



The Abbey Church of Saint Werburgh, Chester, in Pre-Norman Times.

BY GEORGE W. HASWELL.

(Read 14th December, 1915).

IN investigating the earlier history of our mother church no attempt has been made, so far as I am aware, to locate a *site* for the early church of SS. Peter and Paul. The history of our abbey church from its conception by Hugh Lupus has been amply written upon, and it will now be my endeavour to place before you its history prior to that date, so as to forge the earlier links and thus complete the whole chain of our abbey's life and splendid record. The late Sir G. Gilbert Scott, R.A., in introducing his paper, "The Architectural History of Chester Cathedral," read before this Society on June 8th, 1870, in the Refectory, says:—

"I may begin by saying that, unlike the majority of great mediæval churches, its origin and the date of its foundation are unknown. Chester having been a Roman city, it follows that it must, during the last century of the Roman occupation—when the empire was Christian—have possessed churches, and one may have stood upon this site. The same may be said of the interval between the departure of the Roman legions and the Anglo-Saxon conquest: a period prolonged in this instance through

the district which includes Chester having been held by the Britons much longer than most parts of England. They were Christians, and must have had churches, and one may have stood here. Whenever it was founded, the original church is said to have been dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul; and Mr. Parker conjectures it to have been Romano-British. During the Anglo-Saxon period, however, the dedication of the church was changed from St. Peter and St. Paul to St. Werburga and St. Oswald. I wish much that we knew when and why this change of dedication was made. I imagine, however, that it was about the year 908, during the time of Ethelred, duke of Mercia, whose wife Elfreda was the daughter of the great king Alfred, and resembled him both in piety and valour. Not only was it customary with the Normans, while dealing with the ecclesiastical structures of their predecessors, to make a clean sweep and re-construct them on a greatly enlarged scale, but the change from a comparatively small collegiate institution to a great monastery of necessity involved this. It is, therefore, not to be wondered at that *no vestige of the older buildings remains.*" [The italics are mine.]

Christianity was introduced into Britain about the year A. D. 180-200 in the mid-Roman occupation of this island. The Emperor Constantine acknowledged Christianity as the religion of the whole empire, being much influenced by his mother the saintly Helena, a British princess. Her name remains in quite a number of place-names, as Sarn Helen, etc. The parish church of Neston is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and S. Helen—and in passing I may mention that in this church there probably is an interesting connection with this saint, in a fragment of a cross-head upon which is a figure holding in the right hand a chalice and in the left hand seemingly a pair of pincers.

The history of our early church is perhaps best explained by the following extract from the *Early*

Christianity in Britain of the late Hugh Williams:—

“With the ending of Constantine’s reign we reach the year A. D. 337. After the conversion of Kent there was in our island a church, which will best be called Anglo-Roman. Within the British portion of the island, among the Celts, there was the old native church which since the Council of Arles, 314, or, at the latest, since the time of Theodosius, 395, had lived on its life in comparative seclusion. There had been occasional communion with continental churches, but what the church of Britain may have possessed of administrative rule was carried on entirely within itself. Many old customs also continued, cherished and revered by all the people in western parts, from the neighbourhood of the West Saxons on the southern coast to the Tyne and the Clyde on the north. But there were no two churches until after A. D. 603. Saint Augustine, the ‘apostle of England,’ eager, active and high-minded as he was, struck out on a wrong path in 603, and caused a division between the English and British churches which lasted until the beginning of the ninth century.”

Knight’s *Old England*, published in 1845, in dealing with the early history of our country, says:—

“The re-establishment of Christianity by the conversion of the Saxons was rapidly followed by the building of churches. What was the nature of the material of these churches; whether any of them exist; whether portions may be found in our ecclesiastical buildings; have been fruitful subjects of antiquarian discussion.”

Mr. Rickman, one of our highest authorities on this subject, said:—

“On that part of our architectural history which follows the departure of the Romans from Britain and which precedes the Norman conquest, there is of course great obscurity; but while in the days of Dr. Stukeley, Walpole, etc., there appears to have been much too easy admission of Saxon dates, on the mere appearance of the semi-circular arch, I think there has been of late perhaps

too great a leaning the other way; and because we cannot directly prove that certain edifices are Saxon, by document or evidence, we have been induced, too easily perhaps, to consider that no Saxon buildings did exist, and have not given ourselves the trouble sufficiently to examine our earlier Norman works to see if there were not some of them entitled to be considered as erected before the Conquest."

Since the foregoing was written much has, by careful research, been revealed, prejudice against the authenticity of Saxon remains has died out, and many examples can be produced of what we must admit to be pre-Norman or Anglo-Saxon buildings; but, naturally, with the vicissitudes they have undergone, we have not very many examples above ground. The splendid tower at Earl's Barton, in Northamptonshire, and the church at Bradford-on-Avon, will suffice to show what once existed in our old country. Where buildings of this glorious style are seen we are bound to admit that the Arts generally in those times were in a high position; and that they were not "mean builders" as one authority would have us believe. Mr. Francis Bond, in his most valuable work, *Analysis of Gothic Architecture in England*, says:—

"Church architecture had a very long history before the Norman style reached these lands in the 11th century." Professor Baldwin Brown in his *Arts in Early England*, in explaining the map of Saxon churches in England, (on which none are shown in our neighbourhood,) says:—

"This represents a personal examination of some 350 examples that have been signalized as showing signs of Saxon origin—other examples no doubt exist that come under the notice of local observers, though they are not generally known, and these would repay investigation. . . . In the absence of any definite feature, a wall that is

really Saxon may pass unnoticed, and there may be very many such pieces of walling up and down the country. . . . Are there any general *criteria* by which an intelligent observer can distinguish a Saxon church from one belonging to other mediaeval periods? There are no *criteria* of absolute validity, but there are general symptoms by which they can be diagnosed. . . . If the character of the masonry be then examined some confirmation of the hypothesis of a Saxon origin can be found in the comparative rudeness and irregularity of the technique, and the absence of any special treatment of the face—such as ‘herring-bone’ work. ‘Herring-bone’ work, which used to be considered a sign of Saxon origin, is now known to raise a presumption to the contrary; more assurance will be gained if the thickness of the walls turns out to be comparatively slight, say 2-ft. to 2-ft. 6-in. Comparative thickness of walls is a good—but by no means absolute—test of Saxon and Norman, but this measurement should always be taken. Norman walls nearly always run thicker than Saxon.”

After these practical suggestions from such an eminent authority, may we not venture to enquire whether we have not some Saxon, or pre-Conquest, work in our northern transept? The general characteristics will, I venture to suggest, correspond largely with what the Professor teaches us to look for; therefore I wish particularly to draw your attention to this portion of our church. Transepts, as a general rule, are the least disturbed portions of our churches, and should be the starting point in examining their architectural history. The rebuilding of a church generally commenced at the east end, sometimes at the west, and occasionally from both ends simultaneously; hence the transepts would be the last to be disturbed, and in case of cessation of operations would not be touched. This has, I suggest, been the course pursued at Chester. “Saxon,”

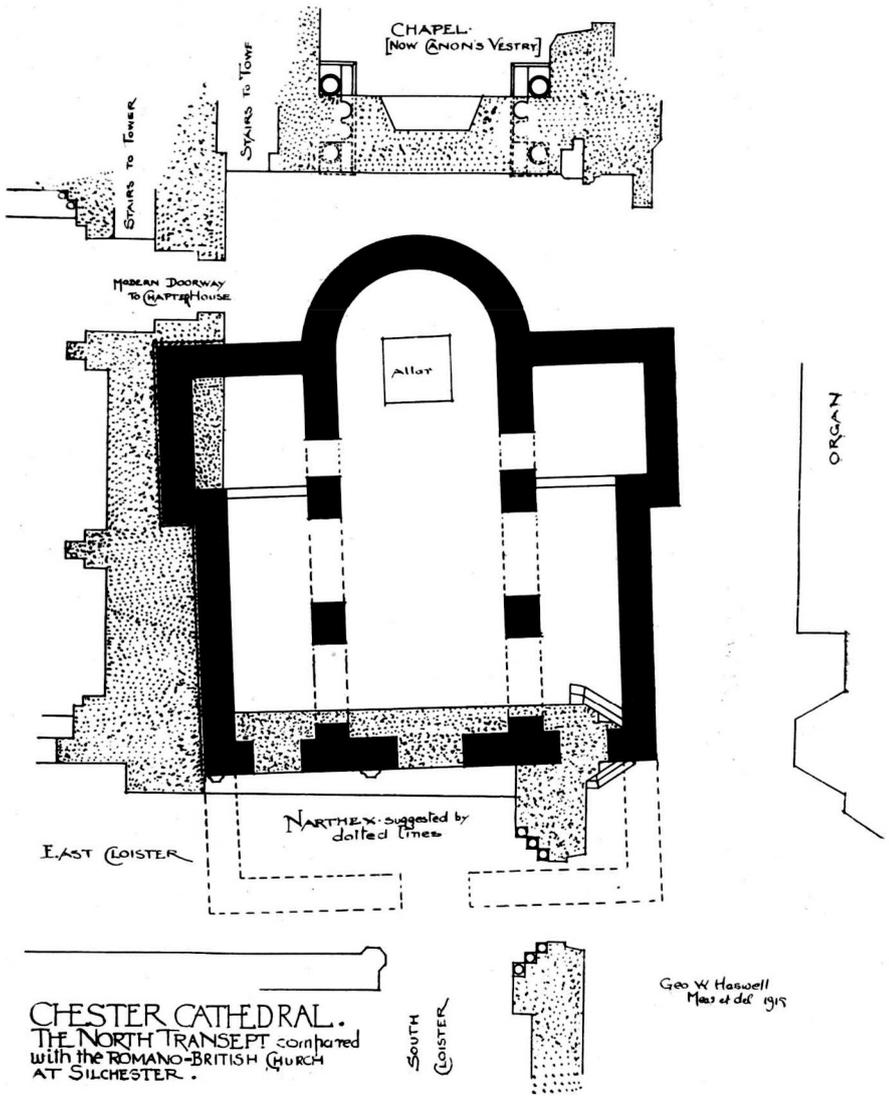


Plate No. 1.

“Anglo-Saxon,” “Romanesque,” or “pre-Norman,” was the style in fashion about the years 650 to 1066. I think that the title of “Romanesque” is the happier one, as no doubt it introduced the “Basilica” in church building towards the end of Roman rule in this country. If we take *c.* A.D. 410 as that date, the Roman empire was already Christianized, and many of the smaller temples in Rome were being converted from pagan to Christian uses. The Emperor Constantine upon his conversion gave seven of these basilicas, and in our own island we have many parallel examples, notably the old British church at Canterbury dedicated to St. Martin, in which Bertha, the Christian wife of king Ethelbert, worshipped; you will remember it was this lady who greatly assisted St. Augustine in his mission to England in the year 597. Now these heathen temples apparently were some trouble to Augustine, as, Pope Gregory, in a letter (A. D. 601) to Mellitus—who had been sent amongst others from Rome at the request of Saint Augustine, “who had a great harvest” and “but few labourers”—told him to inform Augustine that he had determined after much deliberation,

“that the temples of the idols in that nation ought not to be destroyed; but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed. For if those temples are well built, it is requisite that they be converted from the worship of devils to the service of the true God; that the nation, seeing that their temples are not destroyed, may remove error from their hearts, and knowing and adoring the true God, may the more familiarly resort to the places to which they have been accustomed.”—(Bede).

By this direct evidence we are left in no uncertainty as

to what we are in search of, and it clearly points to what has already been said: that we must have many unsuspected pieces of very early masonry in our midst, and if I am not very much mistaken we shall presently see some in the southern portion of our eastern cloister.

During the excavations on the site of the Roman city of Silchester, in Hampshire, in 1891, a discovery was made—claimed as one of the most interesting yet made in Roman Britain—by the uncovering of the walls of a miniature church, complete, but small indeed, as the following measurements will tell:—

Nave: 29-ft. 3-in. by 10-ft. in width, ending in an apse. Aisles: 5-ft. in width. Transepts: 7-ft. by 7-ft. Narthex: 24-ft. by 6-ft. 9-in. extending the whole width of the three main divisions; precisely as described in 1 Kings, vi. 3:—

“And the porch before the temple of the house, twenty cubits was the length thereof, according to the breadth of the house.”

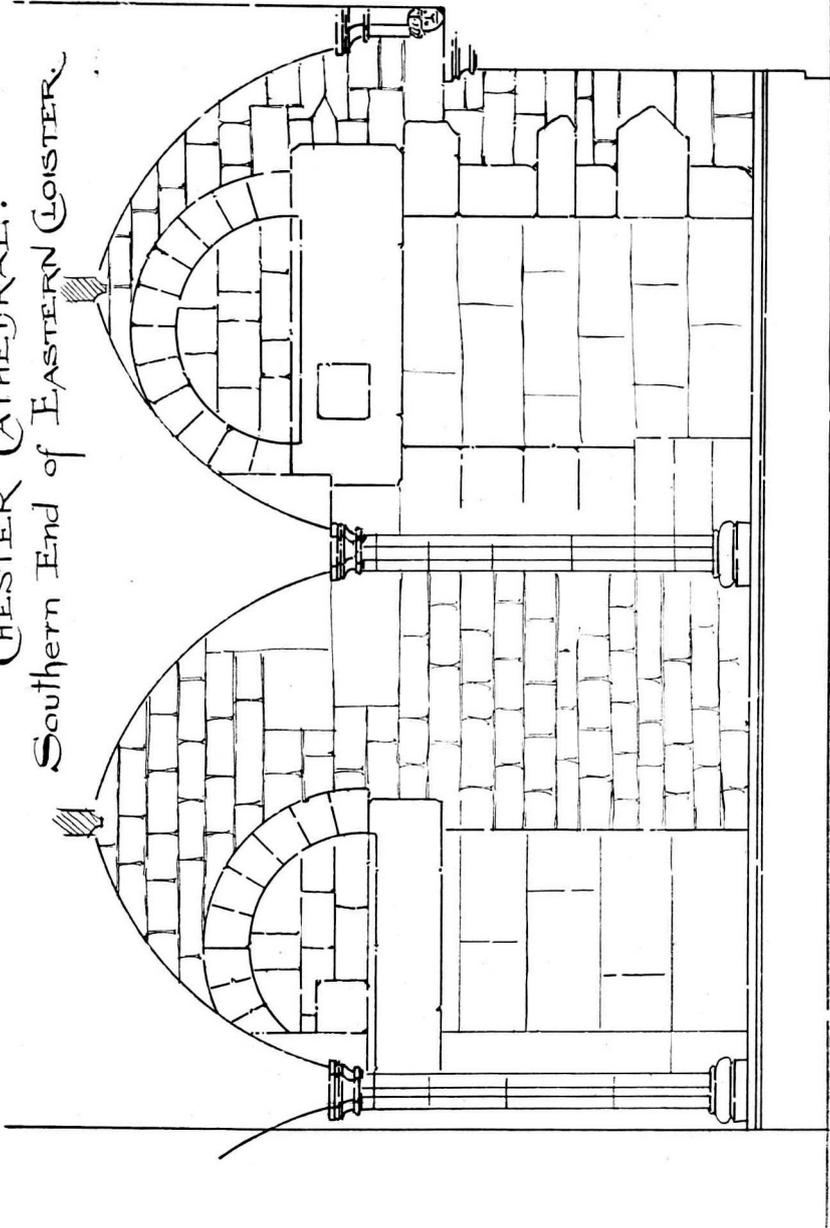
The narthex was the porch, probably entered by a single doorway in the centre. The inner wall had three doors; one opening into the nave and one to each aisle.

This is the earliest known example of a Christian edifice in this country, and now I want you particularly to follow this plan of the Silchester church, and transfer it to the north transept of our abbey church, into which it can be accommodated in a most remarkable manner.¹ In the southern portion of the eastern cloister, and looking east, *two* built-up arches of very early workmanship will be seen, with the characteristic heavy stone lintels of the Saxon period.² Of these two arches the one to the right is taller than the other, obviously suggesting that it was once the centre of a set of *three*. This taller arch (it is next the Norman

¹ See plate No. 1.

² See plate No. 2.

CHESTER CATHEDRAL.
Southern End of Eastern Cloister.



Geo. W. H. ...
1895.

Plate No. 2.

doorway leading to the nave) is central with the transept, and, curiously enough, is in a direct axial line with the chapel (now the Canons' Vestry), consequently agreeing with the apsidal ending of the miniature nave of the basilican church. The built-up opening on the left would correspond with a door leading to the north aisle, the east end of which I suggest may be traced by a "toothing"—where its wall joined and was bonded into the eastern termination—on the right of the doorway in the north-eastern angle of the transept. It does not of necessity follow that we had, in our church, an apsidal termination, as rectangular chancels were common. The *third* doorway—namely that on the right hand leading to the south aisle—disappears within the thickness of the north wall of the nave. The outer wall of the narthex, or porch, is probably beneath the cloister floor. The orientation of the Silchester church is to the west, as was sometimes the case, but it does not necessarily follow that our church was so arranged. The orientation of the basilica of S. Peter, at Rome, was reversed in the year 388. (Bond).

I am aware that I am propounding a very startling theory, but all our previous writers on this subject, whilst admitting the possibilities of a Saxon church hereabouts, leave us in the dark as to a *site*. Mr. W. Ayrton on April 1 and May 6, 1850, in the first volume of our transactions, says:—

“The records we have of the abbey of St. Werburgh previous to the Conquest testify to the existence of a very important building, of which, indeed, we might even now expect to find some traces, were it not that their absence is fully accounted for by the fact that the abbey had, in the beginning of the eleventh century, fallen into a state of great dilapidation, so much so, that in 1057, Leofric,

Earl of Chester, when he visited the city, made the necessary repairs at his own expense."

Now it does not necessarily follow that this "state of great dilapidation" previous to 1057, entirely destroyed all traces of the acknowledged earlier church. No doubt wood used in the timbering of the roofs and elsewhere would have disappeared either by length of service or neglect, or more likely, be destroyed by fire—accidental or otherwise—as we know the delight the Danes took in plundering and destroying the Christian churches. On the other hand there is every reason to believe that in any necessary repairs, due to dilapidations or extension, in those early days, the stonework in the walls, or at least in their lower portions, would not be destroyed but utilized, as we have learned from the instructions received from Pope Gregory.

Mr. Ayrton then goes on to say, in speaking of Hugh Lupus' church of 1093:—

"On the opposite, the west wall of the transept, are three plain blank arches precisely similar (i.e. to the triforium opposite on the east wall), which are probably the remains of a corresponding triforium, the front arcade of which has been removed in reducing the thickness of the wall for a subsequent design."

There are to my mind many reasonable objections to this theory of reducing the thickness of the western wall. Such treatment for a subsequent alteration would be most improbable, because we know that the Normans, as a rule, built thicker walls than the Saxons. Again, these plain recesses are quite different in feeling from the opposite (east) wall, being cruder in arch construction, and they do not show signs on their face of being cut away. This wall, it will be remembered, is the one containing the built-up openings previously referred to in the eastern cloister. Again, if the reduced thickness

suggested took place, one would expect to find a thicker wall below the present transept floor. During the year 1909, when the re-building of the organ was taking place, a trench had to be cut along the face of the north wall, when the writer found, about three feet below the pavement, a "single plinth" or "set-off"; the western end of this excavation did not reveal any signs of a thicker western wall.

May I suggest that the key to the whole solution will be found in studying the blocked-up arched openings in the east cloister? not primarily that they are of early construction—but from their arrangement, bearing in mind that if originally there were *three*, they were only required for entrances to a church built on a very early plan necessitating a separate doorway to the nave and one to each aisle. Once again, making a parallel with Silchester,

"... there seems to be little, if any, doubt that we have here a small church of the basilican style."—*Archæologia*, Vol. LIII.

An interesting description of this, the earliest form of Christian church, is given by Mr. John Ward in his *Romano-British Buildings and Earthworks* :—

"It was a small edifice, being only forty-two feet long and twenty-seven feet wide. As a width so narrow could have been easily spanned with a single roof, it may be reasonably inferred that the basilica was already the conventional form for a church. The pagan temples, although occasionally utilized for churches, were not adapted for the congregational worship of the Christians; the civil basilica, on the other hand, was designed for the concourse of people, and from long usage had come to be regarded as peculiarly the type for halls of assembly. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Christians should have eventually adopted the type for their own assemblies. The tribune became the chancel, a word derived

from the screen or *cancelli* which divided it from the hall. The prætor's chair was now occupied by the presiding priest; and the seats, on either side, by the lesser clergy. The heathen altar was replaced by the eucharistic table. The body of the hall was allotted to the choir and the different orders of the worshippers, the division into nave and aisles helpfully contributing to the groupings, and so coming to have a ritual significance. The church was entered through a space extending the full width of the building; this, in the west, usually took the form of a portico, forming at first the fourth side of an open court—the *atrium*—through which the main building was approached. When the *atrium* disappeared, the fourth side was retained, not only because it formed a suitable vestibule, but because it was the part to which certain grades of penitents were admitted. In the east, however, it was represented by a closed-in narthex, which was structurally within the main fabric. In the *atrium*, or somewhere in the open space in front of the building, was a large basin or fountain—the *cantharus*—where the people washed their hands before entering the church. . . . This little Silchester building is the only one in Britain that has been identified as a church of the Roman era. Some existing churches have been supposed to be of this era, as St. Martin's, Canterbury, and those of Reculver, Dover Castle and Lyminge; but all that can be said of them is that they are built of Roman materials. There is no evidence that they even occupy the sites of Romano-British churches. That the remains of only one undoubted church of this era should have been discovered is remarkable; but so little is known of Romano-British Christianity, that it is quite uncertain whether the basilica type was rigidly adhered to."

At whatever period this style of primitive church planning ceased in this country, it certainly leads us back many centuries prior to the Norman conquest.

"It was universal throughout the then Christian world, as we find in Asia Minor an early church which is identical in plan with the church at Silchester."—(Lethaby.)

It must suffice, however, for us to know that we have here an indisputable fragment of an extremely rare example of very early walling, interesting, not essentially as exhibiting any Roman influence in technique, but simply the fact that a *triple arrangement of entrances* to this small church *does* exist; a concrete example that will require a great amount of arguing away. These three doorways, in such a limited area, are absolutely unnecessary except for the purposes suggested. The planning is earlier than that of a Saxon church, although it is not inferred that the masonry is Roman. It was built by British hands, influenced by examples familiar, as we have already learned, to the early Christian world. Thus it may not be unreasonable to assign our church of SS. Peter and Paul to about the period immediately prior to, or immediately following, the abandonment of Britain by the Romans, at the commencement of the fifth century.

In surveying the whole of the foregoing suggestions, does not this most extraordinary similarity to the Silchester type of church point to the fact that we have found in our north transept the long lost church of SS. Peter and Paul?

In submitting these suggestions for your consideration I may be excused on the plea raised by Mr. Bond, in his introduction to *Gothic Architecture in England*:—

“Nothing is more interesting than the search for the hidden cause; nor should the investigator be deterred even if at times his discovery prove but a mare’s nest.”

The next step in our enquiries will bring us into close touch with our patron saint. The monk Bradshaw says:—

“Touching the foundation of a monastery in this place, there is not anything that I have seen from our historians,

or records, that may make a perfect discovery thereof, but by circumstances, I do conclude, that Wulphere, king of the Mercians, who flourished about the year 660, perceiving his daughter Werburga much disposed to religious life, caused her to be veiled, and first built it for her and such other pious ladies who resolved to dedicate their lives to the service of God therein; for William of Malmsbury, an ancient author, and of great credit, speaking of this devout virgin St. Werburgh, saith, that she was buried at Chester, in the monastery there, afterwards re-edified by earl Hugh."

It will be admitted that no great value can be placed on this account. St. Werburgh's life was spent elsewhere and we have no trace of her ever having lived in Chester. She was abbess of Ely, and her uncle, Ethelred, gave into her charge the convents he had founded for nuns at Hanbury and Trentham, in Staffordshire, and at Weedon, in Northamptonshire; and, generally, the superintendence of all the religious houses of Mercia. The year of her death is not accurately known—the late Sir G. G. Scott, in the paper previously referred to, gives A. D. 669—but it took place at Trentham, in Staffordshire, and

"on June 21, 708, in obedience to her own instructions, her body was enshrined at Hanbury."—*Pioneers of our Faith*, C. Platts.

After a lapse of about 175 years [A. D. 875] her remains were translated from Hanbury to Chester, and deposited in the church dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul. The reasons assigned for their removal are twofold: one, because of the depredations of the Danes, who were marching upon Repton; and the other, that greater honour might be done them. If the former, then our city must have been considered safe from "the heathen men"—a fact, however, not borne out by history. But

if for the second reason, we must be prepared for a building of more importance than either Hanbury or Trentham; and as we cannot lay claim to this, the first explanation would appear to be the more feasible. I think that had our church been enlarged for this purpose we should have evidence, and considering the unsettled times it is not likely that building of any importance would be carried on. My point is, that the church and its old dedication remained for about thirty-two years after the translation of the remains [875] until the year 907. In the year 900 King Alfred had died, and was succeeded by his son Edward who was now enjoying a space of peaceful rule for six years [903-10]. Edward's sister, Æthelflæda, the Lady of the Mercians, with her husband Æthelred of Mercia, re-built and re-peopled our city in the year 907, a year of the greatest importance to us, because it gave the King of England a harbour looking out on the sea over which the communication between Dublin and York took place. Edward was, it must be remembered, the possessor of the navy which Alfred had created, and in 910 had over one hundred vessels at sea.

To Cestrians it is especially interesting to read the following extract from *England before the Norman Conquest*, by Charles Oman, M.A. :—

“ It is to be noted that Æthelflæda is mentioned by the chroniclers for the first time when co-operating with her husband in the restoration of Chester; she had been married to him for twenty years, but only now begins to appear in formal history as his fellow worker. Charters of an earlier date, however, show that for many years she had been practically co-regent of her spouse the ealdorman of Mercia. Her importance came not only from the fact that she was a princess of royal blood, but from her energy and masculine spirit, which enabled her to take

Æthelred's place, not only in peace but in war, after his death. She was evidently as capable as her brother Edward—more so perhaps when we consider the disabilities of a woman in those troubled times.''

This period would doubtless be taken as a favourable and fitting opportunity to enlarge and beautify the small church of SS. Peter and Paul, containing the remains of St. Werburgh,—which, owing to the miracles attributed to her, had gained so much notice as to make it absolutely necessary for this step to be taken—and to dedicate the new buildings to her memory. Thus the church of SS. Peter and Paul would become the church of St. Werburgh, and, perhaps, in two years' time jointly known as the church of Saint Werburgh and Saint Oswald. Finally the older dedication would be transferred to the church which Æthelfæda had caused to be built at the High Cross; thus completing, before the Norman Conquest, an episode in an historical and ecclesiastical pageant that any city might be justly proud to claim.

We are now confronted with the task of accounting for the new dual dedication of our church. It was a somewhat strange combination—on the one hand a virgin saint with no claim of martyrdom for her faith; and on the other a warrior prince, soldier and missionary, king and martyr. But the year 907 has more surprises for us in our local history, as we have entered, generally, upon one of the most important periods in the life of our church; increased zeal, and the munificence of royal donors, were influencing and infusing enthusiasm in every direction.

Although repeating ancient history, it is necessary to our subject to give a brief account of the life of Oswald. Born about A. D. 605, he and his elder brother

Eanfrith as youths took shelter in the isle of Iona for about seventeen years. He reigned over Northumbria for nine years; defeated Cadwallon at Hefenfeld near Hexham, 634, and setting up a cross bade his army kneel in prayer. Then came his defeat by Penda and death at Oswestry on August 5, 642, when the victor ordered the victim's head and hands to be severed from the body and exposed upon wooden stakes. In the following year they were recovered by his brother Oswiu; the head being buried at Lindisfarne, and the hands enshrined at Bamburgh. Legends abound concerning the healing properties of the saintly remains, and about the year 672 his body was removed to Bardney in Lincolnshire. At Lindisfarne his head remained for something like two centuries, and in 875 the monks, being driven to the mainland by the Danes, deposited their precious relic at Ripon; whilst one of his hands was deposited at Peterborough [the splendid monastery of Medhampsted], thence taken to Ely, and the destination of the remaining hand is not accurately known. We find in the Saxon Chronicle, that in the year A. D. 909 his remains were translated from "Bardney into Mercia." The following reference may be of interest; it is from Mr. C. Platts' *The Pioneers of our Faith*:—

"From Bardney, in the year 909, all but three of the other bones that had not already gone abroad were put out of the reach of the vikings by removal to the monastery which Æthelred of Mercia and his lady Æthelflæda, Alfred's famous daughter, had built in Oswald's honour at Gloucester."

From local historic incidents ending with his death at Oswestry, only twenty-three miles from Chester, we may reasonably assume that at this period [907] was acquired for our new monastery, built by Æthelflæda, a

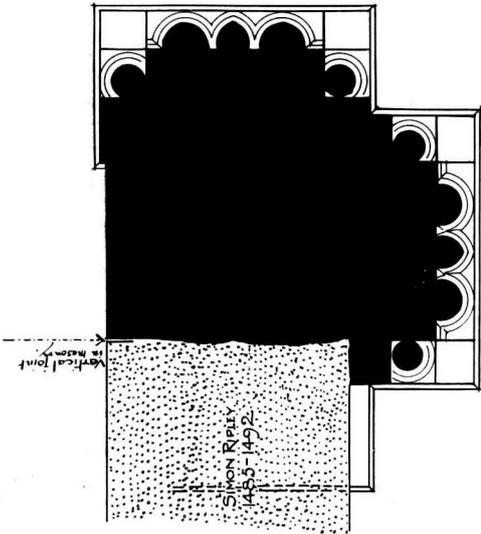
portion of his relics, which were so much sought after in other places, so as to enhance and glorify the new edifice. Among the places abroad where his remains had been taken, one is intimately brought to our mind in the terrible war now devastating Europe—I mean the town of Soissons, where, in the abbey of our Lady were shown as late as the eighteenth century, relics of St. Oswald.

ÆTHELFLÆDA'S CHURCH.

The occasion that gave rise to the translation of the church of SS. Peter and Paul to a central site in the city, indicates very clearly that extensive building operations were contemplated. The first church would stand upon ground sacred with associations of the saintly Werburgh, and possessing the shrine which held the precious remains; and this small spot was to be a nucleus around which an abbey of importance, and dedicated to her memory, was to spring.

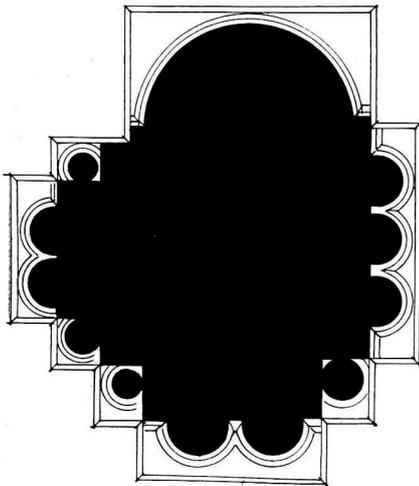
Sufficient attention has not, I suggest, been given to this church by previous writers in proportion to its importance. I submit the following evidence in endeavouring to trace the area covered by it, in the first instance, and then details connected with it.

The area covered is, I suggest, from the east wall of the north transept on the east, and the north-west tower, now the baptistery, on the west. The point to interest us in the east is in the chapel, now the Canons' Vestry. There will be seen, on the west side, a built-up arched opening about fourteen feet in width; and on either side, nearly level with the present wooden floor, are plain chamfered plinths, the upper surfaces of which will be found to be what are termed in masonry, "beds," or surfaces not so smoothly finished as those necessary for faced work, but intended to be built upon to the

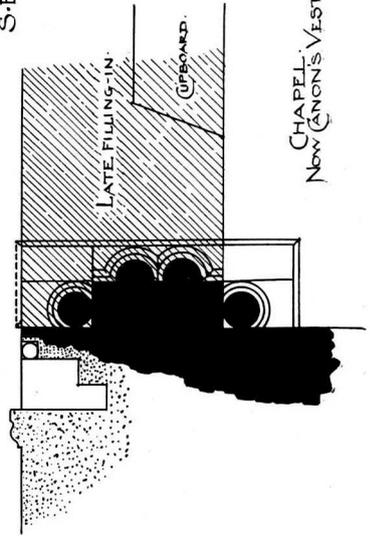


S.E. PIER IN BAPTISTERY
CHESTER CATHEDRAL.

W. Haswell
1878



SAINT JOHN'S CHURCH, [CHESTER]
S.W. PIER OF TOWER.



CHAPEL VESTRY
NOW CANONS VESTRY

extreme edges of the upper line of the chamfer. A simple plinth course, which would carry above it piers of plain rectangular masonry, is quite in harmony with the architecture of the tenth century.³

Proceeding to the north-west tower—now the baptistery—we find that the same remarks apply to the plinth courses here as to those just examined in the vestry, the only difference being that you have in this instance more massive masonry springing from them. As we wish to trace a Saxon church as far west as this point we must examine the planning of these plinths very carefully, since their massiveness and simplicity are suggestive of that period.⁴ On the south-east pier will be seen a respond, or half-pier, forming the western termination of an early arcading. In discussing pre-Conquest and Norman piers, Mr. Bond says:—

“We can hardly doubt that where aisles existed in the Anglo-Saxon churches, they were separated from the nave, not by a colonnade, but by a pier-arcade. The history of supports of our English churches begins with the pier, and not with the column.”

Thus we may have possessed a pre-Conquest church with pier-arcading. It will be noted that the whole width of this respond has not been utilized by Simon Ripley's building; as you will see, he was contented with a thinner wall. The plinths are on the same level as that in the abbot's passage. There are plinths on the west and north walls, but at slightly different levels. There are no indications of an early doorway on the west—the plinth would not be carried through if there were—neither are there any signs of a built-up opening on the exterior.

The abbot's passage, between the baptistery and the crypt, is assigned to the year *c.* A. D. 1120; on the south

³ See plate 3.

⁴ See plate 4.

wall, for a little more than half its length, there is a plinth and ashlar in shallow courses terminating in an external angle carried up to the ceiling. This plinth is, after careful levelling, found to be the same as the piers within the north-west tower, a strange coincidence. The angle suggests itself as being the north-east angle of a tower, thus becoming an external feature; we must bear in mind that there would be an open space here before the building of the passage, as proved by the window above in the abbot's chapel. In order to have a straight face along the whole length of this south wall, it became necessary to build up the recess from this angle, eastwards, for about ten feet. The plinth is not continued, and it does not appear in any other part of the passage. There is a distinct class of wall here, better ashlar and in deeper courses than that above the plinth on the western portion. As the abbot's passage has been dated *c.* A. D. 1120 it follows that this recessed filling-in must be contemporary with it. It naturally follows that as the plinth portion was there first, a date considerably earlier than *c.* A. D. 1120 must be claimed for it. Here we are guided by two factors: (1) the early class of ashlar, and (2) this ashlar cannot reasonably be assigned to the building *immediately* prior to 1120, that carried on by Anselm, as only twenty-seven years have elapsed from the date of the foundation by Hugh Lupus, and this includes the time occupied with building operations, which were slow in those days; this being so, we are led back once more to the time of Earl Leofric, who, simultaneously with his work of enlargement here, was also carrying on similar operations at the collegiate church of St. John the Baptist, outside the city walls.

CHESTER CATHEDRAL.

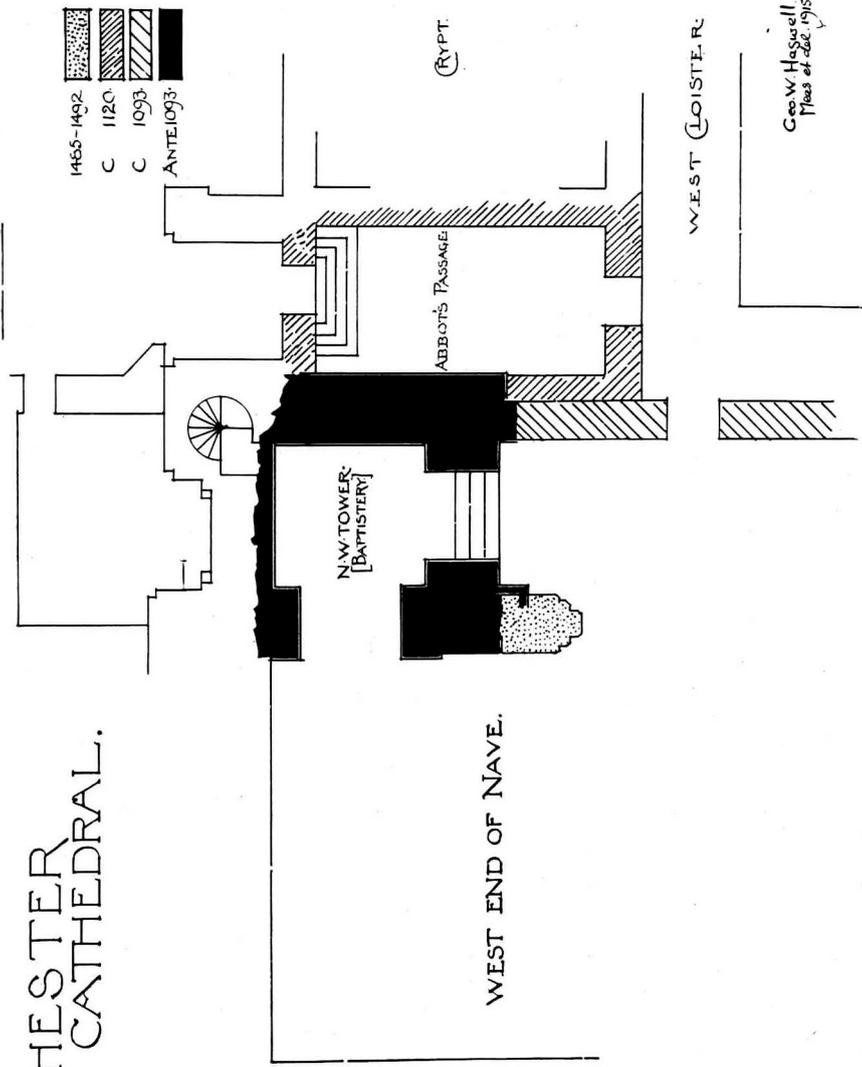


Plate No. 4.

Returning to the vestry, and examining the plain chamfered plinths previously alluded to, we find that they have been utilized for adding piers consisting of central solid semi-columns, with bases and cushion caps, and, on either sides angle shafts also with bases and cushion caps, and the opening arched by simple recessed orders, the jamb making a wall of equal thickness to one that would occupy the whole extent of plinth. This arrangement leaves a void at each external angle of the plinth owing to its outline not following that of the shafts and columns above, such as we should expect to find in Norman times. A similar arrangement will be seen in the north-west tower, but here you find a very striking difference in the feeling of the masonry generally, especially in the sub-divided cushion caps, commonly termed "scalloped," which are quite delicate in comparison with the heavy, primitive cushion, or "cubical" caps of the vestry. Now are these two examples the work of the same master-builder? To arrive at a decision we may, in using the description of the caps just given, reasonably assume that they are not. If the north-west tower is Hugh Lupus' [1093], then the arched opening in the vestry must be earlier, i.e., pre-Norman.

If we can satisfy ourselves that the plinths of the vestry and north-west tower are not Norman, then the subject narrows itself down to the question, who built them? The following points may assist us to decide:—

1. The piers of the built-up opening in the vestry are, apparently, earlier than the piers of the north-west tower.

2. The piers of the north-west tower are not earlier than 1093.

3. If the vestry piers are earlier, then Leofric must be responsible for them.

4. These plinths, in both instances, appear to have been utilized as a foundation for the work existing upon them.

5. Therefore it follows they were there before Leofric came upon the scene [1057], and consequently belong to a still earlier church, which would be the church of Æthelflæda, the time being A. D. 907 when she and her husband rebuilt this city, and the church need not necessarily ever have been *completed* so far west as the north-west tower, an incident common to those days. We find a proof of this statement in our neighbour, the church of St. John the Baptist, which was never completed on the plan originally intended.

“ It appears that when the second Norman bishop in 1095 removed the see to Coventry, and abandoned the plan of making this church the cathedral of the diocese of Chester, Lichfield and Coventry, the fabric of the church was left very incomplete; the funds on which its completion depended being removed, the monks of the priory of St. John were left in a very forlorn state, with a large church commenced, and little more than commenced. It is true that the work had been carried on for twenty years, but that was a short period according to the custom of the age, when a large church was commonly a century in the course of erection, and the re-building in a new style was often commenced before the original plan was completed—as was probably the case in the rival church of St. Werburgh.” (J. H. Parker.)

At the commencement of my paper I referred to the late Sir Gilbert Scott's remark that there were no remains of the Saxon buildings; but in the same address he went on to say:—

“ The previous church, if only a restoration of the older Saxon church, was probably of no great dimensions;

though, if it was actually re-built by Leofric, it would be contemporary with the Confessor's work at Westminster, and might therefore have been of large size. We have, too, a work remaining, partly built by Leofric, at Stow, in Lincolnshire, which might afford some suggestion as to the probable scale on which he would have been likely to build; but all such speculations are useless."

This is a statement of a very elastic nature, and may mean anything.

A statement somewhat upon the same lines, but more emphatic, was made by a competent authority in 1857 in reference to St. John's church, during the visit of the Archæological Institute to this city, when it was "decisively settled by Mr. Parker on that occasion, that an erroneous opinion prevails that a great part of what remains of the monastery of St. John is Saxon architecture."—(Rev. Francis Grosvenor.)

and again, at the same meeting,

"of the Saxon earl's reparations no traces now remain."

This I take to mean that there are no traces of a church earlier than bishop Peter's—a statement without substantial foundation. At the west end of the north aisle of this church will be seen a mass of masonry consisting of a plinth and a plain pier surmounted by an abacus; this plinth, pier and abacus can be distinctly traced on the exterior of the west wall of the nave, in which it is embedded. This masonry is probably one of the piers of an earlier arcade, such as we have suggested existed in the abbey church of St. Werburgh. The portion projecting on the west side of the nave wall is illustrated as "buttress and window at west end of nave,"⁵ an error which would account for the idea of the non-existence of an earlier church.

⁵ *The Medieval Architecture of Chester*, by John Henry Parker, F.S.A., p. 8.

It is quite obvious why this particular pier was not demolished with the rest: it served utilitarian purposes: it gave, at the time when funds ran out, a line for the west wall, so as to enclose the church: so by retaining the pier, which was older work and solid, it formed a convenient angle from which a return wall could be built between this point and the north-west tower; it would act in a two-fold capacity—resisting the thrust of the northern arcading, and also forming a porch and entrance to the church. Light was obtained through an internally splayed window, destroyed, in quite modern times, to make a new entrance leading to the west doorway under the large west window. The suggestion has been made that this pier is contemporary with the last Norman period to act as a temporary buttress, but it was not the way to build such a support; besides it is not in a central line with the arcade, and would be useless for resisting the thrust that would be placed upon it by the enormous weight of masonry pushing against it. The destruction of the corresponding pier, on the south, has caused settlements to take place in the western arch of the south arcade.

Why I am so anxious to bring this before you is that we have in our abbey church many things in common with St. John's. I wish we had a bit of masonry left similar to that at our neighbouring church; however, its absence does not, by any means, interfere with the theory of the existence, at one time, of a pier-arcade in our abbey church.

In conclusion it may be necessary to point out that in the examination of buildings known to have characteristics common to both Saxon and Norman architecture, it must be borne in mind that

“the word pre-Conquest must of course be taken to refer to style rather than to actual date; just as the earliest work at Westminster is Norman, though executed before 1066, so buildings that are essentially Saxon may have been actually reared after the accession of William.”—(Bond).

This overlapping causes naturally many pitfalls; it may account for the technique of the work already referred to in the Canons' Vestry above the plinths, *i.e.*, Saxon workmanship, of the third or last period, influenced by the new Norman design then setting in; therefore, there seem to be sufficient grounds upon which to suggest that here we have a portion of Leofric's church of *c.* 1057, perhaps a few years earlier, as he died in this year.

Then comes the question: have we any remaining evidences of an earlier church? To this I would suggest as an answer that as the rectangular plinths, upon which the work I have attributed to Leofric rests, point to re-usage, then they must belong to the church erected by Æthelflæda in A.D. 907.

Finally—reverting to the church dedicated to the SS. Peter and Paul. Are the grounds upon which I have based my suggestion as to a Romano-British primitive Christian edifice of the Fifth century, reasonable?

