

NOTES ON ST. EDMUND'S CHURCH, EDMUNDBYERS.

THE village of Edmundbyers, in the county of Durham, distant seven miles from Stanhope, five from Blanchland, and about twelve south-east from Hexham, lies on the side of a hill sloping gently to the south, at the foot of which runs the Burdonhope burn, a tributary of the river Derwent. The living is a rectory, of very ancient foundation, in the gift of the Dean and Chapter of Durham, the advowson and manor having been gradually acquired by that priory, in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. The church, dedicated to St. Edmund, is situated on the western outskirts of the village, surrounded by its own glebe, with its rectory house in close proximity. It is very small, consisting of a chancel 24 feet in length by 22 in width, and nave 42 feet by 25; and is very plain in its external appearance, possessing, nevertheless, some peculiarities of architectural feature. The chancel is lighted by four windows, an east window, one north and two south windows; of these last, one is placed low in the wall at the south-west angle, but is a modern insertion, occupying in part the position of an ancient Saxon doorway; the other, as well as the north window, is higher in the wall, measuring 4 feet in height by 6 inches in width, with semicircular head, and splay of 3 feet in width entirely internal; the glass being level with the external face of the wall, or at least recessed by only an inch chamfer on the edge of the window jambs. Close to this window, on its west side, stands another, the arches being separated only by the spandril, but which does not appear to have ever opened externally, presenting in fact only the internal splay; this corresponding exactly with the other in every particular. This had been at a very early period closed up with solid masonry, and was only discovered on the removal of the plaster which thickly coated the wall. In the south wall of the chancel, under the perfect window, still remains a plain round-headed piscina, with aumbry adjoining—these also formerly hidden by the plaster; and the ancient altar slab, with its five crosses, a noble stone 6 feet 3 inches long by 3 feet 3 inches wide, 8 inches thick, with deeply chamfered

lower edge, has hitherto lain in the pavement of the chancel, at the north-east corner. The ancient east window, as well as the ancient chancel arch, has disappeared.

The nave retains a semicircular-headed doorway, and the south wall is strengthened by five broad flat pilaster buttresses, running with uniform breadth and thickness from the base course to the corbel table beneath the eaves, where they disappear in the general surface of the wall. It is lighted by three semicircular headed windows on the south side, but these having been under the improving hands of modern restorers, their former character is matter of doubt. Probably, they were similar to the windows in the chancel; now they are made to assume a Norman character, with external face deeply recessed. There is also a window in the western gable, blank in the lower part, but with a pierced roundlet in the semicircular head. This also has been restored. The north wall of the nave is of very massive masonry, built with large square stones, in regular though rude courses, widely jointed, and bonded with powerful grouted mortar; and is undoubtedly the original Saxon fabric. The corbels of the water tables are carved with rude representations of the human face; and the eastern gable is surmounted with a plain cross within a circle, the cross being of the shape known as St. Cuthbert's cross. With the exception of the insertion of the Norman window, to the destruction of the Saxon doorway—a barbarity never sufficiently to be regretted—the interior of the chancel was not touched when the nave was partially restored, some twenty years ago. It was then that the windows of the nave were Normanized; and at the same time a Norman chancel arch was erected, or rather a triple arch plan, the centre arch having a smaller at each side. An original example of this arrangement exists in the small church of Elton, near Stockton on Tees; but the modern copy was here sadly out of keeping with the Saxon character of the existing remains, and the same remark applies to the Normanized windows of the nave. The dilapidated state of the chancel has now rendered necessary extensive repairs; in the course of which several curious circumstances have come to light.

Up to the period when the work of repair was commenced, two months ago, the thing that would most likely strike the eye of a stranger visiting the spot was, the extraordinary rise of the ground close to the walls, on the east and north sides of the chancel, being a mound of not less than $2\frac{1}{3}$ feet above the chamfered base course. It would be seen that this mound did not exist on the south side. The eastern wall bulged externally in a most dangerous manner; the south wall, also, at the east end, being a few inches out of the perpendicular,

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whilst all the walls were propped by short buttresses, two on each side of modern erection. The east and north walls appeared to be built of mortar, the bonding material being only clay, which poured from the joints in dust, wherever the external pointing was removed. The eastern window was manifestly modern, at least in its head, which consisted of two round arches cut in one stone, but, on examination, the mullion and jambs would appear to be of a remoter date. The small window in the south wall of the chancel would be at once recognized as in its original state, with internal splay and arch complete; the light four feet in height by six inches wide; the window opposite being of similar character, but with the arch of the splay replaced by a wooden lintel. The results of an examination were as follows:—

The southern wall was found to be very strong, built with the best lime of the district, mixed with pounded brick and charcoal, as well as sand, and thoroughly grouted through. This wall was manifestly in its original state, but leaned a little outwards. The east and north walls were cemented with clay mud, very few throughs being inserted, owing to the want of which the exterior and interior of the walls had parted in distinct leaves, with a wide hollow between. Built up into these walls were found the arch stones complete of the internal round splay of the north chancel window, noticed above as headed with a wooden lintel, the stones being so perfect, both in number and form, that they were immediately set up on the ground, forming an arch of three feet in diameter, corresponding exactly with the existing arches on the south side. There were found also, built up in the walls, four arch stones of precisely similar design, but giving a segment, by measurement, of twice the width, a round arch of six feet diameter—without doubt, a portion of the ancient Saxon window of the east end. There were found also two or three fragments of early English work, and portions of trefoil-headed window lights, of debased execution. The removal of the east and north walls was continued downwards, until a point was reached where the mud walls suddenly ceased, the masonry below, down to the foundation, being of precisely similar character to the south wall, a lime-grouted wall, strong and good. The point where the mud wall ceased was found to coincide exactly with the level of the mound outside, and at the point of junction appeared a layer of vegetable matter, turfy and fibrous. On this large stones had been laid, as for a foundation, and the mud walls hastily and insecurely run up. The mound outside was found to consist of stones and lime rubbish. The roof timbers were thoroughly good, though of antiquated construction, being of oak; the roof, of the grey slate of the district, hung in the usual



ancient style, with sheep-shank bones. These being the facts, as disclosed in the process of removal of the walls, I venture to deduce a few ideas as to the history of this church in past times.

Without doubt, this ecclesiastical establishment is of very ancient foundation. The name of the patron Saint, and the appellation of the village itself,¹ point to a Saxon origin, confirmed by the peculiar features of the original fabric still remaining in the church. Without question, the incursions of unquiet Scots, fierce Border wars, and the passing and repassing of hostile armies, would occasionally keep the rectors of the patrimony of St. Edmund on the tiptoe of unpleasant expectation; but its very obscurity, and its distance from the regular line of march, would preserve Edmundbyres from the fate of Hexham. And probably the chancel, however ancient, did not fall into entire ruin until the troublous times of the seventeenth century, of which Mickleton has preserved so striking a picture under Edmundbyres.² The destruction of the roof produced its certain result. Weather and neglect at last affected the very masonry. This the mound of rubbish against the east and north walls sufficiently testifies; the south wall, having the benefit of the sun, had remained drier, and better resisted the progress of decay. Thus the walls lay in a heap of ruin, which, as years passed by, became covered with a verdant shroud, burying the foundations of the ancient walls, but also conducing to their partial preservation. Nature was more careful of the holy spot than man! On the return of order, exile though his revenues be, the rector enters on the work of restoration. The stones, indeed, are at hand, lying in ruinous heaps; but lime is dear, won with trouble at a distance; and labour must be paid for, therefore labour must be saved. Hence the foundations were not cleared; but the wall appears to have been commenced from the undisturbed surface of the ruin, as evidenced by the layer of vegetable matter at the junction of the ancient and modern walls. On this very rough stones were laid for a foundation, the real foundation still existing below; and a wall three feet in thickness was hastily run up, the place of mortar being supplied by clay, with which, and small rubble stones, the inside of the wall was loosely packed. These walls were not very

¹ "Adam Bruntoft holds Edmundbires for his service in the forest, as is contained in the charter which he has thereof."—*Boldon Book*. He sold his land at "*Pethunes-hak*, nigh Edmundesbyres," reserving service.—3 *Surtees*, 363.

² Tunc postea, tempora usurpacionis, fuerunt predicatores seu dicentes, etiam sæpe in uno eodemque die predicantes contra ac contradicentes unus alteri in religione, Anabaptistæ, Independentes, Tremulatores, Millenarii, ac quorum principalis fuit Thomas Tillum, primus docens anabaptismata in hiis borialibus partibus, et Boyer qui hic aliquibus annis vixit Presbyterianus.

artistically built, hardly any throughs or bonding stones being used; the consequence of which, and the use of clay for mortar must have speedily become apparent, in the parting of the east wall, the outer surface of which at last projected in a most alarming manner. The original north window was re-erected, but the internal arch replaced by a wooden lintel, the arch stones having, probably, been incautiously overlooked by ignorant labourers, and built up in the walls before their loss was discovered. No attempt at all seems to have been made to restore the ancient east window, of which also four arch stones were found built up; but the window then inserted appears to have been an Elizabethan mullioned window, of two lights, having rude trefoil-heads under a square frame. This has been subsequently churchwardenized by the substitution of two round heads cut in one stone, of most ordinary execution. But, if the rector of that day found himself compelled to confine his expenses in the walls, he was wise enough to secure a good roof, the timber of all kinds, principals, ribs, and spars, even to the laths for slating, being of most excellent oak. This oak is said to have been cut in the neighbourhood; and in the woods between Edmundbyers and Muggleswick, may still be seen the stools of what must have been magnificent oak trees. The tie-beams, of which there are two, are not, I am told, of oak, but, as I am informed by a competent authority, of larch, grown in a mountainous district and slowly: whatever the wood, they are extremely hard and sound. No new roof timber at all has been required in the restoration of the church. The stone of which the original fabric is built, is not of quarried stone, but has been gained from the fell, where large masses of the same quality, a coarse grained freestone, lie scattered on the surface, or half buried. Of this—a fine stone for dressing, and of most durable quality—all the hewn stone in the building is composed, whilst many of the walling stones are of another description, also derived from the fell, but quite unsuitable for cutting, having been subjected to volcanic action, and thereby partially or wholly vitrified. These have been shaped rudely with the hammer, nearly square, and set in the face of the wall with wide joints. There is, in the immediate outskirts of the village, a quarry of most excellent fine-grained freestone, but this does not appear to have been used in the original building, and possibly was then unknown; whilst the fell stones lay about in great abundance.

The mortar used in the Saxon building is composed of lime of a quality much superior to the ordinary lime of the district known as the Stanhope lime, being derived from what is called the "fell top limestone," which occurs in small beds, and is found in places difficult of

access. This is little, if at all, inferior for building purposes, to the magnesian limestone, so abundant in other districts of the diocese. It is dark in colour, and has been burnt with wood, the charcoal being still incorporated with it, and, apparently, has had added to it, besides sand, a small quantity of pounded brick. In this last respect, I believe, it resembles the grouted mortar used in the Roman buildings of this country, and certainly possesses in a great degree its characteristic of extreme hardness, being often more difficult of fracture than the stone itself. The mortar in the rubbish heaps is of the same nature, but decayed. There are not here, as in some churches of the north, any tokens of destruction by fire, nor any thing to indicate the action of any agent but neglect. The removal of the rubbish heaps outside may yet yield some objects of interest; and I may remark, in conclusion, that what points of remote antiquity still attach to this little church, have now been religiously preserved; and it is only to be regretted that a similar regard was not paid to it on the occasion of previous repairs, when, amongst other acts, we have to lament the destruction, in the chancel, of the Saxon doorway. However, what does remain to us of the Christian architecture of our Saxon forefathers is the more to be cherished and revered.

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