its successive changes had been tending. And we may note that such churches as St. Peter, Mancroft, Norwich, St. Michael's, Coventry, and St. Margaret's, Westminster, although they have grown as we have seen from a Celtic germ, have come at last to a plan which very closely resembles that of the Italian basilica.

Whilst these changes were developing the form of the church, others were going on which affected it only in detail. Here a window or a door was inserted, or a wall or an arcade was raised higher, nearly always for a good reason, and to the improvement of the building both in appearance and in historical interest. I shall not say anything of these matters now further than to protest against the stupid destruction of them by ignorant or pedantic "restorers." It requires no great skill to discover that a fifteenth century window in a thirteenth century wall is an "innovation on the original design," or to devise another window having a specious resemblance to what may have been there before. But the man who put that fifteenth century window there knew far better what he was doing than he who would now take it away. And those who can see and understand more in our old architecture than the profile of a moulding or the twist of a tracery bar, know that it helps to give life and human

interest to the building, and cannot find language strong enough to condemn the mischievous folly which would deprive them of it.

Postscript on the Churches of Canons.

Foundations of Canons, whether regular or secular, seem to have generally been made where parish churches already existed, and the parishioners retained some rights in them. The churches, too, when rebuilt at the time of the new foundation, generally followed the type of the largest parish churches having nave choir and transepts and central towers, but not aisles. This simplicity of plan did not prevent large churches being built, and some, as for example, Ripon, which had no aisles to the nave till the fifteenth century, though it had western towers, were as large or larger in scale than most of the cathedral and abbey churches. The canons, however, soon began to feel that the absence of aisles was a defect, and they added them wherever they could. But where there was a cloister it ran along one side of the nave, and an aisle could not be added on that side without encroaching upon it, which might not well be done, so they had to be content with one on the cemetery side only. This explains the apparent anomaly of the one-aisled nave which we find in most canons' churches. When there was no cloister, as at Ripon, two aisles were added. At Boxgrove, where the nave is considerably longer than the cloister we find two aisles for five bays at the west end, and then the northern one stops, and its arcade is carried on blank for seven bays along the cloister wall. The builders could not have shewn more plainly how much they felt the want of an aisle to be a fault to be got over and kept out of sight as much as possible.