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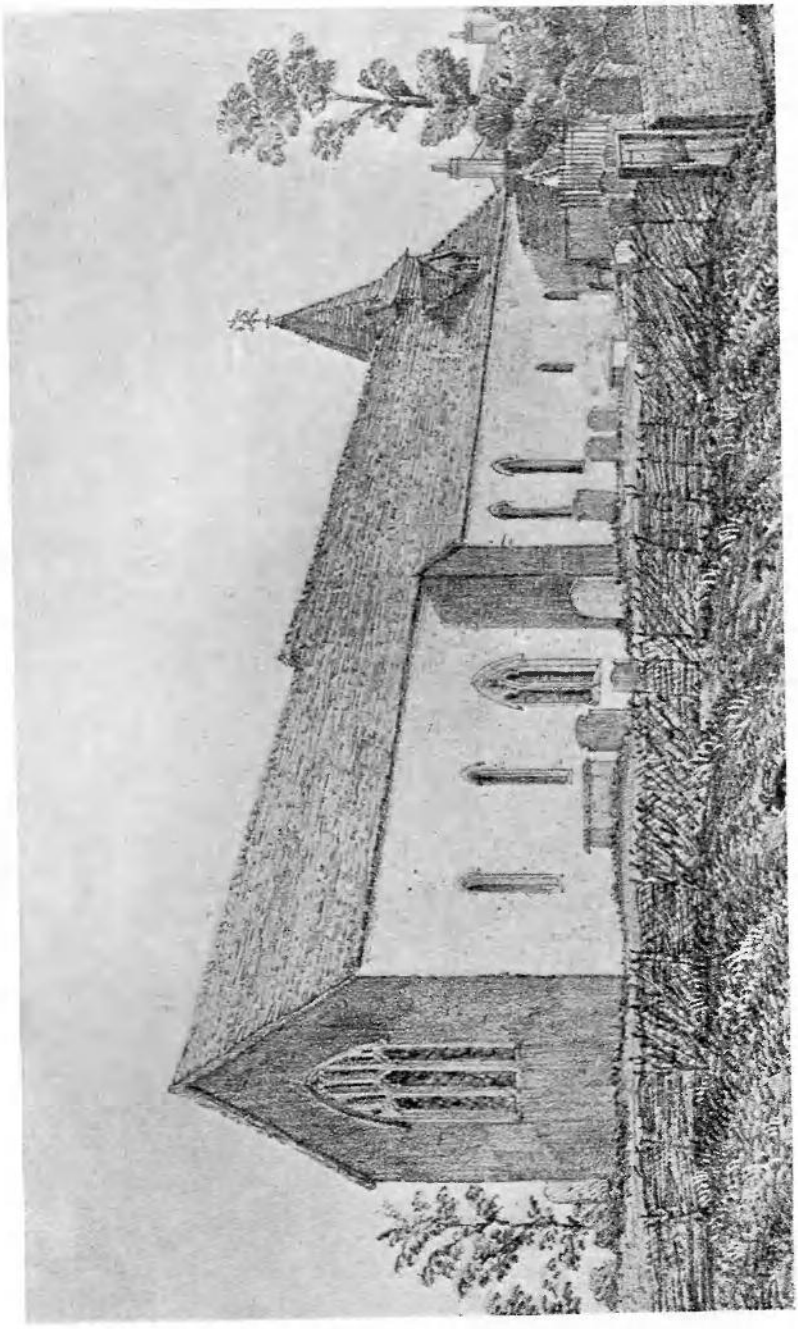

MERTON CHURCH FROM THE NORTH-EAST IN 1824.
From Cracklow's *Churches of Surrey.*

MERTON PARISH CHURCH.

By PHILIP MAINWARING JOHNSTON, F.S.A. F.R.I.B.A.

The following notes are based upon a lecture given in the old church of St. Mary, Merton, to the parishioners and others at the request of the vicar, as part of the celebration of the eight hundredth anniversary of the foundation of Merton priory, with the fortunes of which the parish church was closely linked for half that long period. Although only some seven or eight miles from London, the place is still wonderfully rural and little known to Londoners.

The name Merton is obviously 'Mere-tun' (the town on the marsh): it is a settlement not only of Saxon, but of Roman, and probably of British and prehistoric antiquity. Roman remains have been met with in the parish, including bricks in the walls of the parish church.

Domesday records the existence of a church in 1086. It was probably of timber, and may even then have been several hundred years old; as in the year 784, when Cynewulf, king of Wessex, was murdered at Merton by Cyneheard the Atheling, a semi-fortified house, with gates, is indicated as the scene of the cruel deed, and this house Cyneheard is said to have defended with his eighty-four followers.[1] There must thus have been a considerable settlement for those times, and therefore, very probably, a Christian church. In this connexion it is interesting to note that the Anglo-Saxon word for 'to build' was *getimbrian*. The rank and file of our earlier Saxon churches must have been built by carpenters of the timber that was so plentiful in those days all over England. The raids and burnings by the Danes, and the consequent need for a village sanctuary which should also serve as a place of safety in troublous times, would

[1] In 871 a great battle took place between the Saxons and Danes at Merton.

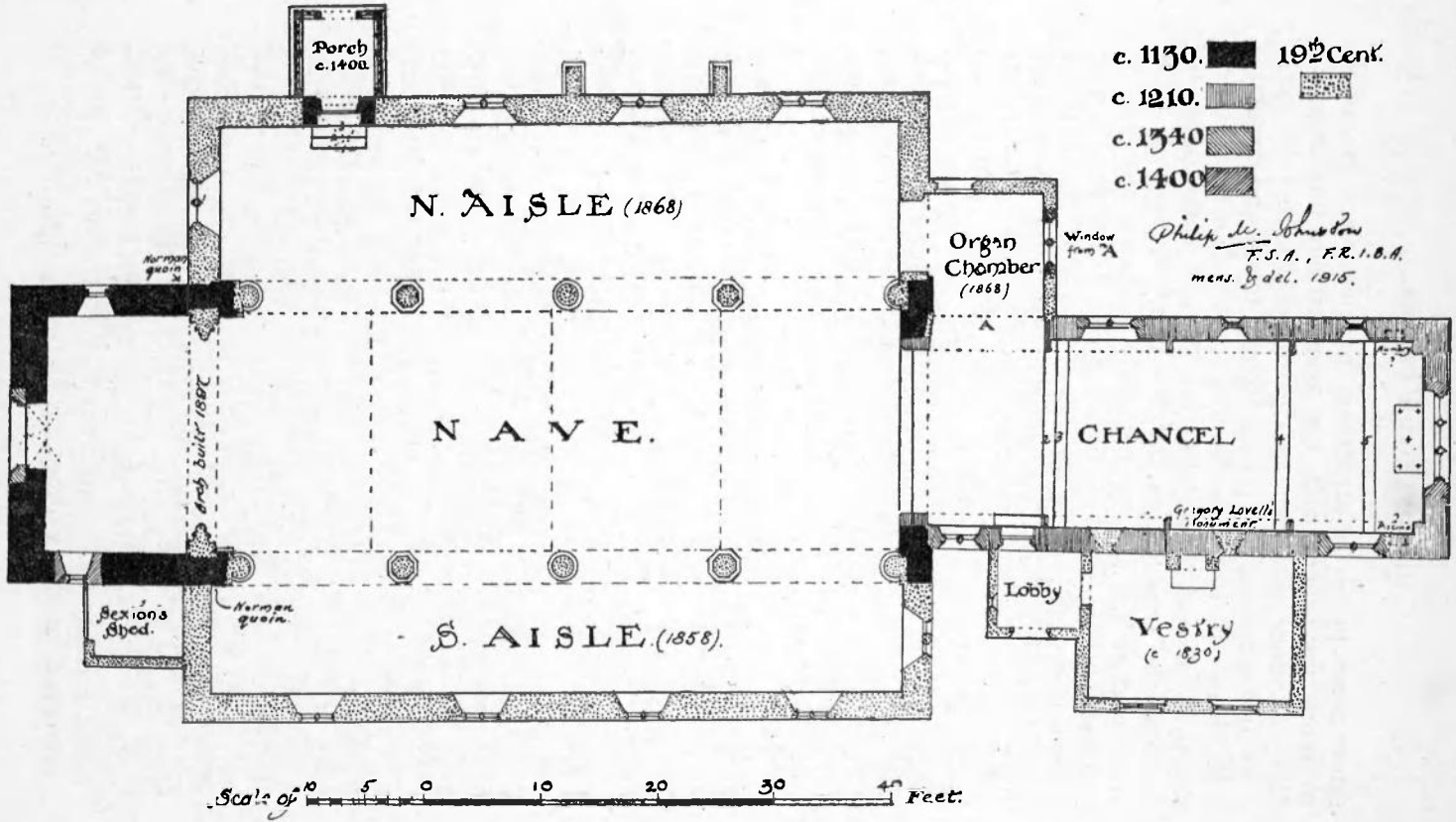

FIG. I. PLAN OF MERTON CHURCH.

cause these primitive structures to give place gradually to more permanent and less combustible buildings of flint and stone, the materials gathered, where such were close at hand, from the ruined Roman towns and country-side villas. It is not without a practical meaning that the walls of such stone churches as have come down to us from the time before the Norman conquest of 1066 are found to be disproportionately high for the size of the building (as in the case of Stoke d'Abernon, a few miles to the west), for by keeping the eaves of the thatched or oak-shingled roofs at a great height from the ground the risk of incendiary fires would be greatly lessened. It is worth noting also that, although these early stone churches were built without buttresses, and their lofty walls were often only two feet or less in thickness (as in the chancel, Stoke d'Abernon), they have survived in many cases the heavily built but careless work of the Norman period. Their foundations were laid deep, their mortar was as good as that of the Romans, and they selected their stone and other materials with sound judgment. Moreover they built slowly, and allowed time for their work to settle and consolidate. There is evidence that the Normans, like the Germans of to-day, were 'young men in a hurry,' which explains, together with their scamped foundations, the fall and failure of many a tower and wall.

We must, then, in the absence of any structural evidence to the contrary, imagine the first church on this site to have been of wood, perhaps, like the still existing church of Greenstead, Essex—built of split sections of oak-trees, and already a building of some antiquity when the body of St. Edmund the martyred king rested therein on its way to Bury St. Edmunds. Even the first Norman church and buildings of Merton priory are recorded to have been of wood.

It is most likely that this timber parish church remained until after the Norman conquest, and then, in that disturbed period, fell into decay, or was burned. The church indicated by the entry in Domesday, 'Ibi ecclesia,' was probably this same wooden building. This would account for a statement in the Arundel MS. no. 28 (preserved in the College of Heralds), that Gilbert the

Norman, high sheriff of Surrey, to whom the manor of Merton had been granted by Henry I, in or before the year 1114, 'built a church there at his own cost' (i.e. a *parish* church, on the site, doubtless, of the destroyed Saxon one), 'before which time the inhabitants were obliged to carry their dead to the adjacent villages.' The same manuscript, which was evidently written by some one with first-hand knowledge, if not an actual eye-witness, relates that Gilbert, as lord of the manor, continued to benefit the place, and having, in 1114, founded the priory of Austin Canons, built their church, sumptuously ornamented it with paintings and statues, as was customary, and caused it to be dedicated, with great magnificence, to the honour of the most blessed Mother of God and ever Virgin Mary. William Giffard, bishop of Winchester (1107–1129), came to consecrate it, and was received with great hospitality. On his progress thither he intervened to save a boy, who, for theft, had been condemned to the barbarous punishment of having his eyes put out, foreshadowing by this interposition of mercy that in the church which he was about to consecrate many should be rescued from the darkness of vice, and brought by the power of discipline to the light of justice. In dealing with these old records, it is not easy to keep distinct the parish church, which still remains, and the church of the priory, also founded by Gilbert and levelled to the ground in 1538 by Henry VIII, who used its stones in the building of his palace of Nonsuch, a few miles away. The confusion, which more than one modern writer has fallen into, between the two foundations arises partly from both churches being dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin, and also from the fact that the *first*, or temporary, buildings of the priory are stated to have occupied a site hard by the parish church.[1] Indeed, it seems not altogether improbable that the nave of the present church represents the parochial building, and that a timber church on the site of the existing thirteenth-century chancel, shut off by an arch and screen from the other, may have served temporarily as the church of the priory. Such a twin-church was not uncommon, and the curiously

[1] It is thought to the east of the churchyard, where now are the school buildings.

elongated plan of the existing nave and chancel may be owing to such an original disposition.[1] This hypothesis, which has not, I believe, been suggested before, would also account for the fact that not a stone with Norman tooling or moulding is to be traced in the present chancel, which, soon after the beginning of the thirteenth century, would have been built with fresh stonework and flints, on the site occupied by the timber chancel or priory church. Of the latter it is recorded that it remained a timber structure till the year 1130, when on a new site, that is, within the still remaining boundary-walls of the priory, three quarters of a mile to the eastward, the priory church was built anew on a grand scale, and the various buildings of the new work gradually grew up around it, occupying, as can even now be seen, a very large area. In 1236 a parliament was held within the walls of the priory, the famous 'Parliament of Merton.'

So complete was the destruction of the priory buildings wrought by Henry VIII, that, with the exception of the low boundary-walls and a gabled building with a fourteenth-century tracery window, little remained aboveground in the beginning of the nineteenth century. As recently, however, as June, 1914, when a housebreaker was let loose upon a dilapidated house, known as Abbey house, near Merton abbey station, a very beautiful archway of the latest period of Norman work was brought to light, and most fortunately escaped the demolition that seemed inevitable, through the prompt intervention of the Rev. J. E. Jagger, vicar of Merton, Mr. Hadfield, and other public-spirited individuals. Sir Arthur Liberty, to whom this part of the site belongs, promptly ratified the intervention and took further steps to preserve the arch and what was left of the shell of this relic, which I have conjectured[2] to be the hospitium of the priory.

To return to the parish church. Down to the middle of the last century it had preserved unbroken its aisleless plan (fig. 1) consisting simply of a chancel (44 ft. 6 ins. by 14 ft.) and nave (about 73 ft. 6 ins. by 20 ft. 3 ins.).

[1] Lyminster, Sussex, is a curiously similar church as regards the elongated nave and chancel, and here also the eastern arm seems to have been conventual, the western parochial. There was a Benedictine nunnery there from Saxon times (*Sussex Arch. Coll.* xlvi, 195.)

[2] *Surrey Arch. Coll.* xxvii, 138.

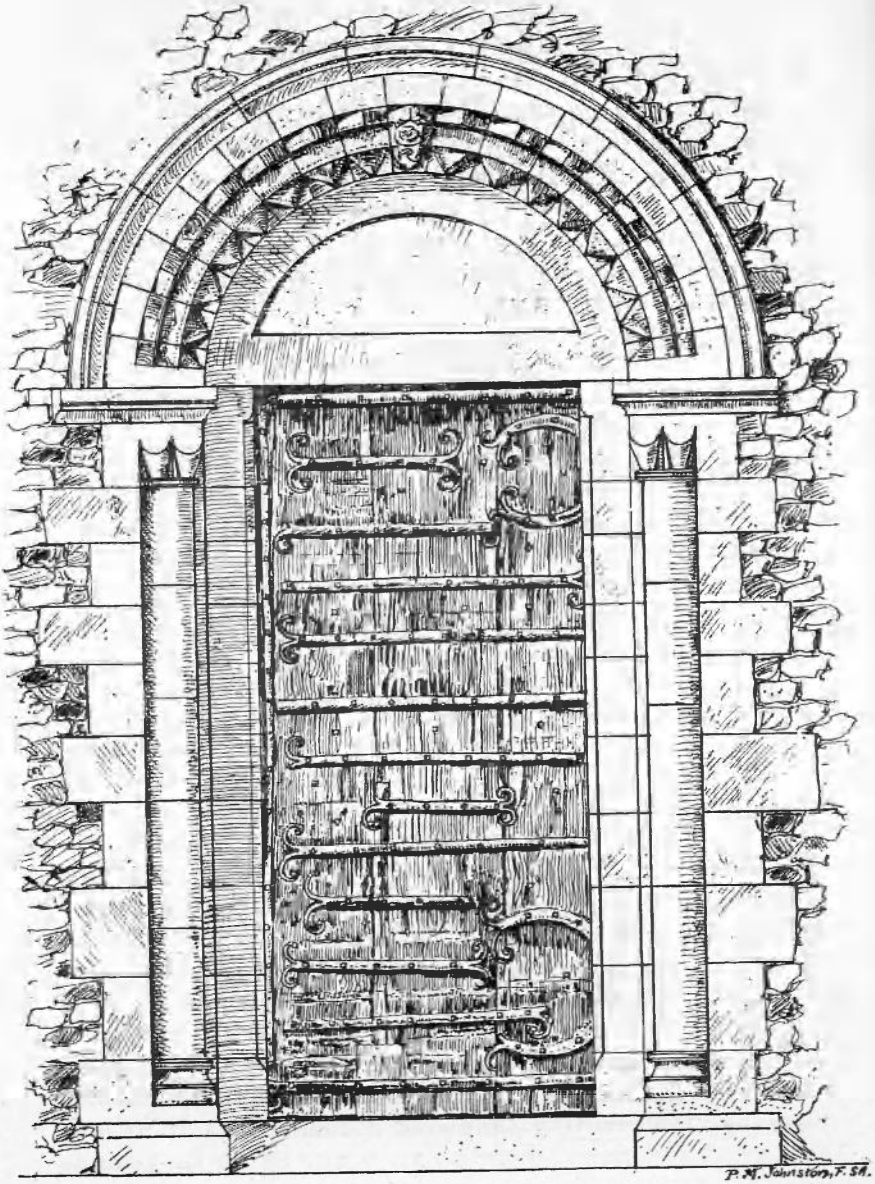

FIG. 2. MERTON CHURCH : NORMAN DOORWAY, WITH COEVAL DOOR (RESTORED).

FIG. 3. WOKING CHURCH, SURREY: WEST DOORWAY, WITH COEVAL DOOR.

It has in a wonderful way retained its ancient and rural characteristics, in spite of the addition of a south aisle in about 1857 and a wider north aisle in 1866. Fortunately these were not carried to the west end of the nave, but stop short of it by about 15 feet, so that the nave west wall and the north and south walls immediately adjoining are actually those of the twelfth-century church. The internal arch and jambs of both the window and doorway in the west wall are of this date, as is also the wide round-headed window in the north wall, the only survivor of four such Norman windows that remained in the nave walls prior to the nineteenth-century enlargements. The eastern quoins of the nave also remain, though entirely concealed by plaster and rough-cast. When the south aisle was added two early-thirteenth-century lancets and two or three fourteenth-century two-light windows in the old south wall were also destroyed (plate II) : while on the addition of the corresponding north aisle two thirteenth-century lancets and two Norman windows disappeared. Happily, the interesting Norman north doorway (figs. 2 and 4), though clumsily put together, was rebuilt in the north wall of the new aisle. It retains its circular head, with an early form of double zigzag moulding, its shafts and a modern copy of the plain tympanum in the head, but the shaft-capitals have been put up without their abaci, and there are no bases to the shafts. Moreover, it is evident that the doorway must originally have had two orders to each jamb, where now there is only one, and that the arch could not have overset the jambs as it now does. There was also a label to the arch, of which no trace remains (fig. 2, in which I have restored the stonework). The internal arch, of circular form, and the jambs are ancient, though the wall has lost 6 ins. of its original thickness. The old stonework of the doorway is in the greenish calcareous sandstone, from Gatton, Merstham or Reigate, which was extensively used by the mediaeval builders in Surrey and London. The capitals have the double scallop and rather heavy chamfered neckings ; and on the crown of the arch is a mutilated carving of a lion, with its back to the spectator. It has lost its head, but the front paws, and the tail curled across its back, can be distinguished. Hitherto it has been

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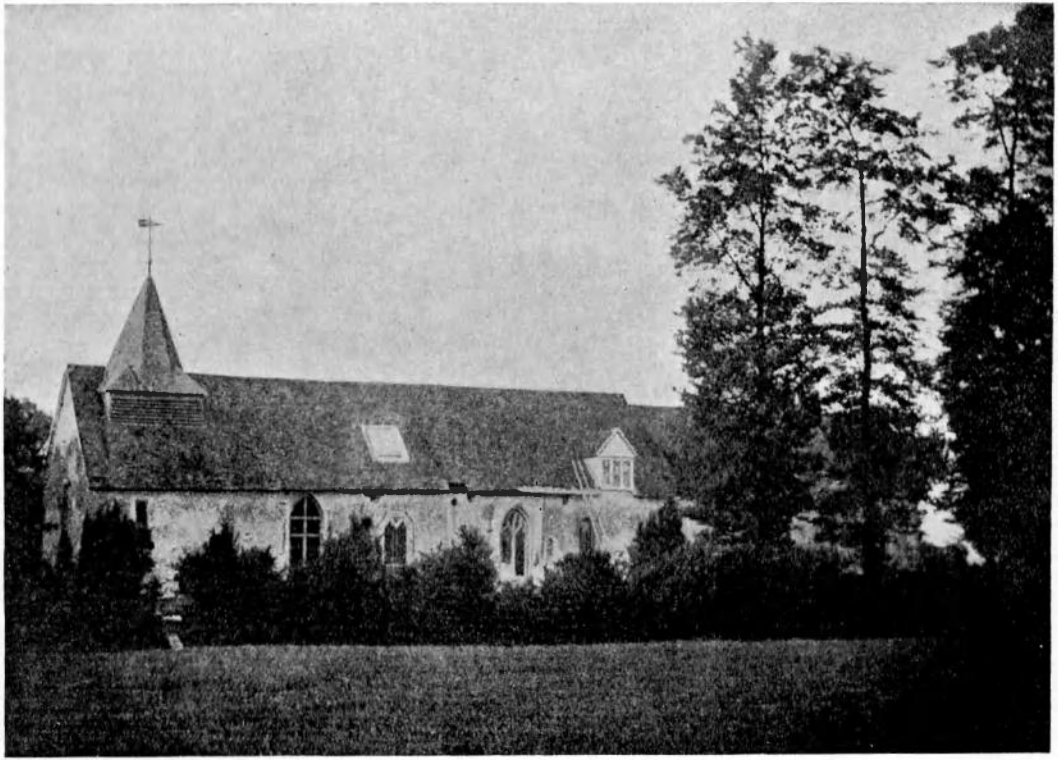

MERTON CHURCH FROM THE SOUTH.
From a photograph taken in 1857.

supposed to be a mutilated human head, but there is no doubt it is a small lion (fig. 4).

More interesting even than the doorway is the coeval door, which hangs therein, and on which is displayed the original twelfth-century ironwork (fig. 2 and plate III). The door is of heavy oak planks, hewn with an adze, furrowed and seamed with age. It retains part of a plain marginal strip of iron, two C-shaped hinges with scrolled terminals,

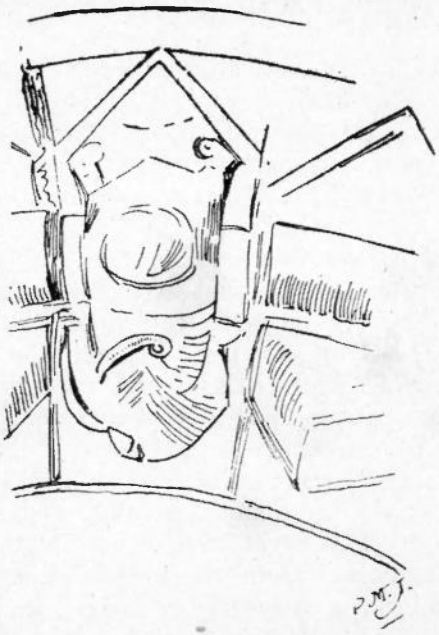

FIG. 4. MERTON CHURCH: MUTILATED LION ON KEYSTONE OF NORMAN DOORWAY.

and twelve horizontal straps, also with scrolled ends of the ram's-horn pattern. The Norman door in Woking church, probably some fifty years earlier (here reproduced for comparison as fig. 3), and that of about 1195 in the tower doorway at Merstham are the only other Surrey examples to compete in interest with this door at Merton; and it is much to be wished that the doorway in which it hangs could be taken down and put together again in such a

manner as to give back its lost proportions. The substitution of oak for modern deal in the internal backing of the door is also very desirable.

The early-thirteenth-century priests' doorway on the south of the chancel also retains its original oak door with four similar scrolled iron straps, preserved, perhaps, from a still older doorway, and a very perfect latch and drop-ring, possibly coeval. My friend, Mr. G. C. Druce, has kindly photographed this door, which is reproduced in plate IV, no. 2. It is not often that one can point to a latch-spindle as old as the thirteenth century.

The antiquity of the chancel walls is hidden by a thick coat of flint-dashing applied like rough-cast plaster. Some such coating is shown in the old views of the church, such as Cracklow's lithograph of 1824 (plate I). In this way the stone quoins are entirely covered up, and the outer stonework of the east window and most of the other chancel windows have been renewed in Bath stone. The exceptions are a beautiful little two-light window in the south wall of the chancel, western bay, and the larger window of the corresponding bay on the north side, which has been rebuilt in the east wall of the organ-chamber (plate IV, no. 1). Both date from about 1340, and are worked in the Surrey firestone, which has weathered very badly. It is both possible and desirable to indurate the stonework with a chemical process, so that they may still be preserved as interesting relics of the mediaeval building. The window on the north retains its original iron bars, and the quarry-glazing is also ancient. These windows take the place of narrow lancets, which are still found in the two eastern bays on the north side. The peculiarity of these windows, apparent only on the inside, is that they are pierced through a thin wall within an arch. There are in both north and south walls of the chancel four of these pointed arches, blind arches, never intended to be carried through the wall, to open into an aisle, as has been mistakenly supposed, and they are of one simple order with a narrow chamfer, crowned by a double-chamfered label (plate VII) They have no capitals or bases, but the narrow pier (only 6 ins. wide) is continuous, and is chamfered like the arch, all the work

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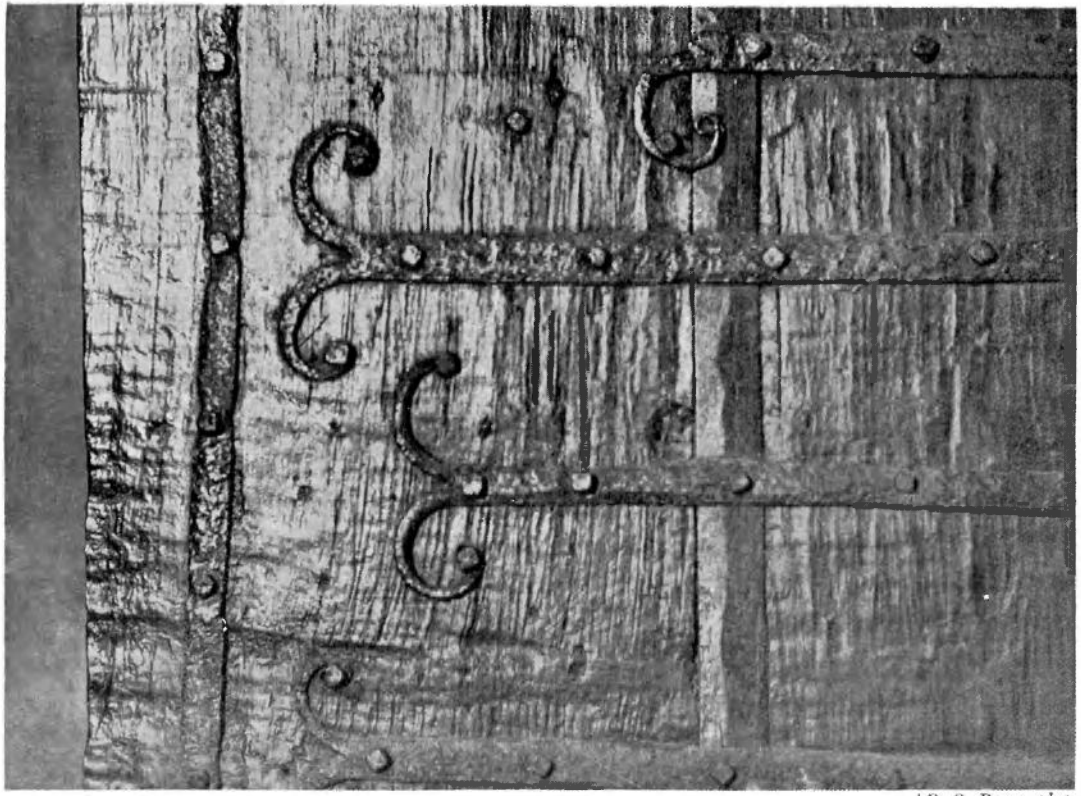
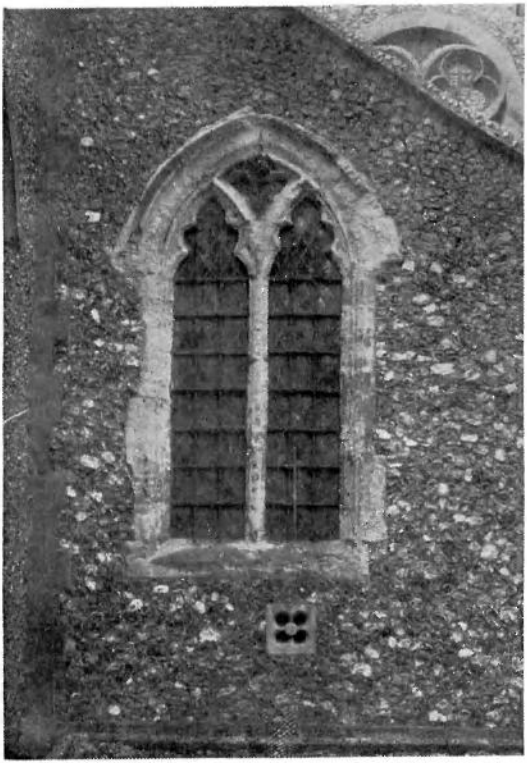


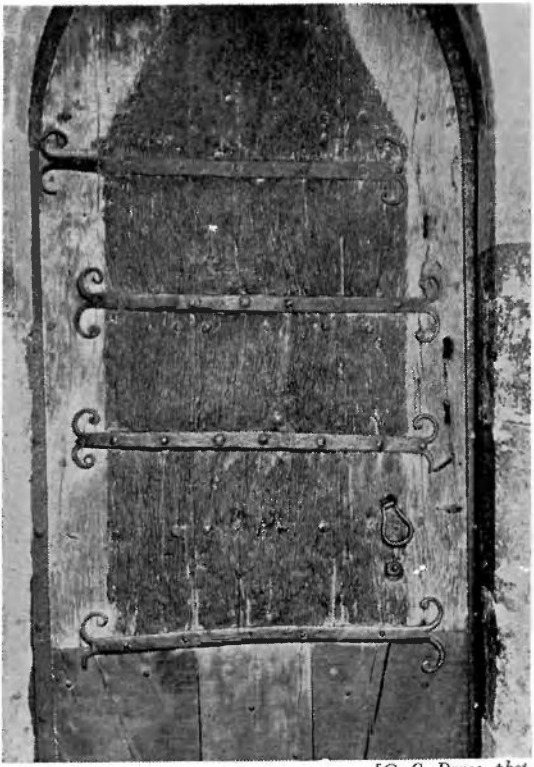
[*G. C. Druce, phot.*

DETAIL OF IRON STRAPS ON LOWER PART OF NORMAN DOOR.



NO. I. EARLY FOURTEENTH-CENTURY WINDOW, NOW IN ORGAN-CHAMBER.

PLATE IV.



[*G. C. Druce, phot.*

NO. 2. PRIEST'S DOORWAY, WITH COEVAL DOOR.

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being in Surrey firestone, which has preserved the broad chisel-tooled surface of the early thirteenth century. Originally each of the four bays on either side had its lancet window (plate I), and an original lancet, shown in a view of about 1800, still survives on the south side, though blocked by some tablets. Its head is visible in the vestry, and it would be a gain to open it out. In the next bay to the eastward the early lancet also remains, but is largely concealed on the inside by the fine monument of Gregory Lovell. Its outer opening remains beneath a modern coat of plaster within the vestry, and the top of an internal opening, blocked, appears above the Lovell monument (plate VII). The easternmost bay on this side is occupied by a restored fourteenth-century window.

The three-light east window, with cinquefoiled heads and super-tracery, under a two-centred arch, is a Perpendicular replacement of about 1400. The outer stonework is a modern restoration on the old lines. Originally there was probably a pair of lancets, with a circular opening over: there is hardly room for a triplet in this exceptionally narrow chancel.

It should be noted before passing on that the lofty blind arcades, like those in the Merton chancel, occur in six other Surrey churches, namely, at Bletchingley, Chaldon, Charlwood, Chertsey, Coulsdon, and Merstham: and, with the exception of Coulsdon (c. 1250) and Chertsey (c. 1350), they are all of early-thirteenth-century date. A group of Kentish churches, that must have been built by the same guild of masons, comprises St. Mary Cray (tower, ground story), Horton Kirby (eastern arm), Dartford (chancel), Brasted, Cliffe-at-Hoo (eastern arm), Rainham (chancel), Newington (chancel), Sittingbourne (chancel), Upchurch (chancel); Hartlip church is a Transition-Norman predecessor; and in all these cases the relieving or blind arches are used both for practical and aesthetic reasons. At Merton they add materially to the space in a very narrow chancel, and this was probably the main reason why they were introduced in the thirteenth-century rebuilding. The walls in which they stand are three feet thick, and, as the recesses are one foot in depth, it follows that the walling of the interspaces is only two feet in thickness. The piscina

and aumbry in the chancel are unfortunately hidden by the modern dado of alabaster.

Besides its ancient walls, the chancel retains in an almost perfect state one of the most beautiful and ornamental roofs in the south of England, dating between 1380 and 1410.[1] It is in three bays, instead of the four into which the walls are divided, and is of a modified hammer-beam type of construction, very rarely met with, and unique in this county. This roof has a bold boarded cove above the wall-plate, framed into panels by moulded ribs and corbels, and crowned by a battlemented cornice, which intersects with a similar suite

FIG. 5. HEAD IN APEX OF PORCH BARGEBOARD.

of mouldings on the cambered hammer-beams. The upper space in the central area is of open raftered construction, with curved braces forming a pointed arch, and producing a barrel-roof, boarded or plastered till 1866. Within this arch, over each of the four principals, is a beautiful screen of slender pierced tracery, with ogee-shaped and cinquefoiled arches. An architect of no mean skill must have devised such a gem of a roof, and while we may give the credit to the priory, to whom belonged the chancel and who kept it in repair, we may

[1] From this it has been suggested that the roof was brought from the priory, but there seems no reason to believe this.

FIG. 6. WEST DOORWAY.

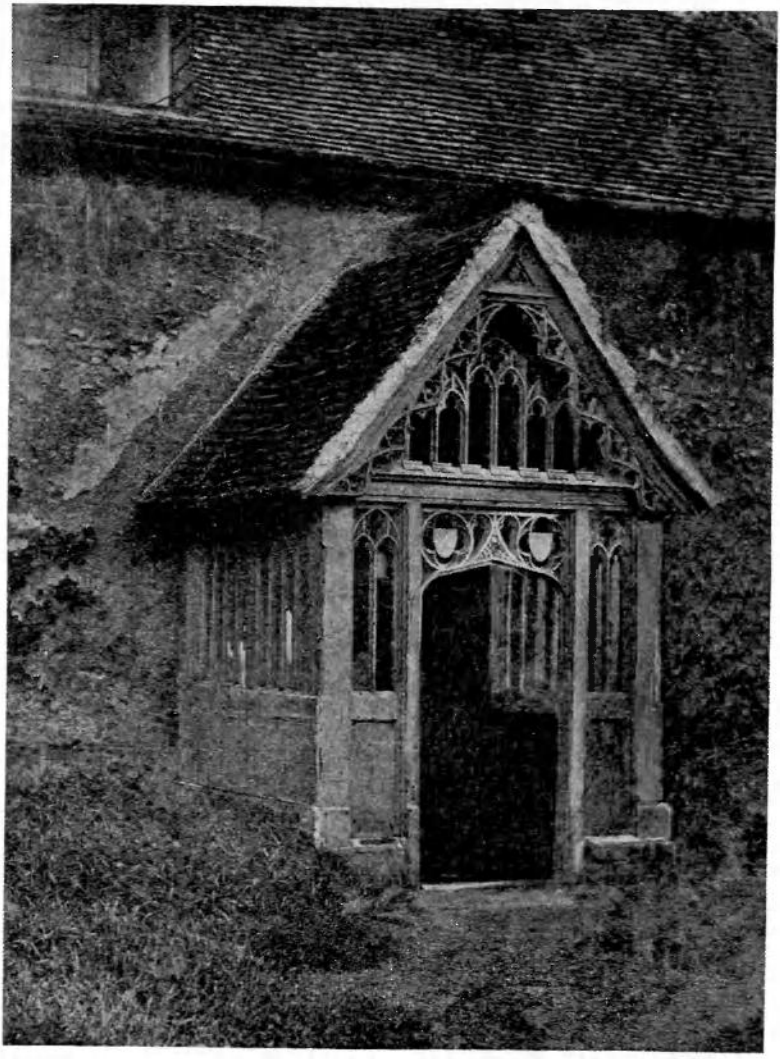
pay a well-merited tribute to the forgotten genius who designed the work.

The chancel arch, of early-thirteenth-century date, is a plain, pointed opening, without capitals or imposts, of two chamfered orders, the outer of which is continuous with the jambs. Norman masonry may perhaps be traced in the lower part of the jambs. Doubtless there were small altars right and left of the arch, or in front of the rood-screen, but no trace remains of them or of the screen.

The roof of the nave, probably of about 1400, is of braced-collar construction with hollow-moulded tie-beams and exceptionally large wall-plates, also hollow-moulded. On the north side this plate is doubled—perhaps to remedy a mistake in setting out. It is at present almost entirely concealed by plaster, and it would be a great improvement if this were removed and the old timbers exposed. The spaces between could then be plastered, or filled with fibrous plaster slabs, and if one or two dormer windows of suitable design were re-introduced in the old positions, as shown in early views, the gain both in appearance and lighting, as well as increased ventilation, would be very great. In this way also the peculiarly hideous skylights that now disfigure the roof could be abolished. It is interesting to note that the fifteenth-century bell-frame and spirelet have survived all the last-century changes,[1] and that one of the four bells is inscribed, ✠ Sancta Margareta Ora pro Nobis, with a shield of the royal arms, uncrowned. Another bears the inscription, BRYAN ELDRIDGE MADE MEE. 1601.

Another feature of altogether exceptional value and interest is the beautiful open-traceried porch on the north side of the church, dating from the end of the fourteenth century, which was moved to its present position when the north aisle was thrown out in 1866. By the kindness of the vicar I am enabled here to reproduce a photograph of this porch taken in 1857 (plate v). The woodwork was then set upon a clumsy stone and flint plinth, and the corner and doorposts were probably shortened where their ends had decayed, to the great

[1] The spire timbers are modern, but the frame from which they rise is ancient.



NORTH PORCH OF C. 1390, PRIOR TO ITS REMOVAL TO THE NEW AISLE.
(From a photograph dated 1857 in the possession of the Rev. J. E. Jagger).

[*G. C. Druce, phot.*

HEADS OF KING AND QUEEN, WEST DOORWAY.

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loss of the original proportions. The doorway is manifestly quite six inches less than its proper height. Unhappily also the beautiful tracery and bargeboard (the latter, especially, very precious for its early date) were coated with dark brown graining, which most certainly ought to be pickled off. The open tracery panels of the front and sides, imitating the stone windows of the period; the doorhead, with four-centred arch, carried up into an ogee with foliage spandrel, and pierced quatrefoils enclosing heater-shaped shields; and the elaborately designed open-tracery bargeboard, are all very excellent.[1] In the triangle formed in the apex of the bargeboards is carved a very life-like head, which may well have been a portrait of the prior of Merton for the time being, or else of the craftsman or donor of the porch (fig. 5). The face seems to be that of an old man, and there is a cowl, or hood, falling back over his shoulders.

The west doorway (fig. 6) and the window over it, as already stated, are of twelfth-century date on the inside, but the outer cases are fourteenth-century replacements, the window being a modern copy and the doorway ancient. The latter has a two-centred head of two orders, with continuous hollow mouldings and a label of coarse section, having for its terminals the heads of a king and queen (plate VI). The king's head,[2] which is bearded, with full eyes, rather wide apart, is worked in the same stone with a length of the arched label. It probably represents Edward III in middle life, that is, in about 1340, the probable date of the outer doorcase. The queen's head has the square metal caul, gilt and jewelled, on either side of the face, in which ladies of the period were wont to enclose their hair. Both heads, though mutilated and weather-worn, sufficiently resemble those of contemporary carved and painted representations of these monarchs—as, for instance, the effigies in Westminster abbey and the paintings formerly in St. Stephen's chapel, Westminster. The suggestion that they may be twelfth-century heads of Henry I and his queen is, in my humble opinion, quite impossible, though put forward by so

[1] It is possible that the actual doorhead is a fifteenth-century restoration.

[2] I have somewhat restored the king's head in fig. 6.

eminent an authority as Bishop Forrest Browne, F.S.A. On the northern jamb is a small votive cross. The panelled door within is of late-seventeenth-century date, and an excellent piece of plain joinery. It is in two leaves, and has an ancient key-escutcheon on the right leaf.

In the circular gable window of the north aisle some fragments of ancient glass are gathered together. These include a shield of the royal arms (lions and fleurs-de-lys) and another of Gilbert the Norman—afterwards adopted as the arms of his priory—gold, at the crossings of a fret azure, eagles silver. There is also a pretty piece of white drapery—the knee of a seated figure of some size, probably of the fourteenth century, as are the shields. In the quatrefoil of the south-east window of the chancel is a beautiful head of our Lord, in white glass, with silver stain, producing a gold tint, and very finely painted. It has the usual cruciferous nimbus. Of the modern stained glass which fills nearly every window of the church, there is good, bad and indifferent work, and the same description may be applied to the fittings, which, including the font, all date from the last half century or so. Unfortunately, the modern aisle roofs, with their skinny stained deal timbers, almost amount to a disfigurement.

An eighteenth-century west gallery was removed in 1897 and a stone arch built across the belfry-space, partly with a view of providing a more stable seating for the bell-frame. Apart from this object its insertion is to be regretted, as confusing the plan of the church. The spire is recorded to have been re-shingled in 1791, and again in about 1856.

Of the ancient monuments, the oldest is a stone coffin-slab in the churchyard, bearing a floreated cross of fourteenth-century date. The next is the singularly beautiful monument in alabaster, marbles and freestone —one of the best of its period in Surrey—of Gregory Lovell, who died in 1597 (plate VII). Within two circular-arched alcoves are the painted kneeling figures of Gregory and his two wives facing each other. At each angle is a marble shaft with Corinthian capital, supporting a frieze and entablature, above which are three armorial shields in scrolled frames. In the plinth are two groups, also facing each other, representing the progeny by the two wives—

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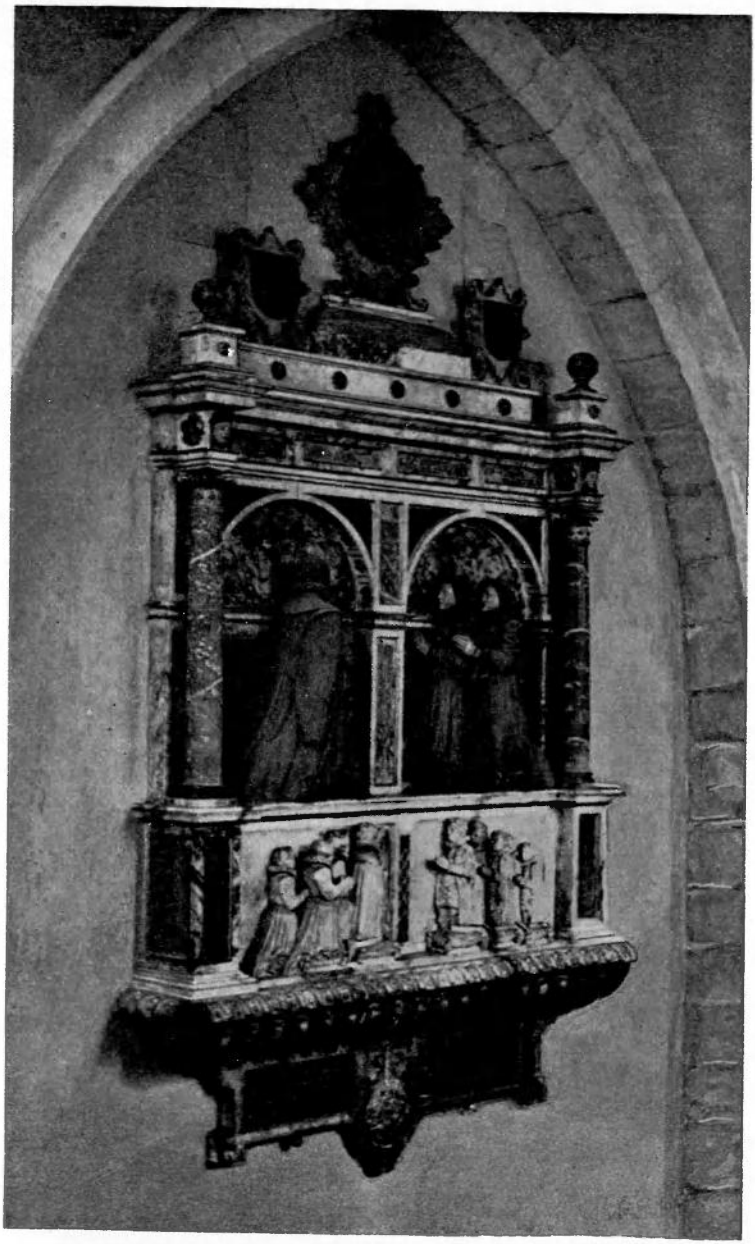

[*G. C. Druce, phot.*

MERTON CHURCH: GREGORY LOVELL'S MONUMENT, WITH WALL-ARCADE AND BLOCKED WINDOW OF C. 1210.

one son and three daughters on the left, and five sons on the right. Beneath is an elaborately fluted moulding, surmounting the inscription: 'Here lieth Gregory Lovell, of Merton abbey Esquyre Cofferer of Her Majesties Houshold, second son to S^r Frances Lovell of Harlinge Norff^e. He had two wyves Joane daughter of . . . Whithead by whome he had issue Thomas Mildred Elizabethe and Frances . . . and Dorothye daughter of Michaell Greene by whom he had issue S^r Robert Lovell Henry Thomas William and Gregory. He lived to the age of threescore and XV. and dyed the XV. of Marche in the yeare of our Lorde 1597.'

It was to this Gregory Lovell that queen Elizabeth, in 1586–1587, granted a twenty-one years' lease of Merton priory, 'all that house and scite of the late priory of Merton (alias) Marten, alias Marton), in the county of Surrey, there dissolved; and all houses, edifices, barns, stables, dovecotes, garden-grounds, orchards, gardens, mills, land and soil within the scite and precinct of the said late dissolved priory. . . .'

In the chancel floor, now at the western end, but formerly within the communion rails, are two handsome black marble slabs bearing shields of arms and heraldic mantlings in low relief. They are inscribed to Sir Henry Stapleton, bart. who died in 1679, and to his daughter, the wife of Thomas Robinson, who died in 1676. The church also contains monuments of eighteenth and early nineteenth century dates, amongst which may be named the finely carved medallions erected by 'Mrs. Elizabeth Cook, wife of Captain James Cook the circumnavigator,' to commemorate Admiral Isaac Smith and Isaac Craig Smith. Beneath the second is the figure of his beautiful wife, sister of R. J. Wyatt, the sculptor, who was the author of the work. A quaint and unusual feature is the row of hatchments suspended over the columns of the nave arcades, among them being that of the great lord Nelson, who, with the fair and frail Emma, worshipped within these walls. The seat he is said to have occupied is preserved as a bench in the vestry.

In the large and beautifully tended churchyard are some old and quaint stones. On the north side is the Rutlish table-tomb. William Rutlish, a native of Merton,

'imbroiderer to king Charles the second,' who died in 1687, left houses in the parish 'to the value of 400*l.* for the putting out poor children born in this parish apprentices.' The modern Rutlish school has been erected and endowed out of the greatly increased funds.

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