

III.—NOTES ON THE RECENT DISCOVERIES AT KIRK- WHELPINGTON PARISH CHURCH.

By W. S. HICKS.

[Read on the 29th June, 1892.]

THIS church, dedicated to St. Bartholomew, consists of a nave, chancel, western tower, and south porch only. I give a plan of it, showing the indications of earlier forms which have lately been discovered.

The fabric, when I first saw it two years ago, was in a most dilapidated and unwholesome condition: its modern roof in holes, its timbers decayed, its floors, seats, and gallery soaked and green with damp. The chancel only was in a state of repair, though greatly reduced in size and disfigured in proportions by the rebuilding undertaken some time ago, by the lay rector.

The nave walls, roughly rebuilt of ancient stones, contain some portions of the lancet windows, but nothing of their ancient character, and nearly all the windows have plain square sashes.

The roof was an ordinary king-post construction of the early part of this century, containing a little of the old oak of a former roof, so cut up as to leave no trace of its earlier form.

The tower is buttressed with huge modern buttresses, partly enclosing and hiding the old ones, and it has been so altered in its upper stage as to be almost beyond recognition as a thirteenth century tower. The south porch is a modern structure made entirely of ancient stones.

The ground on both sides of the church had become banked up three or four feet above the present floor level, and this floor appears to be a foot or a foot and a half above the ancient one. There were some indications, in this high ground, of transept walls on both the north and south sides, and these indications were more or less of a puzzle.

Hodgson says of it, at vol. i., part 2, page 203:—'It has been a cross church, but its transepts have been removed.' On the other

hand, I am told by the vicar that the late Mr. Johnson expressed his opinion that it was not a transeptal church.

The excavations justify both of these contrary opinions in a curious and interesting way, reconciling them, as I shall presently show.

There being urgent need of repair, a plan was made for an alteration of the roof, and a contract was entered into with Messrs. R. Carse & Son of Amble. I am much indebted to Mr. J. T. Carse, who has had this work under his charge, and am glad of this opportunity of mentioning his intelligent interest, and the care with which all relics and traces have been observed, preserved, and pointed out, and handed over to me by him and his workmen.

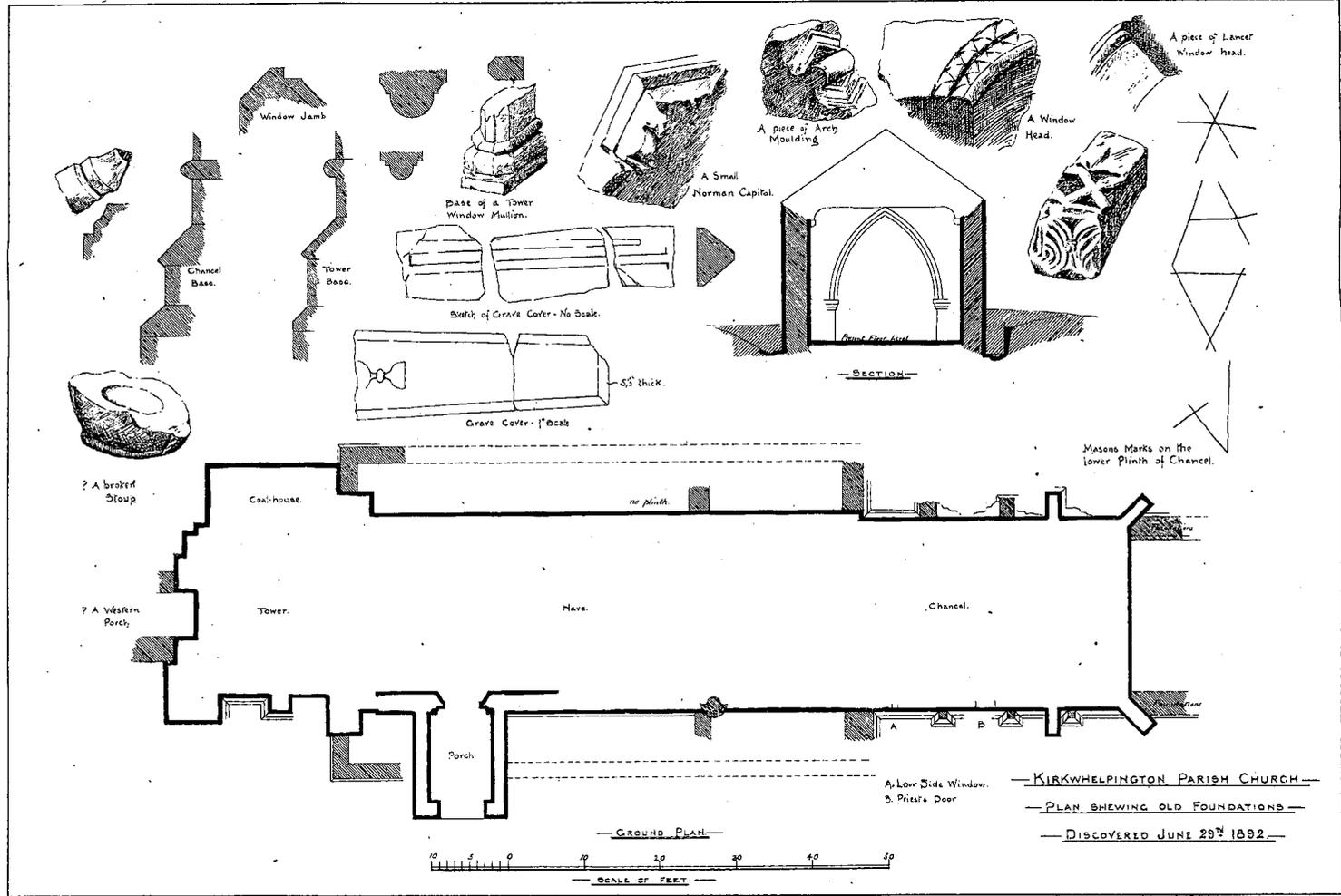
The first contract for roof and drainage was completed, and a sufficient sum of money was still available this year for a second contract, which is now being carried out by Mr. Carse. This consists of cutting away so much of the embankment of earth, and building *débris*, and other remains above mentioned, as will enable us to put in a good open trench all round the church below the present floor level, and at what is probably the ancient level of the floor.

This is intended to dry the building, and it is this excavation which has brought to light so many very interesting features, and has thrown so much fresh light on the original condition and the changeful history of this much altered fabric.

The excavated earth has been searched with the result that some pieces of thirteenth century glass have been found (if I am not mistaken) all calcined almost beyond recognition, and beyond the possibility of entire preservation. These fragments have been placed in the Museum at the Black Gate, having been presented by the Rev. C. W. Soden, the vicar.

I picked up a calcined bone; and the marks of fire on the stones also show that the building has been completely destroyed by fire once, if not more than once.

Two original grave covers have been found in fragments. I give drawings of them. One is of an ordinary kind, with cross and sword; it has been preserved by being worked into a triangular coping, and turned upside down. The other is a very interesting and uncommon stone with a chalice incised on it, and nothing else whatever.





Hodgson also mentions, at page 104 of the volume already quoted, a tombstone found in some excavations ordered by Archdeacon Thorp, 'with a figure in the middle of it, and an inscription round the margin which nobody could read.' It had disappeared for ten years when Hodgson wrote. It has not yet reappeared.

The laying bare of the plinths and buttress foundations of the old walls is the most interesting of all the work that has been done, and it is much to be wished that a further excavation could be made beyond that which is required for the trenching of the church, so as to show the extent of the ancient aisles and transepts.

The plinths now uncovered show round the chancel, and at the east ends of the aisles or transepts, a handsome double plinth with a string-course above it. This chancel had small buttresses about twelve inches by twelve inches, at intervals of about nine feet; also a low side window and a priest's door on the south side. The plinths followed the slope of the ground, declining towards the east about *one in sixty*, or two and a quarter inches in eleven feet six inches.

These plinths and string returned round all the buttresses, and at the east wall of the aisles, as above mentioned. The original masons' marks are quite clear on these plinths, showing that they were buried, and their surfaces thus protected from decay, at an early period in their history. All the tool marks are quite distinct. I give drawings of this chancel base, and of the masons' marks.

The tower had also a base of the same character, slightly differing in dimensions. This seems to show that one was copied from the other, rather than all worked from the same patterns at the same time.

The west walls of the transepts show no signs of any plinths whatever; and this is to be noted as additional and conclusive evidence that the transepts are not the original form, for if they had been, they would naturally have had their plinths on their western as well as their eastern walls.

The plinth of the present nave is like the lower plinth of the chancel, but a little smaller and of later chiselling, having the appearance of a reduced and re-used plinth, taken from the aisle walls when the present nave walls were built on the site of the ancient nave arcade when the aisles were destroyed. The foundations of both aisles show this plinth at their west ends. There is a break of five

inches in the thickness of the south wall at the west end, the present wall of the nave being two and a half feet thicker, outside and inside, than the respond wall against which it is built.

This thick nave wall contains the old aisle door, rudely rebuilt. This is the entrance doorway described by Hodgson as 'decorated with two shafts, mouldings, and a drip stone.' There is a north door, with a square head opposite, now walled up.

The foundations of the chancel walls extend further eastward than the modern east end; how far east I have not yet been able to discover. They appear to have been removed in order to make a path. There are also foundations of a western porch to the tower.

A portion of an aisle pillar with its base, apparently almost *in situ*, exists at the western corner of the south transept; but nothing is found to correspond with this on the north side.

There are several other fragments of mouldings—all indicating a fine and characteristic Northumbrian church—of the beginning of the thirteenth century. The summary of its history appears to me to be as follows, approximately:—

Omitting the original Norman church, of which a few fragments remain, but nothing to indicate a plan, we find the usual Early English church, with a long chancel, a nave with narrow aisles six feet six inches wide internally, and a western tower, bearing out Mr. Johnson's opinion that it was not originally a transeptal church.

Secondly, we have a general destruction, probably by fire, and a rebuilding of the chancel, with larger buttresses, on the north side; also a rebuilding of the nave (possibly about the same time), without aisles, but with transepts, bearing out Hodgson's record; a south porch, a great buttressing of the tower, and a destruction of the western porch. Part of this was probably at the end of the fifteenth or beginning of the sixteenth century, and part much later. The filling in of the fine pointed tower arch with its zigzag mouldings, the apex of which is still visible, and the huge character of the tower buttressing, all go to show that the tower was in a dangerous, if not ruinous, condition.

Lastly, the still more modern disturbances, involving the destruction of the north chancel buttresses and of the transepts, as men-

tioned by Hodgson; a rebuilding of the east end of the chancel, considerably short of the east wall foundations; also, a partial destruction of the nave and rebuilding of the upper part of the nave walls; and the construction of the new roof.

I do not know how many of these last alterations may have been undertaken at the same time, when the leaden roof was taken off in 1805 and replaced by one of Westmorland slates, according to Hodgson, above quoted, page 203. This is the roof I found two years ago, and which I altered and repaired under the instructions of a committee of the Restoration fund, consisting of the bishop, the archdeacon, and the rural dean.