

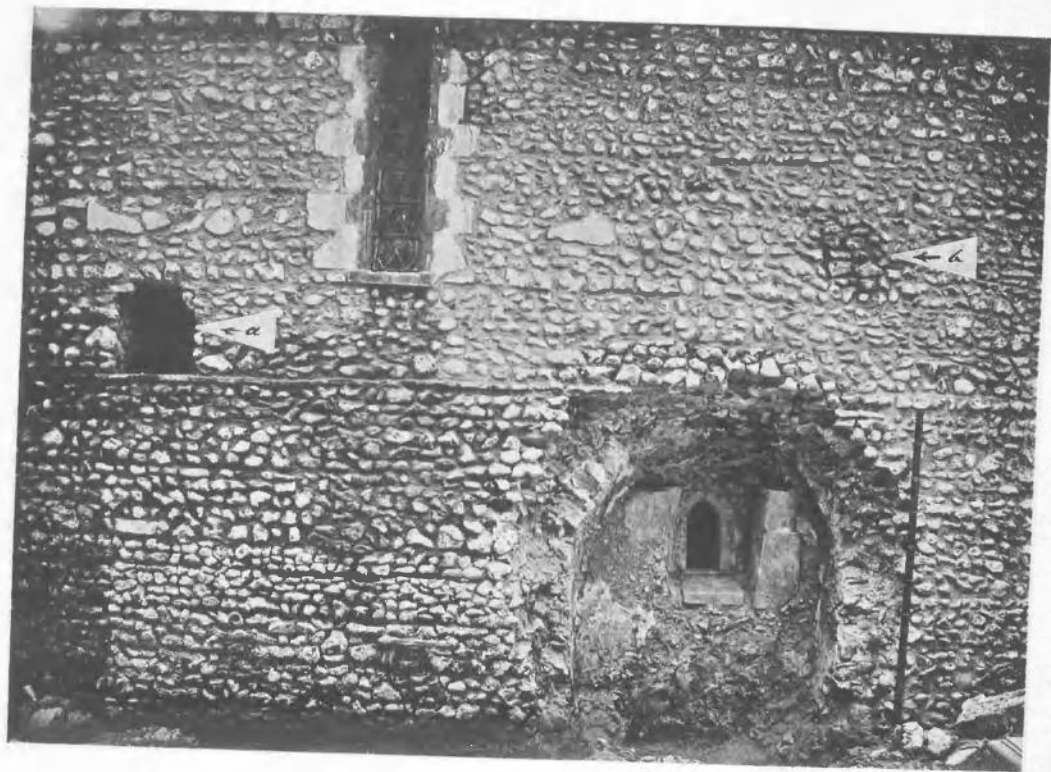
ON THE DISCOVERY OF AN ANKERHOLD AT THE
CHURCH OF ST. MARTIN, CHIPPING ONGAR, ESSEX.¹

By the REV. E. S. DEWICK, M.A.

The church of St. Martin, Chipping Ongar, is a small building for the most part of early Norman character. It consisted, until 1884, of chancel and nave without aisles. The walls are three feet in thickness, without buttresses, and there still remain a few of the original window openings, narrow slits in the wall deeply splayed on the inside. The external walls remained nearly unaltered for some eight centuries, but the want of sufficient light led to the insertion of larger windows at various dates. The Norman chancel arch was probably low and narrow, and was therefore replaced early in the thirteenth century by a wider one in the Early English style; and towards the end of the century a large east window, of which the inner jambs remain, replaced the three Norman windows, traces being still seen of the jambs of the two outermost. The church was "restored" in 1850, and thereby much of its architectural history was obliterated or obscured. In 1884, the need of additional church accommodation led to the building of a south aisle and the consequent destruction of the original south wall of the nave.

Until last year (1887) the whole of the original walls were covered with rough-cast, which concealed the masonry. This coating was then removed, and several features of interest were brought to light. The walls were found to be constructed of flint with a considerable mixture of Roman tiles, the west wall in particular containing many layers of them, and a round-headed doorway on the north side of the nave having its arch

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, June 7th, 1888.



The Phototype Co., 308, Strand, London.

REMAINS OF ANKERHOLD AT ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH, ONGAR.

entirely constructed of them. A priest's door of early Norman character was discovered on the south side of the chancel, the wooden door itself being found walled up *in situ*, with the ironwork well preserved, though the wood was ready to crumble to pieces. The socket for the stout wooden spar which once secured this door on the inside was found still to exist in the thickness of the wall.

Two remarkable openings, 14 inches square, were discovered in the north and south walls of the chancel, four and a half feet from the east end, and about five feet above the present level of the ground on the outside of the church. (That on the north side is shown at *a* in the accompanying illustration). These holes were clearly intended to carry a beam, which must have stretched across the chancel above and behind the altar, leaving a space of a foot and a half between it and the inner face of the east wall. It is known from documentary evidence¹ that such beams were once a common feature at the east end of English chancels, but it is rare to find the architectural proof of their former existence. On the beam stood the Rood with St. Mary and St. John, and on special festivals were displayed reliquaries and other treasures of the church. It is interesting to note, as has been pointed out by Dr. Rock,² that the beam was the fore-runner of the reredos, which was constructed by filling up with stone work or wooden panel the space between the ground and the beam. The room thus formed behind the reredos was frequently used as a sacristy, of which a good example may be seen at Tideswell in Derbyshire. At Ongar, however, the beam was not sufficiently distant from the east wall of the church to allow of a sacristy being made in this way, and it probably stood detached. An example of a beam of this kind supported by two pillars is shown behind an altar in St. Augustine's, Canterbury, in a mediæval illumination which has been engraved by Dugdale, (*Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. 1817, vol. I, p. 120.)

But I must now come to the discovery, which is the main object of this paper. For many years past the attention of antiquaries has been directed to a shallow

¹ Rock's Church of our Fathers, iii, pp. 470-473.
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² *l.c.* p. 470.
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lancet-shaped recess, 14 inches in height and 6 in breadth, on the inner north wall of the chancel. The masonry of the outer wall being concealed by rough-cast, it was impossible to ascertain whether this recess was a blocked up opening communicating with the outside, or was merely a niche or small aumbry in the thickness of the wall. Last summer, however, when the external coating of the walls was stripped off, a large hole was found which had been filled up with rubble. When this filling was removed an arched recess was found constructed in the thickness of the Norman walls, about five feet in height and four in breadth. The sides of the recess were rudely plastered, and in the centre of it, at a height of three feet four inches from a rude flooring, was the opening which had attracted attention on the inside (see illustration). This opening was found to have been originally closed by a shutter *from the outside*, on the eastern jamb the iron hinges remained, and on the other was seen the socket for a bolt. It was therefore evident that the opening and its shutter were intended for use by some one on the outside of the chancel, and a careful examination was made for marks of a building which might formerly have abutted upon it. No trace could be found of a sacristy, for the Norman masonry was undisturbed. There was, however, a square hole above the recess, which probably received the end of a beam, which may have formed the ridge of a small gabled cell constructed without the use of stone. This hole (marked *b* in the illustration) was "flinted over" just before the photograph was taken, but can be distinguished by a difference in the colour of the mortar. It is therefore almost certain that there was a cell rudely constructed against the north wall of the chancel, with a window looking into the church which could be closed by a shutter, and I can imagine no use for such a cell so likely as the dwelling of a recluse or anker.

From documentary evidence we learn that ankers and ankeresses were not uncommon in churches and churchyards.¹ In several editions of the *Sarum Manual* is found the *Servitium Includendorum*. The first part of this office

¹ See Cutts' *Scenes and Characters of the Middle Ages*, 1872, pp. 93-151; Rock's *Church of our Fathers*, vol. III.

pp. 114-124; and Bloxam's *Gothic Ecclesiastical Architecture*, 11th ed., vol. II., pp. 163-185.

was said before the altar of the church to which the ankerhouse was attached. A procession was then formed to the *inclusorium*, and, after the episcopal benediction, the ankerhouse was closed from the outside (*de foris*) and the *includendus* became *inclusus*. In the *Ancren Riwele*, printed for the Camden Society, the ankeress is described as living "under the eaves of the church like the night fowl," (pp. 142-3), and the window looking into the church is referred to, for it was expressly ordered that no conversation was to be carried on there, but that it was to be respected on account of the Holy Sacrament seen through it (p. 69).¹ Again, in the adventures of Sir Launcelot it is recorded on one occasion that "he saw a chapel, where was a recluse, which had a window that she might see up to the altar."² The window at Ongar is exactly so placed that the occupant of the cell might "see up to the altar" whenever he or she chose to open the shutter.

The position of the Ongar ankerhold on the north side of chancel instead of on the warmer and more comfortable south side is perhaps to be explained by the fact that the greater part of the village lies on the north side of the church, which was consequently the most frequented, and the anker would be in less danger of having his daily supplies of food forgotten.

A similar instance of an anker's dwelling rudely constructed on the outside of the church was brought before the Institute last year by Mr. Micklethwaite in his paper, "On the Remains of an Ankerhold at Bengoe Church, Hertford," (*Arch. Journ.*, xliv, p. 26.)

It remains for me to add that, after much deliberation, it was decided to close the recess which I have described by a thin wall, and to insert a door to allow of its free examination. This has been done, and the rudely plastered cell, and the window looking into the church with the marks of its shutter have been left just as they were found untouched by the hand of the restorer.

¹ A good deal of village gossip apparently went on through the cross bars of the other windows, so that the ankerhouse became proverbially associated in this respect with the mill, the market, and the smithy. "Vrom mulne and from

cheping, from smide and from ancre huse me tidinge bringed." *Ancren Riwele*, p. 88.

² *La Mort d'Arthure* (Bloxam, II, p. 174).

In conclusion, my sincere thanks are due to my friend the Rev. J. Tanner, Rector of Ongar, for facilities afforded me for making a full examination of the church, and for much information ; and on behalf of antiquaries generally I should wish to thank him and his churchwardens for their zealous efforts to preserve this interesting illustration of the life of our forefathers.