

A Note on the Restoration of Repton Church.

BY REV. J. CHARLES COX, LL.D.



THE fine old church of St. Wystan, Repton, is now (January, 1886) undergoing a most sadly-needed restoration, brought about by the timely energy of the new vicar, the Rev. George Woodyatt.

When the Royal Archæological Institute were at Derby last summer, the members visited Repton, and the church was minutely examined, especially the chancel and crypt, by several of the competent architects and ecclesiologists who were among the company. It is hoped that, in the next issue of the Journal, the society will have the benefit of a paper on the Saxon work of this church, supplementary to that of Mr. Irvine, by an architect of repute.

Meanwhile, it may be well at once briefly to note the discoveries that have already been made, and to which my attention was directed when visiting the church with Mr. Bailey, on December 16th, 1885.

The base stone of a font of Decorated date, pierced with the drain, has been found. It is proposed to re-use it: designing a new one to fit the base. The church has at present nothing worthy of the name of a font.

A well-carved stone roof-boss, of late Early English design, was disclosed in part of the old walling. It must have been brought across at some time from the Priory church or building, as there has never been any stone-groining of that description in connection with the parish church.

The old spiral stone staircase, up to the parvise over the south porch, has been discovered in the wall to the west of the main entrance. The doorway opens into the church, and had been blocked up, plastered over, and forgotten when the galleries were erected. The disfiguring lean-to staircase on the west side, opening into the porch, was then constructed. This is to be removed, and the old staircase re-opened.

Several portions of the alabaster basement and sides of the tomb of the old knight of the Frances family, whose effigy is now in the crypt on a brick substructure, have been found beneath the old flooring.

The floor of this church, which was so disastrously raised in 1792, when the finely-carved old pews were swept away, and many other enormities committed, is now being reduced to its former level, exposing the bases of the piers, which, in several cases, have been much mutilated. In one or two places the old tiling has been uncovered *in situ*, consisting of red tiles laid square, with a few of ordinary encaustic pattern.

The removal of the flooring, and further excavations, have brought to light very interesting facts relative to the first church of St. Wystan, built here in the tenth century, on the site, it would seem, of the revered monastery destroyed by the Danes. The body of the church consisted of a short nave, extending down only two bays of the present nave, and seems to have had narrow side aisles. It will be recollected by the members of the Institute who were present in the church last August, that Mr. Micketwaite considered that the extent of the old Saxon church would correspond with the change and drop in the line of the string-course moulding over the nave arcades. This has now been proved to be a most correct surmise. It is here that the returning angles of the west wall of the Saxon nave have been uncovered, about two feet below the flooring of 1792.

It is not desirable, now, to anticipate in detail any more mature opinion that may be arrived at after the necessary repair of the chancel has been undertaken ; but it may be here placed on record that the savants, who so carefully inspected the most ancient parts

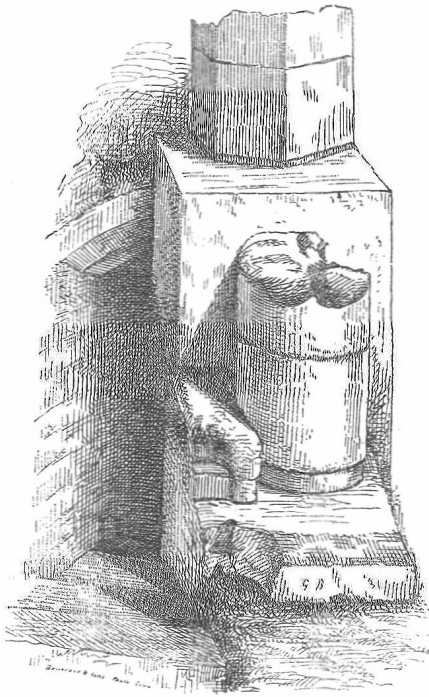
of this church last August, were of opinion that the chancel, and the first bay of the nave (so disgracefully removed in 1854), were beyond doubt of Saxon work, and not of early Norman, as has of late been by some supposed. The groined roof and supporting pillars of the crypt were, also, pronounced to be with equal certainty of Saxon date. Indeed, the two stand or fall together, for no careful observer of the capitals of the two pillars that were removed from the nave in 1854, and which now stand in the porch, can doubt, on comparing them with the capitals of the crypt pillars, that they are of approximately the same date. Whilst not accepting all the theories of Mr. Irvine in his most valuable paper on this crypt,* it was generally agreed that he was right in assigning a twofold date to the crypt, and that it had not originally been groined and vaulted, the outer walls, with their remarkable cornice belonging to an earlier period—that is, to an earlier Saxon date.

My own idea, then, at present is this—that the outer walls of the crypt, with its nearly obliterated three chapels or recesses, pertain to the old lower chancel or crypt of the celebrated Repton Monastery, destroyed by the Danes in 874, and probably erected as it then stood in that same century—that when times of peace came in the next century, and the church of St. Wystan was first raised, the faithful, desirous of interfering as little as possible with the remains of the ancient sanctuary, hallowed by the interment of saints and kings, raised the walls of the later Saxon chancel upon it, strengthened the crypt with stone-groining, so as to bear the chancel above it, constructed the two stairways leading down to the crypt from the nave, and built a short nave with narrow side aisles.

These two stairways have now been opened out, and it is hoped that arrangements may be made for their remaining in that condition. The bases of the Saxon responds, each side of the chancel arch, that were hacked away in 1854, are now exposed, about two feet of them remaining. The raised flooring of 1792,

* *Journal of the Derbyshire Arch. and Nat. History Soc.*, vol. v., pp. 165-172.

fortunately prevented the barbarians of the later date from sweeping away all trace of them. The accompanying drawing gives



an illustration of the respond base on the north side.

During my visit on December 16th, the vicar kindly permitted one or two of the paving flags under the chancel arch to be raised, and the earth below (which had evidently been disturbed in comparatively modern days for vault or interment) to be removed, so as to open out a space on the nave side of the remarkable triangular recess in the west wall of the crypt. I make, now, no further conjecture, in addition to the numerous ones already

given, as to its purport, but only record the fact that the stones composing it, on their nave faces, are altogether rough and unworked, showing that there was never any communication or opening on that side, but that it was simply a recess.

The singularly fine tower-archway at the west end of the church has been opened out with excellent effect, and the thorough but most careful restoration of the excellent Perpendicular roof of the nave was then in full operation.

The chancel and crypt had not then, and I believe have not now (January 18th, 1886), been in any way touched, except the opening out of the crypt stairways. When this part of the work is begun, it is absolutely impossible to exaggerate the need that there will be for the greatest possible care not further to damage or alter a single stone without necessity, and no real notion of

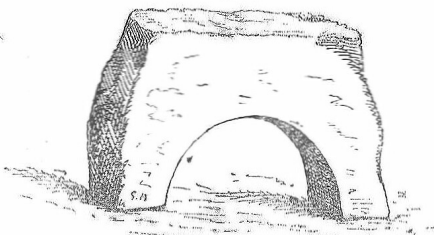
what may seem to modern taste beautiful and fitting must be suffered to tamper with the most remarkable ecclesiastical structure, on the most interesting site, that English Christendom yet possesses.

Mr. Irvine, who has had perhaps greater experience of the good and of the evil of modern English restorations than any one else of the century, wrote as follows to our society in 1882, and his word will well repay reproducing and re-reading :—

“It is to be hoped that whenever further improvements and repairs take place in this (St. Wystan’s) church, this most interesting chancel and its belongings may receive tender handling. It wants but careful cleaning, rather than ought else. The opening of its north light, and the removal of the flat ceiling, the restoration of the lost gable cross, with the *very, very* (the italics are his) careful removal of the modern plaster inside from the stone altar *only*, but not from the surfaces originally plastered. This is in general all that is wanted to hand forward to posterity one of the most interesting monuments of Saxon architecture that ‘Time and the Dane’ (with other and later friends not a bit better, but rather worse than the last) have left to Derbyshire.”

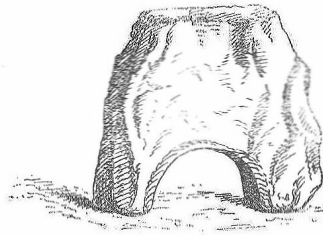
The attention of the archæologists in August last was also drawn to sundry stone remains in the vicarage garden, to the west of the church. When the garden was being enlarged in the previous summer, Mr. Woodyatt found a large number of roughly-hewn stones a little distance below the surface, lying in a position that suggested their having formed part of some overthrown substantial wall. Many of these stones are now heaped upon the surface, with the only four that showed any traces of carving. Two of these (Figs. 1 and 2) are the top stones of early Saxon windows, and are slightly splayed. Their dimensions are, respectively :—

FIG. 1.



2ft. 10in. by 2ft. Height of Arch, 1ft.

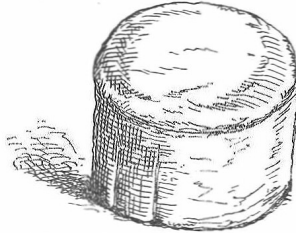
FIG. 2.



2ft. 6in. by 2ft. Height of Arch, 8in.

Another stone (Fig. 3) is the simple course of a round shaft or small pillar:—

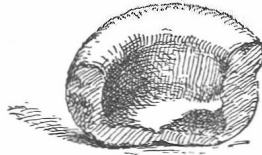
FIG 3.



7½ in. in diameter, and 3 in. in height.

The fourth stone (Fig. 4) is part of a small hollowed stone vessel or mortar, perhaps a hand-quern :—

FIG 4.



6½ in. by 4 in.

It may be that these remains had some connection with the buildings pertaining to the old Saxon Monastery, but it seems more probable that they pertained to the old town of Repton; perhaps, as stone buildings would be so very exceptional, to the residence of the Mercian kings.

These stones were found a little to the west of the sycamore tree, said to have been planted over the remarkable and extensive interments and vaults discovered in 1687, and again opened in 1787.* Could not the year 1887 be signalised by further and more observant excavations at Repton? There can be no doubt that very much yet remains to be learnt, and is simply below ground, with respect to the ancient capital of Mercia and its neighbourhood. If further excavation in the precincts of the church and vicarage should not appear seemly or desirable, could not our society obtain leave for systematic diggings at the "Buries," that well-defined quadrangular earthwork between Repton and the Trent?

* See Bigsby's *History of Repton*, pp. 247, 248.