

## A Note on Discoveries at Repton Priory and Church.<sup>1</sup>

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ABOUT twelve years ago there appeared in *The Athenæum* a brief account of certain excavations undertaken by Mr. Hipkins in September, 1898, in connection with the Saxon crypt beneath the chancel of the parish church of Repton. They resulted in the discovery of a puzzling flight of wide steps leading down to the east end of the crypt from the direction of the adjacent priory. Mr. Vassall, the Bursar of Repton School, whose zeal in all that pertains to the antiquities of Repton is well known, has continued this useful and interesting work during the current year.

In 1792 a fine table-tomb of alabaster, with a recumbent effigy, which stood at the east end of the north aisle of the parish church of St. Wystan, was removed and partly broken up, presumably to make way for an enlarged pew. The old crypt, long lost sight of, was accidentally rediscovered in 1779, when a grave was being prepared for Dr. Prior, the headmaster of the school. The outer entrance came to light, and the crypt was cleared out in 1802. It was then considered a suitable place wherein to deposit the ejected knightly effigy, proved to be that of Sir Robert Frances of Foremark, *c.* 1400. There Sir Robert rested, supported on a few bricks, in a bad light, for over a century, the alabaster green with damp for most of the period. Writing about this in 1876 (*Churches of Derbyshire*, vol. iii.), I ventured to plead that this good effigy of a knight of some repute in the district might find "a

<sup>1</sup> The following brief notes as to recent Repton discoveries are slightly expanded and corrected from a contribution of mine to the *Athenæum* of July 29th, 1911.

more worthy resting-place." It was a pleasure to find, when visiting Repton thirty-five years later, that this wish had been at last achieved. Mr. Vassall has had the effigy carefully cleaned, several portions of the old table-tomb cemented together, and the whole replaced in the church as near as possible in its original position. This is not only seemly so far as an historic effigy is concerned, but the removal allows of a better display of the small, but noteworthy, crypt.

The preparations for the resting-place for the restored tomb and effigy of Sir Robert Frances revealed the broken stump of one of the two Saxon piers at the east end of the nave, which were barbarously hacked out in 1854 to make uniform arcades. There is about two feet of it still *in situ*, and it has been happily left open to view. The stump of its fellow on the south side can also now be seen on raising a floor-slab.

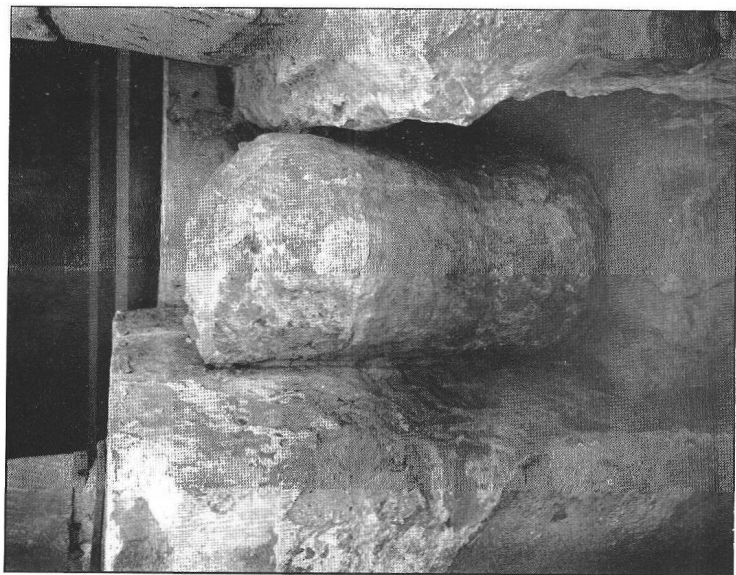
In "A Note on the Restoration of Repton Church" which I contributed to the eighth volume of this *Journal* (1886, pp. 231-6), I described these stumps and illustrated the one on the north side. They were then both uncovered for a short time. Why the restorers should have buried them again cannot now be explained.

The crypt is now kept in a clean and dry condition. On revisiting it I saw no reason to alter the opinion formed and expressed in 1886, when the church was under restoration, in contradistinction to opinions printed ten years earlier, namely, that the outer walls, with their remarkable cornice, 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. I came to the conclusion, further, that the groined roof and supporting pillars of the crypt are also Saxon, but of later date, not Norman, as at one time supposed. This work was most likely introduced in the tenth century, when the church of St. Wystan was first raised—the builders desiring to interfere as little as possible with the old sanctuary, which had been the mausoleum of several kings and saints, and also to strengthen it to bear the late Saxon chancel of the church above.



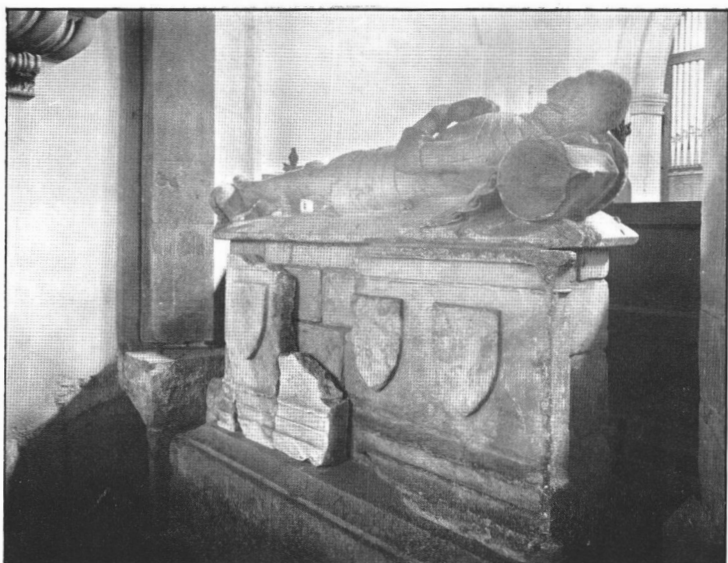
*Photo by R. Keene.*

THIRTEENTH CENTURY GRAVE COVER.



*Photo by R. Keene.*

STUMP OF SAXON PIER.



*Photo by R. Keene.*

EFFIGY OF SIR ROBERT FRANCES.



*Photo by R. Keene.*

ENTRANCE TO CLOISTER AND TO UNDERCROFT OF REFECTORY  
OF REPTON PRIORY FROM THE HALL GARDEN.

A fine sepulchral slab or grave-cover has been brought to the surface under the east window of the church, clear of the crypt, in the school or old priory yard; it has a circular cross-head, and appears to date from the close of the twelfth century or early in the thirteenth century. This would not be the usual place for the interment of the canons or other occupants of the Austin priory founded here to the east of the parish church in 1172. But the parish church was served by the canons, and this stone may possibly have marked the burial of one of the first canons who had acted as parochial vicar. Mr. Vassall found this gravestone (which measures 64 inches in length, and tapers from 19 inches to 12 inches in width) about a foot below the present surface of the yard, and on further digging found also the stone coffin with its occupant five feet lower. The coffin has been again covered and left undisturbed.

A second and much smaller grave-cover was recently dug up in the churchyard, and is now standing in the church porch; it is probably half a century later than the one first described. It bears the symbol of shears, which were at one time supposed to betoken the burial of a woman, but the better opinion is that it represents a woolstapler.

Mr. Vassall has in addition been excavating in the north-east corner of the Priory garden, and has laid bare a low splayed window and two small archways, and also come across the foundations of several walls, one of which is, no doubt, the east wall of the refectory. The floor of the undercroft of the refectory was groined, and nine consecutive stones of a vaulting rib were discovered. An Ave Maria token was found, and a silver penny of Edward III.; also several roofing slates, pronounced by geologists to come from Charnwood Forest. This corner of the remains of the buildings round the cloister-garth now looks well, and develops the actual plan, whether viewed from the now Priory garden or from the exterior Hall garden. The slype that led from the cloisters to the Hall, formerly the Prior's Lodgings, at the east end of the refectory and its undercroft, shown conjecturally on Mr. St. John Hope's plan of 1884, is clearly in evidence;

it is provided with a bench-table to serve as a seat, which is one foot high and about twenty inches wide.

I feel convinced, I should like to add, that the block of buildings still standing on the west side of the cloisters, which now serves as Mr. Vassall's Priory House and the big school library, was in the main the guest-hall, with cellarer's offices below, as marked on Mr. Hope's plan. This would be in accordance with the usual monastic precedents. It would be the very last place wherein one would expect to find the infirmary, which was naturally, as a rule, a detached building. The wording of a grant of 1559 has been cited confidently by an able writer in vol. ii. of *The Victoria County History of Derbyshire* (1907) as proving that this block was the infirmary; but the grant cannot be taken to establish anything of the kind, for the draughtsman was clearly altogether vague as to the disposition of monastic houses; he writes, for instance, of "one large voyde roome which was lately called the Cloyster." The evidence of the inventory of the suppression commissioners is also wholly against this position. Mr. Hope gave some fairly sound reasons for supposing that the infirmary was at a little distance to the north, on the banks of the old course of the Trent; see his papers in vols. vi. and vii. of this Society's *Journal*. For my own part, I do not believe that the true infirmary site has yet been ascertained.

One of the small thirteenth-century vaulted chambers of this west block, now known as the Priory, which serves as Mr. Vassall's larder, and was probably the official chamber of the cellarer or general storekeeper, has recently had the ribs cleared of whitewash and plaster; with the result that some fine carving has come to light, and the curious fact been revealed that the ribs were partly carved into dogtooth mouldings, but only short lengths were thus treated. Finally, it may be mentioned that Mr. Vassall has this year accomplished the important work of the restoration of the old slype by the chapter house leading to the cemetery; it had been walled up for ages as a potato shed.