

## KENSWORTH CHURCH, HERTS.

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Kensworth is the Ceneworth of Domesday, indicative of an earlier Coenessworth, probably meaning Keen's farm. The church of St. Mary is situated on the northern border of Hertfordshire, two miles south of Dunstable in Bedfordshire. It occupies a very isolated position, half a mile north of the long, straggling modern village, and one mile west of the great Roman road between St. Albans and Dunstable.

The church, as far as architectural evidence goes, was built in the middle of the twelfth century (figs. 1 and 2), but the foundations recently exposed suggest the existence of a previous church on the same site. The church comprises an aisleless nave, in length just twice its width, and a long rectangular chancel, almost the width of the nave. A tower was added to the west end of the church in the fourteenth century and has good checker-work of Totternhoe stone and flints inside the turret staircase. There are large stone quoins in the ringing chamber. The east side of the tower rests on the upper portion of the Norman west wall, and there is a modern south porch. The south side and east end have fourteenth-century and modern and modernised windows. There are three Norman windows on the north side of the nave and two on the north side of the chancel. Before the present modern south porch was built there existed an older structure, and there can be no doubt that the successive porches and the western tower have helped materially towards the preservation of the remarkable Norman doorways.

There are two Norman doorways, both flush with the west and south walls, without hood-mouldings (figs. 6 and 7). One of the Norman windows of the nave is illustrated in fig. 3 to show the section of the mouldings and the curious oblique scoring of one member of the

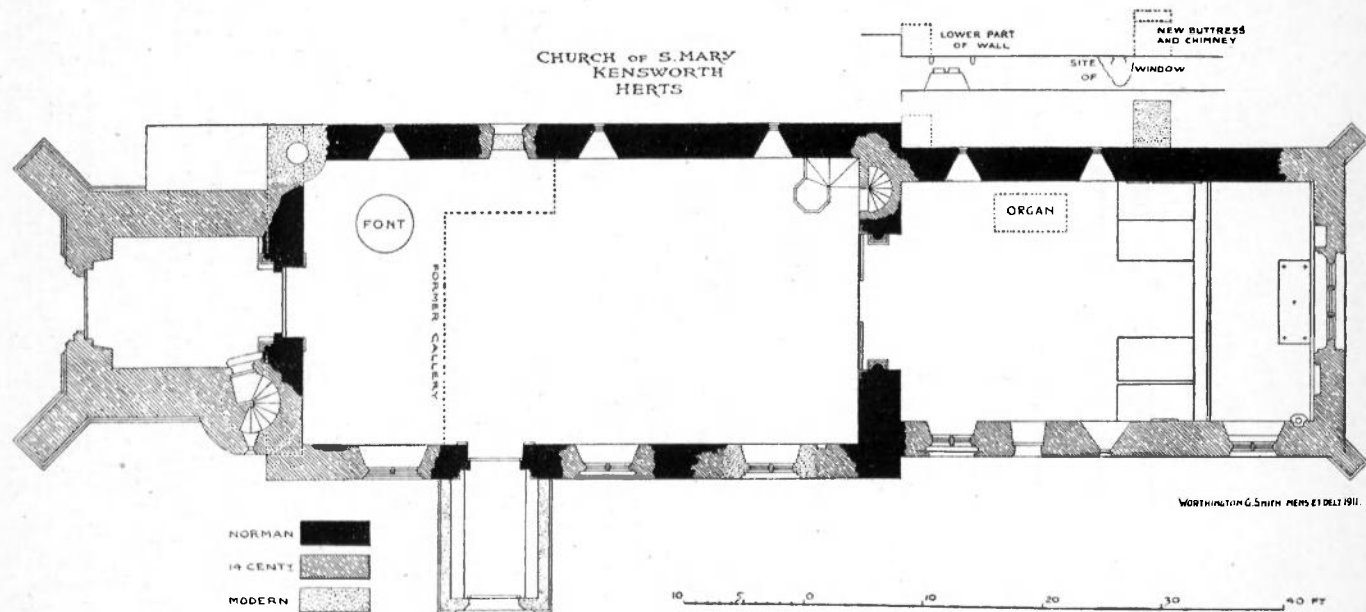


FIG. I. PLAN OF KENSWORTH CHURCH, HERTS.

arch. The arches are formed of a single stone and are consequently weakest where they should be strongest. The Norman walls, three feet thick, are built in alternate layers of chalk and flint; the middle part of the walls is filled in with a rubble composed of broken flints, pieces of broken stone and large local pebbles. The window-dressings, the Norman arch between the nave and chancel, and the two Norman doorways are of stone, probably from the well-known quarries at Totternhoe, near Dun-



FIG. 2.

stable. The structure of the walls was exposed in 1878, at which time traces of Norman windows were found on the south side of the nave corresponding with those on the north. The exposed external Norman work of stone is very much weathered, and the walling is in an unsatisfactory state from age. Nearly the whole of the exterior is covered with rough-cast; this has no doubt helped to hold together the Norman flints, chalk and stones, and to prevent the whole north wall from collapsing.

For a considerable number of years the north wall of

the chancel has shown signs of bulging and cracking, both inside and out. In 1911 the condition, as seen from the inside, became so threatening that steps were taken for the prevention of mischief. To avoid collapse a large buttress of brick was erected: this structure is hollow and serves as a chimney as well as a support, and is covered with rough-cast, probably for uniformity with the rest of the wall.

When the earth was removed for the foundation of

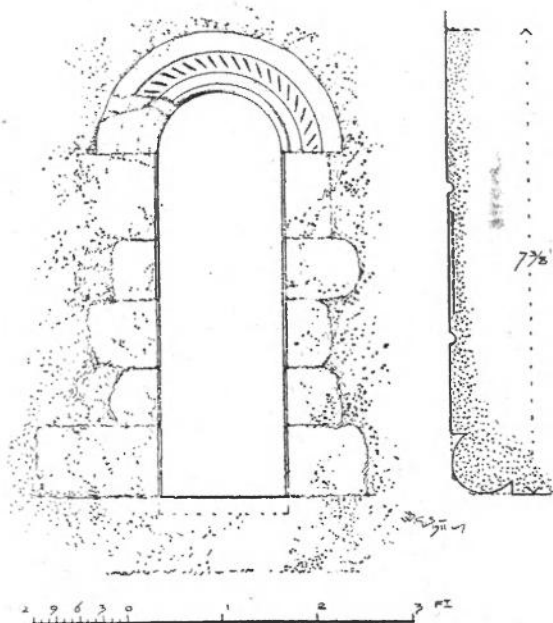


FIG. 3. WINDOW ON NORTH SIDE OF NAVE.

the buttress, the original foundation-stones of massive untrimmed, or only slightly trimmed, stones were brought to light, and at the same time a large mass of the adjoining walling fell into the churchyard, leaving a gap in the wall about six feet high and three wide (fig. 4). The cavity practically pierced entirely through the three-foot wall, leaving only a few flints and an inch of hard internal stucco to keep the weather from the interior of the chancel. The workmen removed the few flints

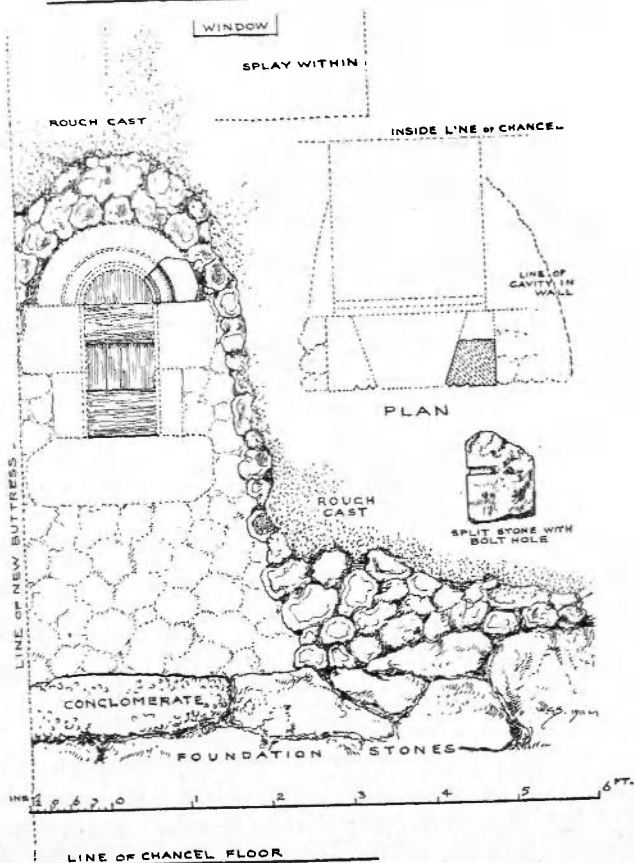
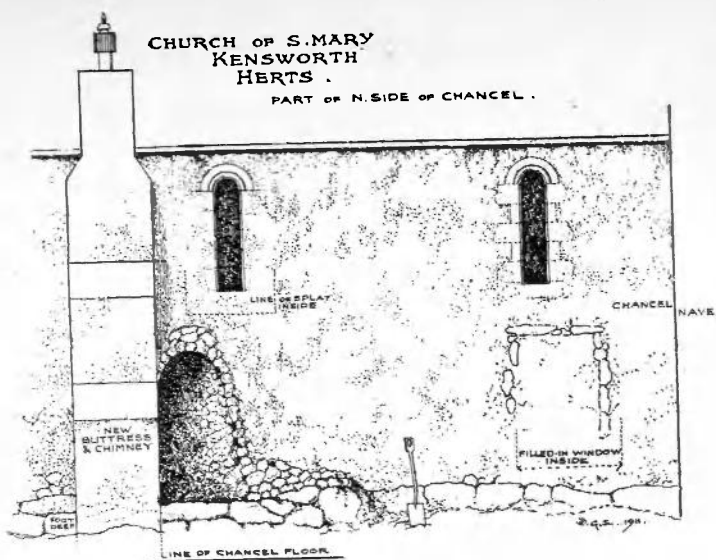


FIG. 4. NEW BUTTRESS AND CAVITY, WITH RESTORATION OF SHUTTER.

remaining at the bottom of the cavity and a huge foundation-stone of Hertfordshire conglomerate was exposed.<sup>1</sup> Further digging brought to light other large foundation-stones, either not trimmed at all, or only slightly so. The lowermost stones were not reached, for much digging was impossible without bringing about further falls of the walling. The fallen flints, with numerous large pebbles of lower tertiary age and a few pieces of stone, dressed and undressed, were placed in a heap in the churchyard. The church is built upon what is known geologically as red clay-with-flints.

Amongst the stones from the cavity was one broken example showing a bolt-hole, and another exhibiting part of a small semicircular slightly-moulded Norman arch. There was sufficient of this piece of stone to secure the radius when complete, and it agreed in size and mouldings with the arches of the two adjoining chancel windows. A cardboard template of the complete stone fitted exactly into the semicircular top of the cavity (fig. 4). There was, however, one remarkable difference between this piece of moulded stone and the window-heads, for the latter had provision for the insertion of glass, whilst the piece from the wall-filling had no such provision, but was splayed abruptly towards the chancel. The sill of the window could have been used for a light, as of a lantern or covered lamp, and the opening could have been approached easily from either the outside or inside of the chancel. The general appearance at first suggested a ruined low-side window, but on further examination the meaning seemed problematical. Ecclesiologists of high repute and long experience, with whom the author entirely agrees, consider the original opening to be connected with an anchor-hold. In this connexion may be mentioned the anchoret Roger,<sup>2</sup> and the anchoress St. Christine of Markyate cell in the near vicinity,<sup>3</sup> and the anchoret Simon of Dunstable.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A second very large piece of this stone, a foot thick, occurred on the east side of the buttress. This variety of stone represents one of the large local surface boulders, most difficult to trim, or sometimes even to move from their usually half-buried positions. There is an immense block

of this conglomerate in front of Greenend farm in the village, and others of less size may be seen by the roadsides near the church and village.

<sup>2</sup> *V.C.H. Beds.* 347.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Annales Priorati de Dunstaplia*, 109.

Amongst the rubbish from the opening were four hard, buff-coloured, broken tiles marked on one side with rude scorings. There were also eight small pieces of oak boarding that could be conjoined so as to form five pieces. These pieces of wood could be fitted together so as to form a shutter with two bracing pieces. One piece had been splayed off with a plane, others had been

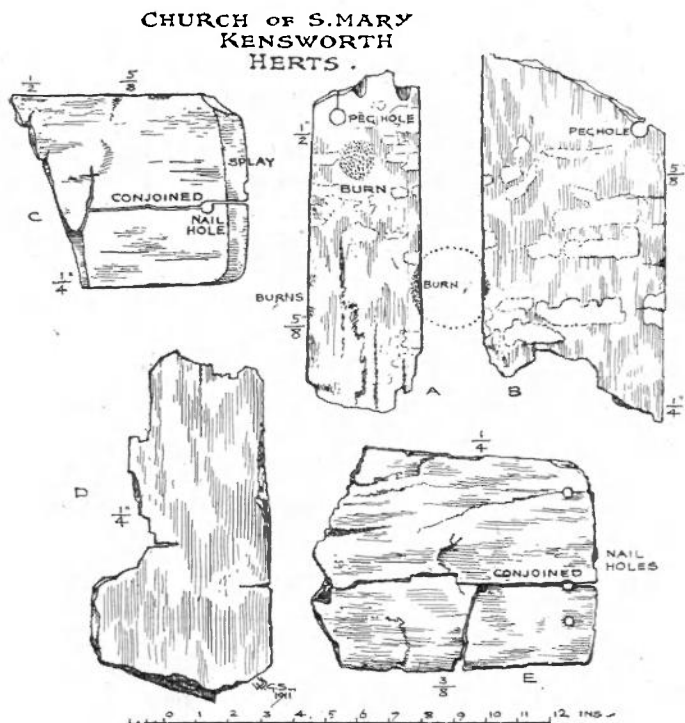


FIG. 5. PIECES OF A WOODEN SHUTTER FOUND IN NORTH WALL.

partially burned. The pieces suggested a shutter to an unglazed window-opening (fig. 5). In the drawing of the wooden shutter A and B belong to each other, but a piece is missing from the middle; the burnt piece is pierced right through, but the grain agrees and the peg-holes indicate the horizontal line; C is in two pieces, shown conjoined, with bevelled edge and nail-hole; D is a thin piece; E is in three pieces, shown conjoined, and

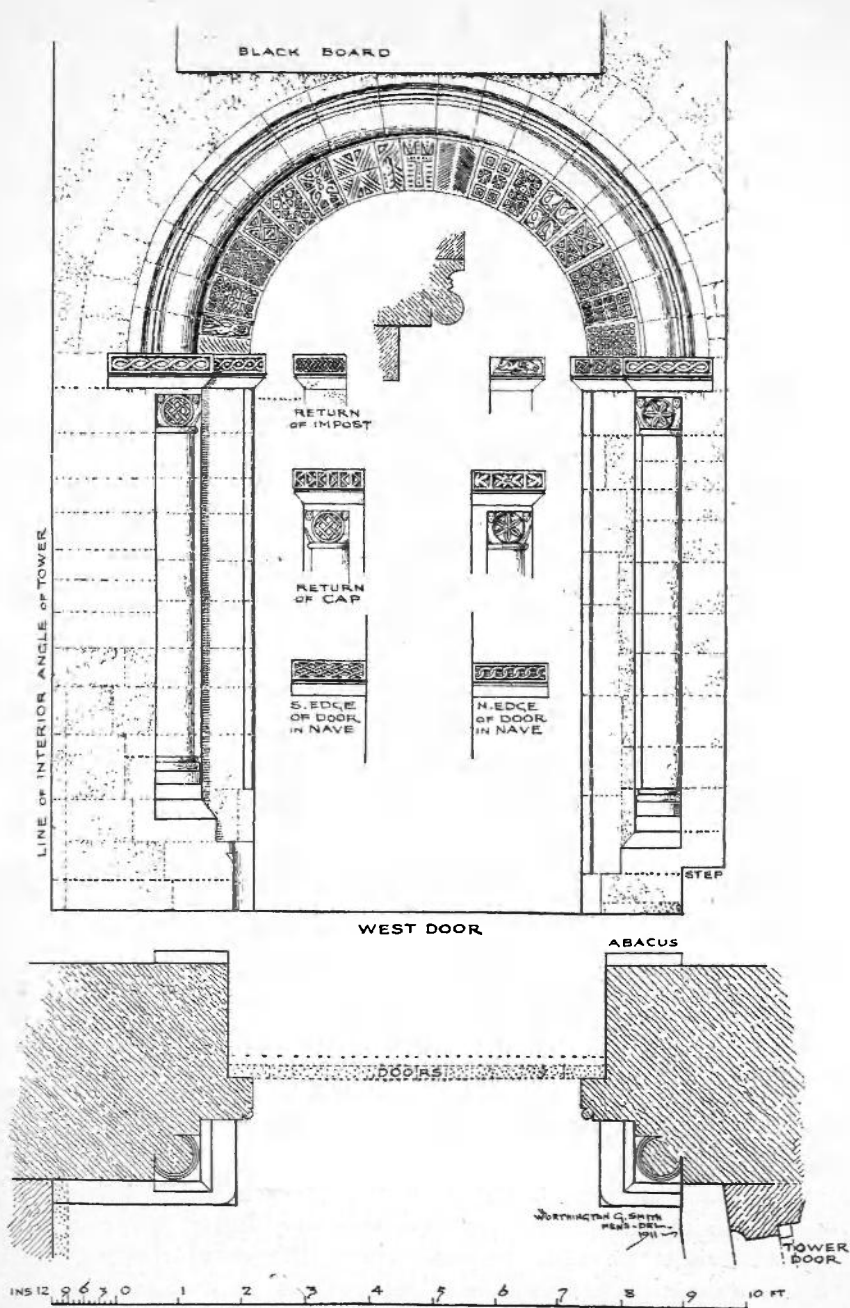


FIG. 6. WEST DOOR.



CHURCH OF S. MARY  
KENS WORTH  
HERTS.

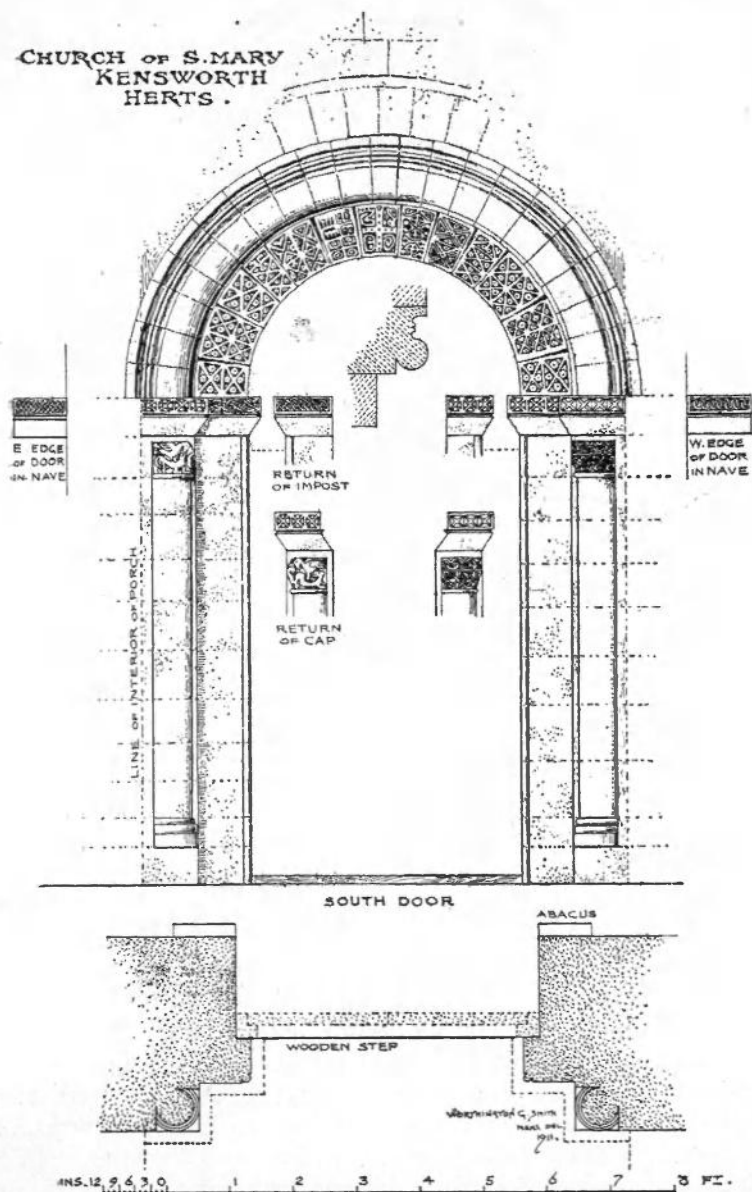
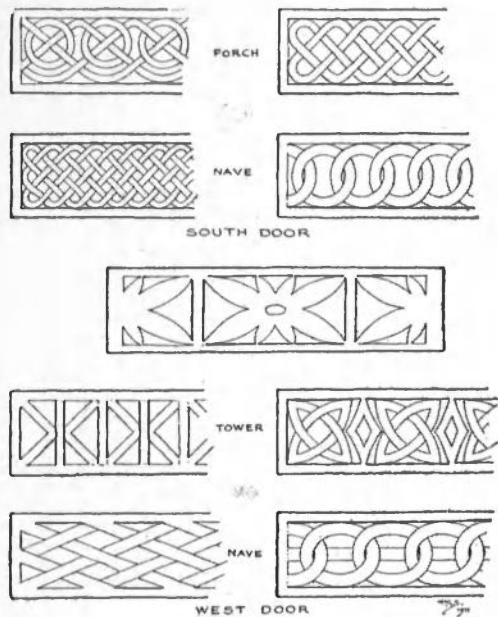


FIG. 7. SOUTH DOOR.

with three nail-holes. No glazing was indeed necessary, as the opening was almost under one of the chancel windows, as shown in the upper part of fig. 4.

Every piece of stone found in the orifice had been smashed, and even the pieces of oak with peg and nail-holes had been broken and partially burnt. All pointed to wilful and almost complete destruction, such as was common at the dissolution of religious houses in the time of Henry VIII. After the stone and wood-work had been destroyed it would appear that the wreckers filled up the opening with the broken pieces of stone and wood, together with any flints and pebbles that came to hand, and then made good the wall-facing with flints only. Later on the patched-up place was so covered with rough-cast that no trace of the alteration remained visible from outside or inside of the church. At my suggestion the opening has now been filled in solid, with the piece of arch-mould replaced in the position it must once have occupied. The Norman mortar is different in colour from the mortar of the destruction, and a third kind of mortar has now been used in the recent refilling.

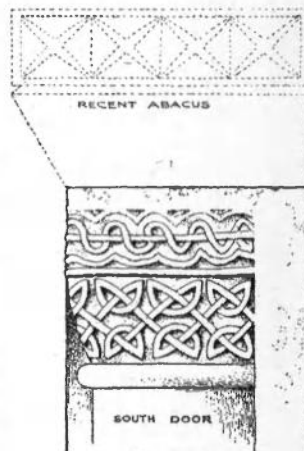
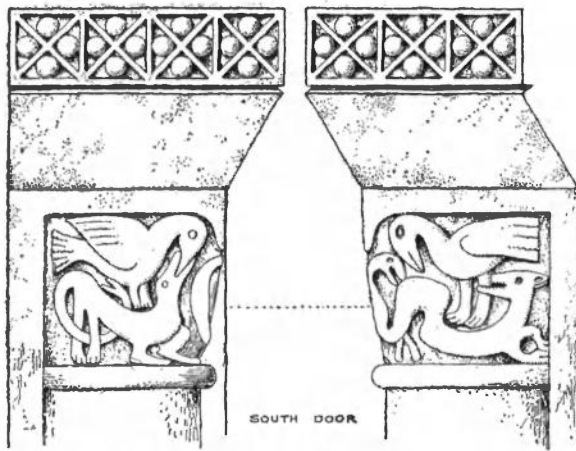
The most interesting features of the church are the two Norman doorways (figs. 6 and 7). Both have apparently been rebuilt; this is the case, without doubt, with the south door, as is obvious by the shaping of the arch-stones; they once belonged to a larger arch, perhaps originally agreeing in size with the west door. Some of the arch-stones of this south door may have been lost or damaged beyond repair at the time of rebuilding. The joints between the arch-stones are wider on the outer side than on the inner. The general design of the doors is early Norman, but the remarkable surface-carvings would seem to be of a different style and nature, and if really executed in Norman times, are probably a survival of Anglo-Saxon interlaced work. Possibly all the stones of the two doorways were at first left quite plain, as in the chancel-arch, and some second hand executed the patterns, the arch-carvings being no part of the original design. A cross indicative of a Celtic or Byzantine feeling is carved on the key-stone of each arch, and every abacus has its upper member carved. There are, in addition to the external abaci, four others built into the walls of the



CHURCH OF S. MARY  
KENSWORTH  
HERTS.



WEST PORTAL



0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 INCHES

FIG. 8. CAPITALS AND ABACI.

nave. In the west door the abaci inside and out are the same in height from the floor, but in the south door the abaci in the nave are higher than those in the porch. The patterns on the abaci are shown in diagrammatic form in fig. 8.

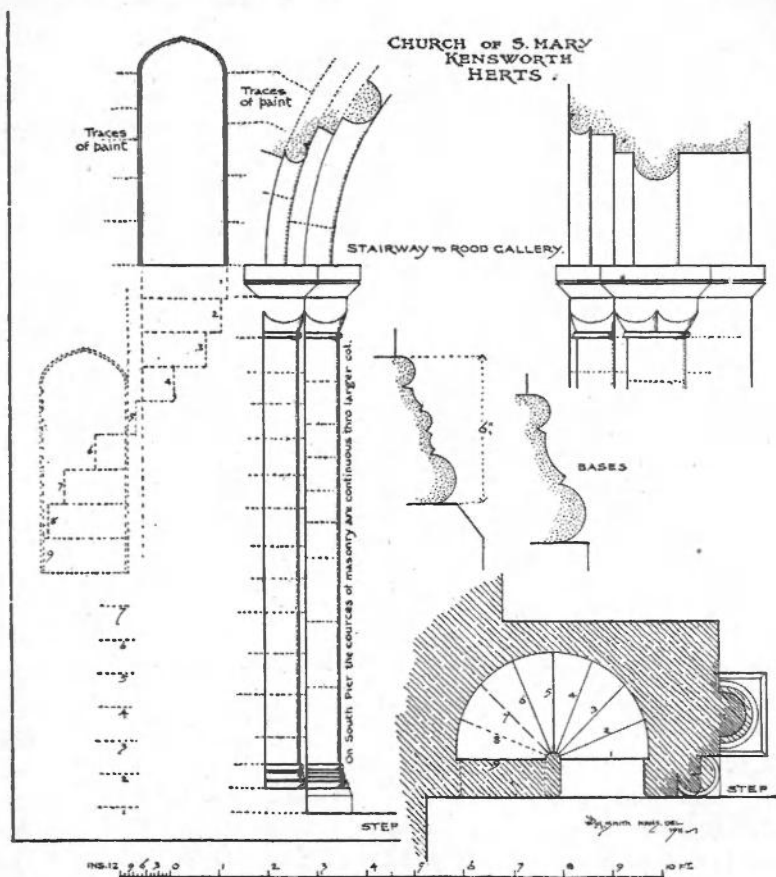


FIG 9. ROOD-STAIRS.

There are two figure-subjects on the western capital of the south doorway (fig. 8). They are not on the western pillars, as stated by the Cambridge Camden Society, where they are described as "Eagle and Hare" and "Wolf and Crane." No resemblance to either a wolf or hare can be seen: the animals shown are two birds and two dragons, each of the latter being furnished with four legs and two

heads, the minor heads being like snakes' heads placed at the end of the tail. The carvings probably represent the conflict between good and evil: the one to the right shows the actual conflict, where the dragon, powerful for evil, is seen biting with its teeth one of the limbs of the bird above. The subject to the left shows a toothless dragon with its tail down and helpless, whilst the bird above is the victor, pecking into the fallen dragon's mouth. There is a bird carved on the southern impost of the west door, and four birds are represented pluming themselves on the fifth stone on the south side of the arch. The southern impost of this door as well as the north side have obviously been rebuilt. The bases differ considerably in their height from the floor. Some of the carvings have been retouched in modern times. A former aged sexton told me that this was done long ago by a "curate," meaning by this that some one did the mischief during the absence of the vicar.

The font, of the date of this church, is circular and carved in the simplest manner. It is, however, painted white.

In a visitation and inventory of the church made in 1297 by the dean and chapter of St. Paul's, London, who were the impropiators of the benefice, mention is made of one lamp and one handbell. In the inventory of 1458 two handbells are mentioned as well as three bells in the belfry. The date shows that at this time the tower was built and furnished with bells. The old bells have vanished and have been replaced by five "Chandler" bells: one bears the name of George Chandler, and all are dated 1717.

The old plain floor-tiles in the chancel, buff and reddish in colour, date from some time prior to Henry VIII, as one was found in the filling of the ruined wall. Sixty years ago both nave and chancel were paved with tiles of this kind, mostly in a broken state, but at a recent restoration they were all taken up, the broken ones thrown away and the whole specimens relaid upside down in the chancel so that an unworn surface might appear. I have seen no undoubted pieces of Roman tile in the fabric of the church, but I have often picked up rims and other pieces of Roman pots on newly made graves in the churchyard.

There are no brasses, but in Salmon's *History of Herts.* it is stated that in 1728 "one old stone had brasses for effigies and an inscription, but they are broke off."

In the quatrefoil at the top of the north-west window of nave there are a few small fragments of old glass, perhaps of fifteenth-century date.

The present wooden credence table is the former holy table or altar, of post-reformation times.

The present chancel rails were formerly the altar-rails.

The stone stairs to the rood-loft (fig. 9) are within the wall to the north of the chancel-arch. It is remarkable that the stair is only semicircular on plan, so that in ascending the stair the starting point must have been at a height of five feet six inches from the floor; the lower door must therefore have been reached by an external stairway or steps in the nave, probably of wood. There are nine steps in the wall, each with a riser of eight and a half inches, and it would require seven additional steps to clear the space between the floor of the nave and the floor of the rood-loft. The loft floor rested in part on the projecting abaci of the Norman chancel-arch. The masonry on the northern side of the chancel-arch is false bedded or non-continuous, and the chief column appears to have broken away from top to bottom and to have been rebuilt. On the southern pier the masonry is continuous. Traces of paint occur near the great arch and by the rood-door, but these may possibly belong to the royal arms of Charles II, which were painted over the arch. The door of the rood stairs was only discovered in 1854, as before this time it had been hidden by a painting on wood of the commandments. No doubt the making of the rood-loft and staircase greatly injured and weakened the Norman work.

There is a fourteenth-century piscina on the south side of the chancel, but the present basin is new. There is also a small square recess in the wall of the nave on the south side of and close to the chancel-arch.

There are two niches of different sizes in the eastern wall, the larger of which probably held a figure of our Lady and the smaller possibly St. John.