SOME NOTES ON THE STUDY OF OLD PARISH CHURCHES.[1]

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Many an otherwise excellent parish history fails badly when it comes to the fabric of the church. And this is true not only of those which were written in the dark ages of architectural knowledge, but, with few exceptions, of those which have appeared in recent times. The new writers have a larger architectural and ecclesiological vocabulary than their predecessors, and the dates which they give to windows and other features are generally nearer the truth. Few attempt to go further in their enquiry than the dating of such details; very rarely is the description of a church accompanied by a good plan, and sometimes there is none at all, although without a right understanding of the plan it is impossible to work out the story of the church. The details are indeed most valuable helps; but the real essence of the building is in its walls; and unless the relation of the details to the walls is properly understood, the details may easily lead the enquirer wrong.

Those who have the arrangement of our conference, thinking that this subject might properly be brought forward there, have asked me for a paper upon it. And in accepting the invitation I have tried to put together a few notes which may be useful to those who wish to work out the story of a parish church for themselves.

The subject is not quite a new one with me, and I will venture to begin with a reference to a paper on "The Growth of a Parish Church," read to the Archæological Institute, at Lincoln, in 1880, and printed in Vol. XXXVII of the *Archæological Journal*.

In that paper I tried to show that nearly all parish churches, as we see them now, have grown from smaller ones of earlier date; that generally the story can be traced back to an aisleless building of the twelfth

[1] A paper read before the Congress of Archæological Societies, 8th July, 1896.

century; and that there was a normal order of growth seldom departed from without cause. To this I would now add that in many more cases than I had any idea of in 1880, the germs from which the buildings have grown are older than the twelfth century, and that in a few they are of the thirteenth, or later, though we may have written evidence of the existence of churches in those places in older times. But the order of growth from the earlier and later plans is the same as that from those of the twelfth century. The buildings were without aisles at first, and may be roughly classified as those which had towers at the beginning and those which had not. The original towers were central, and often, though not always, they were flanked by transepts. This form, which seems to have been reached early in the eleventh century, was the architectural beginning of most of our larger parish churches, though but few of them now keep either the cross form or the central tower. The smaller churches have grown from the simpler plan of nave and chancel only, which is far older than the other. In each type we find both apses and square east ends, the apse being sometimes formed by the bending round of the chancel wall and sometimes separated by a cross arch, and made a distinct division of the building.

Starting from one of these beginnings the first step in the enlargement of a church was generally the addition of a north aisle to the nave, and that was often followed soon by one on the south. These aisles, as time went on, were in many cases widened—sometimes more than once—so that where there were transepts the aisle walls came to line with their ends, and often the transepts disappeared altogether. This stage was generally preceded by the removal of the central tower, which had either fallen or been taken down because it was unsafe. I think that never in the old days, except perhaps in a very few rich trading parishes, would men have voluntarily taken down their tower to replace it by a better. The undertaking was too great. To build a church tower was the work of a generation or more, and therefore, when men already had one, even if they were not satisfied with it, they would rather try how they might improve it than think of building a new one.

When a tower came down of necessity, its rebuilding was often not attempted till after a long interval, and it was seldom done in the old place in the middle of the church. Our fathers used their churches on seven days in the week; and although they were willing to put up with a temporary inconvenience for the sake of a permanent gain, they were careful always to arrange their works so as to interfere as little with the use of the church as might be. The gap in the middle of the church where the tower had been was therefore roofed over and made decent, and in due time, when the new tower was begun, it was placed outside the church at the west end of the nave, or in some other position the reason for which may even now sometimes be traced. When built the tower was generally joined on to the church by a slight lengthening of the nave, or otherwise according to its position.

The addition of a tower to a church which had not had one before was done in the same way, and this, with other works done to both on parallel lines, brought churches which had been begun on different plans nearer and nearer together until sometimes it is only by careful search that it can be determined from which of them one has grown.

The clearstory often followed the west tower, but was sometimes used without it.

The changes in the chancel, though much alike, were not quite so uniform as those in the western division of the church. After the twelfth century it seems to have been common to take down apses and replace them by square ends, and examples may be found in which no other change of plan has been made than this. There is a good one at Sidbury near Sidmouth, and another at Meriden, near Coventry. The loss of a central tower necessarily led to considerable work in the chancel, and sometimes to its rebuilding. Chapels in the form of aisles were added on one or both sides, and in some large churches clearstorys. The final development of the old English church plan was reached as early as the fourteenth century in a few churches—St. Nicholas's, Lynn, for example—and became common in towns in the fifteenth and sixteenth. In this transepts have quite

gone; the chancel-arch is taken away, and the arcades and clearstory are carried uniformly from east to west. The divisions were made by screens, and when properly furnished this is a fine type of church. The contrast between it and the aisleless cross church of the twelfth century is great. Yet in many cases one has grown by regular steps from the other.

The story I have told is true of nearly every old English parish church, more or less. A few keep the form of their first laying out, and have received changes of detail only; others started on the course of change even before their first building was complete. Some went but part of the way, and others ran the whole course. Some took four centuries to do it, others did it so quickly that they are quoted as examples of churches built new and all at once from the ground, which close study shows they were not. Others again, although their growth has been quite normal, have had their earlier parts rebuilt or so considerably altered that at first sight they seem to depart from the general rule. And very often the evidence of an earlier state of things is to be sought not in actual remains, but in the influence of the older work upon the form of the newer which replaces it.

If we wish to read the story which an old church has to tell we must begin with the plan, and always keep in mind the conditions under which the work was done. The most important of these are what I have just mentioned when speaking of the tower, namely, the unceasing use of the church and the economy, which, although it did not prevent works of improvement, was careful to prevent the demolition of what might be worked in with the improved state of things.

One of the commonest sources of error in church description is the assumption that a wall is of the date of the windows in it. The text books tell the student much about windows and nothing about walls. He sees the windows and dates them properly, but has no eyes to distinguish those which are inserted from those which are contemporary with their setting. Now, it is scarcely too much to say that in country churches the walls are generally older than the windows. It is quite usual to find chancels with the windows and roofs of the fourteenth or

the fifteenth century, whilst the walls are of the twelfth or thirteenth; and aisles in like case are nearly as common. They are dated by the insertions until the busy "restorer" comes and hacks off the plaster inside and the roughcast outside, and makes much of himself for discovering that there are blocked-up lancet windows in the wall. These he probably proposes to open out and "restore," and, if he gets his way, finds himself sorely bothered by the want of relation between the lancet windows and the buttresses, which are of the later date, and were never intended to have any relation with them.

It is not always necessary to dissect the walls in order to ascertain their date. After a little training the eye can tell a good deal, and there generally remains something of the original besides mere walling—some string or plinth, the sedilia in the chancel, a piscina in the wall of an aisle, and nearly always the doorway is kept, though every window may have been altered.

It is not, however, always safe to assume that a wall is as old as the oldest feature in it. I remember a good many years ago being much puzzled to make out the story of Colwall Church in Herefordshire, until I discovered that the south doorway, though wrought in the twelfth century, was moved, and put where it now is, in the thirteenth. Such cases are not uncommon. Catterick Church, near Richmond in Yorkshire, is a rare instance of a parish church built upon a new site in the fifteenth century, but it is full of parts of the elder church which it replaced, and which stood close by. They are of many dates, and can easily be recognised in spite of one of the most abominable "restorations" which ever an unfortunate church suffered.

The most remarkable example of re-use which I have met with is a tall stone spire of the fourteenth century, which stands on the top of a Tudor tower at Stanion in Northamptonshire. I have seen it mentioned as a "broach" spire of "Perpendicular" date; but the case is as I say. The spire must have been first built on an earlier tower, which failed, and had to come down; but it was itself all clean ashlar work in excellent condition; and as the good people of Stanion in the days of Henry VII thought it was far too good to be lost, they took it down

carefully and put it in store; and when they had built their new tower, they set up the old spire again on the top of it. I hope their successors will take as good care of it. When I saw the church in 1894 it badly wanted mending.

Churches which have received their full development of plan have often nothing left in position of the first buildings from which they have grown. The most likely places to find any are at the outer corners of what were the transepts, if any trace of them remains, and in the spandrels of the main arcades, which, strange as it may seem, are often older than the pillars and arches which carry them.

This last-mentioned fact is due to a cause which also brought about most of the irregularities in the setting out of old churches, for which fantastic explanations are often given: and that is, the practice of building up as much of the new work as possible before the old was disturbed, and then pulling down as little of the old as might be, consistently with the carrying out of the new intention. It must be remembered that, in all but the few churches which have never been enlarged, much, if not all, that we now see was built on ground already partly occupied. The rule, the square, and the line were the only instruments then at the builder's disposal for setting out, and he had not the help of carefully scaled plans. The best work is done with wonderful accuracy; but often in the work of the local mason, especially in rural parts, we find evidence of bungling and stupidity which his modern descendant would find it difficult to beat.

We will take the case of an aisle having to be added to a nave up to then without one. At the best, a line is stretched at the required distance from the old wall and parallel with it, and if the old wall be straight and square the new one will be. But perhaps there is a porch in the middle projecting further than the width of the new aisle, and there are buttresses or turrets at the east and west corners which stand out unequally from the main line. This may be seen and allowed for, but it is equally likely that it is not. The ends were generally built first because they did not interfere with the access to the church. If the builder be of the careless sort he makes his two

ends equal in themselves, and when (perhaps the next season) the time comes for building the side wall, and the porch is taken down, the line is laid from one new corner to the other new corner with the result that the new wall is not parallel with the old one, nor with the arcade which will later take its place. Such or such like is the origin of most of the irregularities of plan which we find, including the chancels out of line with their naves. But sometimes the distortions are so great that they can scarcely be explained this way.

The outer wall being finished, I believe the roof generally followed next. But the arcade would do so if it were built outside the old wall as it sometimes was, and thereby made necessary some alteration of the nave roof, and, unless the same were done on both sides, shifted the centre line of the nave. But more often the new arcade was built in the line of the old wall, and so under the old nave roof.

To this point the inside of the church has not been touched, and its use has gone on without interruption. Now it becomes necessary to break into it, but the use is not suspended.[1] A slit is cut down the wall near one end, east or west, and in that slit a respond of the intended arcade is built up, and then at proper distance another slit is cut and a pillar built. Then the arch between them is built, stone by stone, only enough of the old wall being cut away to get them in. In this way the whole arcade was built, and the usual order seems to have been to begin at the ends and work towards the middle, which was probably done, that the doorway in the old work might be kept in use as long as possible.

There were opportunities for going wrong in this method of building, and sometimes they were made the most of. I had lately sent to me a note of a case at Throckmorton, in Worcestershire, where they had begun at each end and built two good arches each way; but the last two pillars got too near together for a like arch, and they had to put a little one in the middle.

[1] Sometimes we find licences issued for services to be held in halls or the like. They are always for short periods, and an examination of the fabrics of the churches in those places would probably sometimes show that the dates of the licences correspond with those of the ending of some considerable works in the churches when the junction of the old and the new was being made.

There is another curious and instructive case at Scarborough. The old church there was a very early victim to "restoration," and has been scraped and tinkered worse than most. The part of present interest to us is the south arcade of the nave. The line of it is very crooked, which may partly, but not entirely, have been inherited from the earlier wall. The arcade was begun from the east end, and completed for two bays *and a half*, ending with the point of an arch, thus, I think, proving that the work was done in the way described. The half arch having the old wall below it to rest upon might safely be left for any length of time. The work was then taken up by a younger man, or at least by one of a newer school. I think there was little or no interval of time; but the "restorers" have restored very treacherously, and the reading of the story is as the deciphering of a palimpsest MS. But whether after a pause or not the new man began at the west end in his own fashion, and either did not know or did not care that his wall was considerably thinner than that of his predecessor. The meeting of the parts at the point of an arch is so clumsy that even the casual observer sees it and asks what it means. I think the explanation given here is the true one.

When the arches were finished the old walling within them was cleared away; but that above, if it were in good condition and otherwise fit, was left, and thus it is that often there under the plaster, and hung up as it were amongst the later work, is all that is left of the first stone church on the site.

In small country churches grown from the simpler type of original plan, the earliest work may often be found in the walls of the chancel or in the western part of them where an apse has been taken away.

In such churches more than in those of important places we find the alteration to have been in the form of improvement rather than in that of enlargement, and rebuilding was rare. Those who used a church might find it quite large enough, but old-fashioned and gloomy. So they enlarged one or more of the windows, and this, with the re-roofing which in many cases was made necessary by the decay of the older roofs, is enough to give the building the appearance of being much newer than it really is.

The changes are most conspicuous in the windows, and they went on all through the Middle Ages. Sometimes there is evidence to show that a window is the third, or even perhaps the fourth, that has been in that place, each being generally larger than that next before it. The gift of painted glass seems sometimes to have brought with it the alteration of a window to a later fashion without enlargement. Occasionally it may be observed that the jambs and outer order of the arch are older than the tracery within them, or that the jambs and mullions differ in detail from that which is above them, which suggests a difference of date.

This last criterion must, however, be used with caution. Another cause sometimes brought about a want of agreement between details which should have worked together, although the work is all of one date. There was a good deal of what may be called *New Road* business done in the Middle Ages. The centres of it were some of the chief towns and the principal stone quarries. A great trade was done in gravestones, which seem to have been kept in stock—those from Barnack, for instance, may be found far and wide through the Eastern and Midland Counties—and also the "yards" would execute mason's work to order, and send it to the place of its destination to be fixed by the men on the spot.

Sometimes these were men of little skill, and made strange mistakes. I know a large east window set wrong way round with the broad splayed stone jambs to the outside. I will not say where it is lest I give a hint to someone to spoil it by "putting it right." These unskilled country masons would sometimes undertake the simpler work themselves, whilst the more difficult was ordered from the quarry. A good example of this is the east chancel window of Babraham Church, near Cambridge. The jambs and mullions are local work and plain, but the tracery is moulded. Of course, the two do not work together; but they are made to fit after a fashion, and the effect is not bad.

Carpenter's work of the best sort seems often to have been wrought at a distance from the place it was meant to occupy. And this may generally be the explanation of that seemingly reckless disregard for existing features

which is sometimes to be seen, where wall pendants are made to come in front of windows, and things are done which tell of an absolute indifference to anything but the work immediately in hand. But some of these "unconformable" roofs were very likely prepared to form parts of greater schemes of improvement which were never carried out. For example, the well-known double hammerbeam roof at Knapton, in Norfolk, now spans an aisleless and rather low nave; but it has so evidently been prepared for a lofty and many-windowed clearstory that it seems almost certain that they who ordered and paid for it must have had it in mind to build such a clearstory. If they had not, they must have been singularly foolish people.

The subject of misfits recalls the frequent story of this or that in a parish church having been brought from this or that abbey or priory at the suppression. It is not to be doubted that some such transferences[1] did take place; but in by far the greater number of cases the story has no foundation better than the imagination of some sexton, and it ought to be contradicted, as it may lead to mischief at the hands of men who, though they may hesitate about taking away what they think to be in its original place, have no scruples about pulling to pieces that which they believe has already been moved.

Before I bring this discursive paper to a close I should like to urge on any who would write the history of a parish church not to stop at the sixteenth century. Even of churches which have been well and reverently treated much of the later story must now be recorded in books and drawings. The high box pews, the galleries, and other things, which the Church reformer has done well to take away, are none the less material for the Church historian. We who have passed through it all scarcely appreciate how enormous has been the change in our own time. Even now there are grown men and women who can hardly believe that churches ever were as

[1] The tower of Wroxeter Church, Salop, is a singular example of the use of monastic spoils in a parish church. It is a large and well designed tower unusually rich in decoration, which, on being examined, is seen to be made up of architectural fragments dating from the twelfth century onwards. There are sculptures from tombs, bosses from vaulting, and details of all sorts used in positions for which they were not intended, but combined with skill. The tower was probably built soon after 1540 with material from Haughmond.

nearly all were fifty years ago; and unless I greatly mistake, before the twentieth century sees its end, this dull, commonplace, workaday time of ours will seem one of the most important in history, and will even have acquired a glow of romance. Antiquaries will read papers about us, and novelists present fancy portraits of us to their readers. I leave the novelists to take their luck. They cannot do worse than men of good name have done before. But the future antiquary is my younger brother, and I should like to help him if I can. He will have learned enough of the dark ways of the "restorer" to make him suspicious of anything he may find in an old church unless he has some positive evidence about it which will enable him to see through and behind the havoc of the Grimthorpian and the meddlesome tinkering of the less ignorant but more mischievous moulding-monger. Therefore, let the historian of any old church not only set down all that he can learn of its former condition, but record, before it is too late, what was the course of the "restoration" which his subject can scarcely have altogether escaped. The man of mouldings, if he find, say, a window which takes his fancy in a place where it has a meaning and a history, has a trick of making one or several copies of it and sticking them in places where they have neither, and then perhaps he smartens up the old one till it is as new as the others. Nothing can undo the mischief, but a record of the facts will keep alive the memory of the old window with some of the associations connected with it, and will caution posterity against the forgeries.