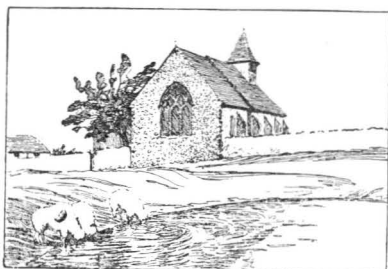


WEST BLATCHINGTON CHURCH.

BY IAN C. HANNAH, M.A., F.S.A.

THE village of West Blatchington stands on the southern slope of the Downs, overlooking the Channel across the narrow eastern end of the maritime plain.



CHURCH N.E.

It is in the hundred of Whalesbone, named from the stream (now arched over) that flows through the central valley of Brighton; its manor belonged to the de la Warrs, the church to Lewes Priory. Formerly one of

the most lonely and insignificant of downland settlements, it is now deprived of any suggestion of solitude and threatened with eventual absorption by the northward creep of Hove. Though its actual population (in the village) is still under a hundred, half Brighton and all Hove are in very easy sight. Paved streets are separated by no more than the width of a good sized field.

The church of S. Peter is typical of the Downs, a small fabric built almost entirely of flint rubble. It consists of a Norman nave, a chancel that seems to belong to the fourteenth century, and the foundations of a western tower that was destined apparently never to rise more than a foot above the soil. The greater part is modern, having been rebuilt in 1890,¹ after

¹ It is very unfortunate that nothing was written for these collections at that time, for the architect, Somers Clarke, and others who were responsible for the restoration have passed away, and much is now obscure that was, perhaps, in 1890 evident enough. This account is based on notes taken at the time by the present writer (then a child), a long article that appeared in the *Sussex Daily News* of June 30, 1891, the day after the church was reopened by Bishop Durnford—and, of course, an inspection of the actual fabric.

lying for many years in ruin, a henhouse having long made use of the massive walls.

Instead of being surrounded by the yard in the usual way the church has its east end flush with a farm road. This is certainly owing to the fact that encroachments have been made since the church was ruined. It is extremely unusual in Sussex (or elsewhere) for the church to be on the edge of its yard; at Preston, however, it is at the west end so that the tower stands in the manor house grounds.

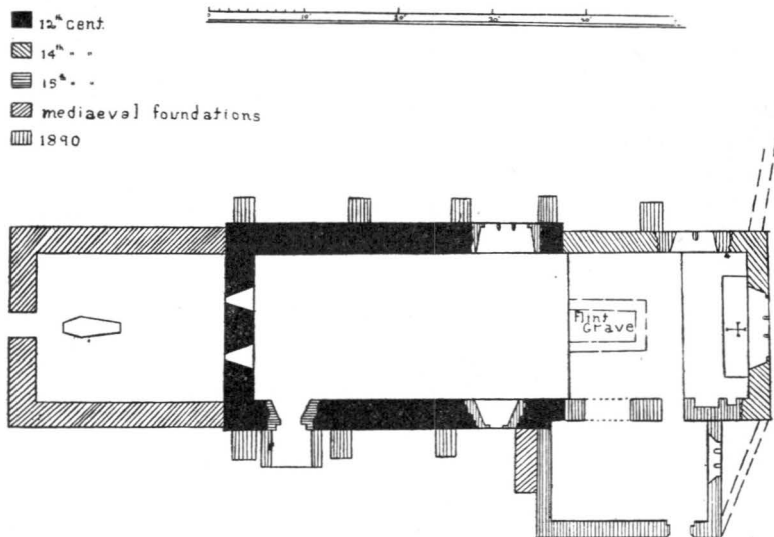
The Norman work has every appearance of being early; the walling is entirely of flint with ashlar quoins; in the west wall are two very narrow little windows, their round heads each formed of a single stone, originally, it appears, closed only by shutters on the outside, for which the rabbeting remains. They are widely splayed, but unfortunately the whole building at the time of restoration was coated within by white plaster concealing all original features.

Another Norman window in the south wall was destroyed in 1890, being too much decayed for preservation.

The Norman church had a rather elaborately moulded chancel arch of which some stones were found in a grave at the east end of the nave, and are now built into the west end of the north wall. Most display the roll mould with billeting; one had triangular members instead of the square billet. There is not enough to restore the arch with any confidence. Other later carved stones built in are not of much interest, but include a feature shaped like a bird.

The arch was apparently destroyed during the fourteenth century when a new chancel with internal length of about nineteen feet was provided. The walls are thinner than those of the nave, but inside they are continuous, the building merely becoming narrower on the exterior. A new east window of three lights was erected; this was restored with net tracery in 1890, using two original sill stones at the northern end. It is probable the Norman church had an apse—

though it may, like Stopham, Shipley and Pyecombe, in the same county, have been square ended. When in 1890 the whole interior was dug out no foundations appeared, but they would certainly have afforded to the fourteenth century builders a more convenient supply of flint than could be secured elsewhere. No new chancel arch was erected.



PLAN, BY I.C.H.

At some time in the middle ages—there are really no indications of date—foundations were laid for what may have been intended as a western tower. These are about four inches narrower both north and south than the nave, but the tower would have been very disproportionately large for the church as well as being awkwardly oblong in plan. In the middle of the west wall is an opening three feet wide which it was not apparently intended to close by a door as a very low mural plinth is carried round the jambs. At Bexhill there is another Sussex example of a tower with archway originally open to the elements. There is a much larger instance at Chatteris, Cambridgeshire.

The tower at Blatchington can hardly have been carried far, as there are no marks of its walling against the west wall of the nave, nor is any provision made for a doorway into the church. It appears to have been merely begun, and it may have been intended for almost any kind of extension to the church. Just within the opening on the grass is a perfectly plain mediaeval coffin slab, broken across.

Close to the west end of the south nave wall is inserted a late fifteenth century doorway, very plainly bevelled all round, the flat four-centered arch composed of two stones. At the east end of the nave are foundations of a wall running south for about $6\frac{1}{2}$ ft.; the west wall of the vestry is partly built upon it. Just east of the doorway were slight remains of another wall on which a new buttress is built. At intervals on the south of the nave are rough projections in the flint walling of slight character; their purpose is by no means clear. It seems certain that some extension on the south as on the west was actually begun.

The south wall of the nave is practically all original; the west wall is old to about half the height of the gable. Some three to five feet of the north and east walls is mediaeval; as there were no remains of any south wall to the chancel, the vestry and organ chamber was built against it. The new walling differs from the old in having small pieces of freestone built in at random. Strengthening buttresses have been erected both north and south. The new windows are of late Gothic form; Somers Clarke considered that mediaeval architecture went on improving to the end, and his own principal work, the chancel of Brighton parish church, is in the style of the early Tudors.

Horsfield (*History of Sussex*, I., 158) speaks of the church as consisting of north and south chancels with steeple containing five bells. In all probability there was a south chapel, the foundations of whose west wall remains, on whose site in part the vestry stands.

In the interior was discovered a flint-built grave just within the limits of the chancel, before the altar

step, but it is not in any way marked on the present pavement.

In it were found the stones of the chancel arch, and when these were removed there was disclosed the remains of a wooden coffin, with iron rings, which had been wrapped in canvas, then filled in all round with clay.² The skeleton was nearly complete, but no epitaph appeared.

Horsfield (*op. cit.*) says the church existed (intact) in 1724, but gives no reference. Miss Harriet Hodson, whose family occupied the manor house for some two hundred years, and who left money to rebuild the church, in a short paper reprinted in the *Sussex Daily News* for June 30, 1891, suggests that more likely the fabric went to ruin about the time of the reformation (which the Scrase family, who then lived in the manor house, refused to accept for several generations), and the rectory was consequently attached to the vicarage of Brighton, an arrangement which still persists. The yard contains not a single grave stone that was set up before the rebuilding of the church.

The manor (or farm) house is modern and uninteresting, but at its north-west corner still remains a very massive, broad, diagonal buttress of flint and stone, dating from the fourteenth century. Close by it was formerly a trefoil-headed window (seen by the present writer, referred to by M. A. Lower, *S.A.C.*, VIII., 5), but this has lately disappeared.

The garden wall on the west with sloping buttresses and probably some of the small cottages of the village are built of mediaeval materials, including a small amount of ashlar. The farm buildings include a windmill, erected about a century ago, but now no longer in use. It rises above barns, its battering timber tower (of "smock" form) surmounting a flint-built base, both octagonal. Only the hood revolved,

² The *Sussex Daily News* (June 30, 1891) says that the iron rings and some pieces of clay with the impress of the cloth were to be placed in the Brighton Museum, but Mr. Toms, the curator, assures me this was not done. Among other relics found I remember an old key, but there was nothing of great importance.

provided with a tail-wheel. Its form is unusual, but the ordinary detached windmills are decidedly more picturesque.³

Interior and exterior views of the church are given (M. A. Lower on the family of Scrase), *S.A.C.*, VIII., 4, 13. These show the walls virtually intact, including the south side of the chancel. Two pointed windows shown on the south side of the nave, and chancel, have entirely disappeared, but the woodcuts are rather vague, and not very accurate (one window was certainly Norman); neither they nor the letterpress throw any further light on the history of the fabric.

A brief and colourless reference to the ruins at Blatchington occurs in *S.A.C.*, XII., 119 (Rev. E. Turner on *Domus Anachoritæ, Aldrington*).

³ It is illustrated in *Sussex County Magazine*, October, 1929, p. 711.