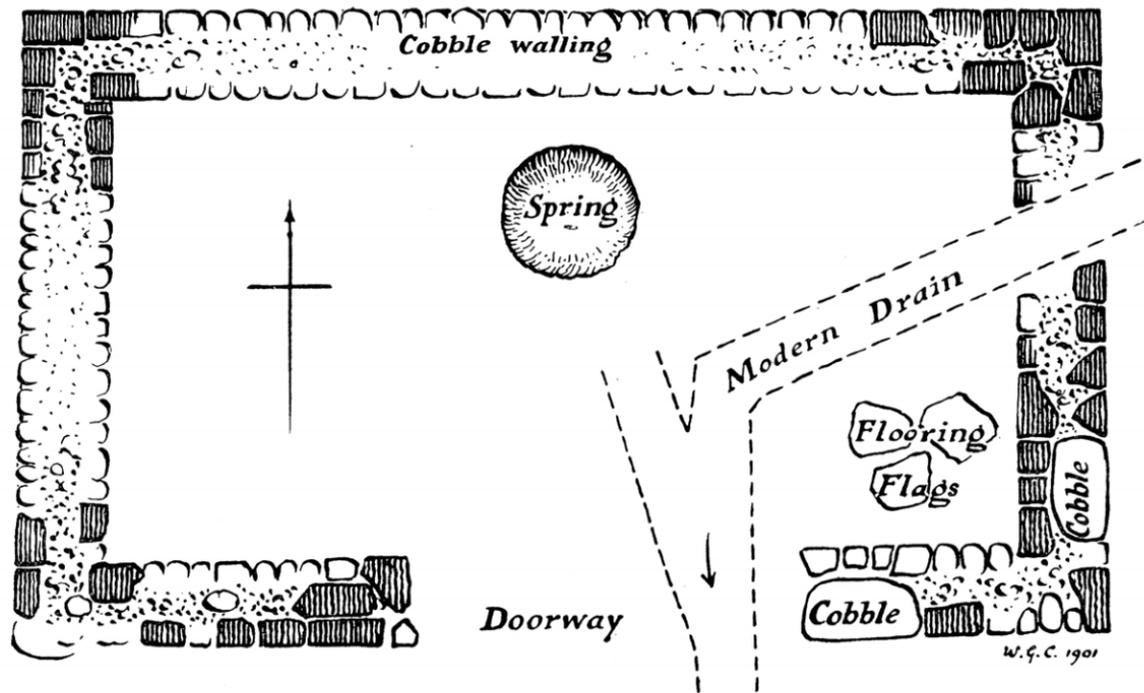


ART. V.—*Report on Excavations at the Holy Well, Gosforth.*
By W. G. COLLINGWOOD.

Read at Durham, June 20th, 1901.

AT our Windermere meeting a letter was read from the Rev. Rees Keene, Rector of Gosforth, asking the Society's assistance to explore ruins at Chapel Brow, in the neighbourhood of Gosforth Church, where a chapel was thought to have existed, together with a Holy Well. The late Rev. F. F. Pinder, of Gosforth, was said to have believed, and the idea was accepted by some, that the site might have been that of the original Gosforth Church, before the present Norman church was built; and it was thought that excavation might yield interesting results. Our Council directed me to visit the place and report upon it. The day after our meeting I went over the ground with Mr. John Watson, parish clerk of Gosforth, and reported to our President and the Chairman of Council, who encouraged me to make arrangements for digging. Mr. J. S. Ainsworth, the owner of the ground, and Mr. John Hartley, his tenant at the Hall, gave permission, and Mr. Keene offered help; but we were not able to begin work until March 28th, 1901, when, with a man and boy provided by Mr. Keene and a man lent by Mr. Watson, we cut into the mound, and soon came upon ruins of a building. On the third day we were stopped by a snowstorm, not before the form of the foundations had been made out, and a bit of a cross discovered. A few days later, work was continued in my absence, though I made several visits during its continuation; but Mr. Watson's interest in the subject and great practical experience (for he was the builder at the restoration of Gosforth Church and the finder of the hogbacks), as well



THE HOLY-WELL AND CHAPEL AT GOSFORTH



as Mr. Keene's constant oversight, gave every reason to believe that the work was in good hands. At Easter Mr. Ainsworth returned, and undertook the thorough clearing of the site, which he has now put into good order, with the area turfed over and the masonry exposed, the well cleared out and walled in, and the whole railed round to prevent damage by cattle.

The form of the building is oblong, measuring externally 33ft. along the south side, 32ft. 6in. along the north side, 18ft. 9in. on the east side, and 19ft. 3in. on the west. The walls are from 2ft. 6in. to 2ft. 8in. thick, built—at least in the foundation courses, which are all we have left—of rough cobbles, with red freestone at the corners inside and out; the freestone blocks very irregular in size, and irregularly placed. In the plate herewith, the blocks observed in digging are shown with vertical shading; the smaller cobbles and freestone are not individualised. Some of the freestone blocks, especially the N.E. quoin stone, are carefully dressed, and Mr. Watson remarked that the tooling was like that of the older masonry of the church, and that the mortar was the same with the old church mortar. Between the outer and inner faces of walling was the usual rubble core with coarse mortar, run in wet as grout.

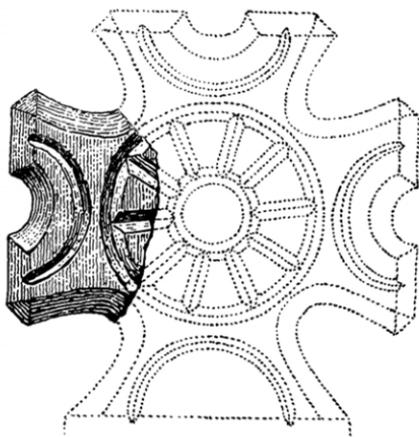
It was evident that the place had been intentionally destroyed down to the foundations, and, indeed, bits of worked freestone are found in the dykes of the field; especially, near a piece of old walling on the east of the field, there is a semi-circular fragment which looks like the cap or base of a pilaster, which may have come from the doorway or window of this chapel.

The doorway was in the middle of the south side, and must have been about 9ft. wide, which, however, includes the jambs, which have gone, if there were any. One side of this space has been torn away in making a drain, which goes through the foundations.

Many fragments of roofing flags of the same freestone

were found, with holes for the nails, and one side of the slabs was usually worn smooth by friction. Similar roofing slabs were found in the rebuilding of Gosforth Church.

The floor was of clay (pinnel), but on the east side were a number of earthfast freestone slabs, which seemed to be intended as flooring; and it is possible that the whole space was so covered.



FRAGMENT AND RESTORATION OF A CROSS FROM
THE HOLY-WELL CHAPEL, GOSFORTH.

At the east end was found a fragment of a small red freestone cross, measuring 7 by $4\frac{1}{2}$ by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches. It may have formed the finial of the east gable.

Almost exactly midway between east and west inside the building, but nearer to the north wall than to the door on the south, the Holy Well springs up through the pinnel. On clearing away the broken earth and leaving the unbroken pinnel around it, a basin was found, about 4ft. in diameter* and $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. deep, below the floor. Into this the water springs up exceedingly clear and fresh. It is

* Now narrowed to 2ft. 3in. by the walling built inside the opening to keep the well open.

evident that the building was placed so as to enclose this well. In the 25-inch ordnance map, in which sites of a chapel and well are marked from tradition, the two are apart, but the plan shows how symmetrically the chapel was built around the well, which, if the building had been meant for any other purpose than a well-chapel, would have been greatly in the way.

Lower down in the same field there is a large freestone trough, irregular and rough on the outside, but neatly chiselled inside, forming a basin about 2ft. square internally. There are, of course, many stone troughs in use on farms, but this is of an ancient appearance, and evidently meant to be sunk into the earth. Some such trough as this may have been set in the centre of the building to receive the water from the spring, though it is impossible to say that this is the basin from the chapel.

It appears, then, that the building was a mediæval well-chapel, of a kind not elsewhere known in our district, though there are many examples elsewhere.

At Wavertree, near Liverpool, there is a well-chapel dated 1414, over which was once a cross. Sketches and places of well-chapels are given in *The Legendary Lore of Holy Wells of England*, by R. C. Hope, F.S.A. (1893), among which may be mentioned several in Cornwall of a type very like this: such as St. Madron, a building 25 by 16 feet in plan, with a stone altar at one end and the water brought into a tank at one corner; at St. Austell, the Menacuddle Well is in a little chapel 11 by 9 feet in size, with two tanks at the east end; at St. Cleather, the Basil Well flows from under the altar of a small chapel.

In Cumberland, out of a number of Holy Wells mentioned by Mr. Hope, chiefly on the authority of the Rev. James Wilson, only one seems to have been built in and roofed over in ancient times—namely, St. Kentigern's Well at Castle Sowerby; though the well in Carlisle Cathedral is an example of a spring under the roof of a church.

There does not seem to be any written account of the site. The "Chartulary of St. Bees" mentions more than once a St. Helen's Well, but close to the ancient manor-house of Newton, about a mile away. A very curious story has been given me by Miss Senhouse of Gosforth, who kindly collected what was known by old inhabitants as to the fact of the existence of the chapel and well. In 1884, Miss Senhouse was told that "John Shepherd, a former tenant of Gosforth Hall, used to say that at certain feasts wine would be poured into the stream, which the villagers would look out for and drink." It would be interesting to know at what feasts, but *that* deponent sayeth not. The well at Bothel was said to run blood on the day of King Charles' "martyrdom;" and at Holy Wells in Cumberland and Yorkshire the country-folk used to drink the water with sugar on the patron saint's day.

The water of this Gosforth Holy Well, clear and fresh as it is, tasted just a little salt. Dr. Cohen, of the Yorkshire College, kindly analysed a sample of it, and reported:—"It contains a little salt and a trace of sulphate of lime, but not excessive, such as would constitute a mineral water." He subsequently communicated a quantitative analysis by which it appears that the solid matter is only 10 grains to the gallon. There is more than fifty times as much in the Holy Well at Humphrey Head, though the constituents are similar; and the Humphrey Head well, as Dr. Barber shows (*Furness and Cartmel Notes*, pp. 164-171), is very like Kissingen and other famous waters in which chloride of sodium (common salt) is the chief ingredient. The spa at Gutterby, 12 miles south of Gosforth on the south-west Cumberland coast, is said in Whellan (p. 499) to contain "a large quantity of chloride of sodium, also sulphate of soda, sulphate of lime, and carbonate of magnesia, and is somewhat similar in composition to the saline spring at Cheltenham." Perhaps, therefore, it is rather for its freshness

and purity, than from any mineral character, that this Gosforth Well has been distinguished from the many sources in the neighbourhood, by the name of a Holy Well.

* * *

Since the above was read, Dr. C. A. Parker writes from Gosforth :—" I hope you will make it clear in your report on the excavations here that the exact site of the chapel was known to some of us. I have carefully kept the site and memory of the chapel alive (see these *Transactions*, VI., 411, and elsewhere) since the stones were led away by the late John Steele about 1877. Mr. Steele showed me the spot, saying that the walls were about 18 inches above ground ; but almost buried in the débris of the building and a thicket of brambles and whins. The stones were led away to mend dykes, some of them being used to mend the road between the churchyard and the Bull Copy. Two ancient footpaths run close to the chapel and there seem to be traces of other paths radiating from it."
