

II.—PRE-CONQUEST DISCOVERIES AT GREATHAM CHURCH.

By the Rev. EDGAR BODDINGTON, vicar of Greatham.

[Read on the 28th August, 1912.]

I have been asked to read to the society some account of the recent discoveries in connexion with the ancient parish church of Greatham. To this request I very gladly respond, for while the discoveries are not in themselves numerous, they are at least above suspicion; they have the merit of variety, and they supply one more definite link in the chain of evidence already accumulated both of pre-Norman and of early Norman work in this southern area of the county of Durham. They tend also further to establish the extent of Christian civilization in Saxon times in that district. They afford one or two more specimens of early work, by which the task of 'reading history writ in stone' during that epoch may be further elucidated.

When I first became custodian of its church in 1907, no assured or definite claim, as far as I had heard, had been made that Greatham could aspire to a place amongst the shrines of early Saxon Christianity. It was situated, it is true, within that circle which has drawn the archaeologist from all parts of the kingdom. It is separated by only a few miles from those well-known sister Saxon foundations of Billingham and Norton on the south, and by a still shorter distance from Hart and Hartlepool on the north; but it boasted no credentials, it laid claim to no accredited remains earlier than the twelfth century. Bede never speaks of Greatham: the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle also is silent in regard to it. It has no place in the Boldon Book of 1183. In bishop Hatfield's survey of the fourteenth century it is only found appended in two or three instances to a christian name.

The late Mr. J. R. Boyle, who very accurately describes its church in his *Guide to Durham*, gives no hint of any work earlier than the reign of Henry I.

The ancient portions of its existing church are by no means without interest. Three piers and four arches of its nave are excellent specimens of transitional Norman, and suggestive in two of its southern arches with their chevron pattern of bishop Pudsey's work in the Galilee at Durham, though in the case of Greatham the arches are pointed, and possibly of a slightly later date. Most unfortunately the whole construction of the nave and chancel has been very much confused by one of those fatal 'Victorian restorations' of the last century (1855). In that year a further abortive Norman pier and arch were added to the nave at the expense of its ancient chancel, and a very interesting elliptical Norman arch, leading from nave to chancel, was pulled down to make room for a very feeble specimen of Early English, built four paces eastward from its original position. Only those who visit the church can realize what a disastrous confusion this 'restoration' has caused to its internal arrangements. A still earlier restoration in 1792—most of the funds for which were raised by the sale of the lead from its then existing roof—obliterated its Norman walls to within a few feet of their foundations.

However, over these later details I must not linger to-night. I come back at once to my main purpose—the pre-Norman and early Norman remains recently discovered. The first evidence of possible Saxon work that arrested my attention on a first examination of the church were two curiously rude baluster shafts. These supported the very interesting pre-Reformation Frosterley marble altar-slab still *in situ*, and *pace* Edwardian canons and injunctions—I am thankful to say—still *in usu*. At that time, together with the altar slab, these baluster shafts were covered by an altar-frontal, and were not likely to be noted. They are now

open, and exposed to view.¹ They correspond in a remarkable degree to some specimens illustrated for us by professor Baldwin Browne's able book on *The Arts in Early England*. However, I had no knowledge that any notice had been taken of them, and when the Durham Archaeological Society visited Greatham in 1908, I got little encouragement for the theory of their Saxon origin, and I felt a certain sense of discouragement. It came, however, subsequently, to my knowledge that so competent an archaeologist as bishop Westcott, who 'visited' Greatham in 1895, considered them to be of Saxon origin. I have since found in some admirable notes on Greatham church, published by your society^{1a} by the Rev. G. W. Reynolds, vicar of Elwick Hall, that the same suggestion was made. I determined at the time to leave no stone unturned to arrive at a just conclusion in regard to their date and origin. Were they balusters of the eighteenth century devised by some local mason to support the ancient altar slab at the 1792 restoration, or had they an earlier and more interesting origin? There could be no doubt, of course, if they *were* Saxon, they could have no connexion with their present position or their present use. But supposing they were of Saxon origin, then either Greatham church was the site of an earlier Saxon foundation, or, failing this, after the example of the cathedral church of Durham, in the case of the bones of the Venerable Bede, Greatham had filched away some Saxon remains from the neighbouring shrines of Norton, Billingham, or Hart. A theory not at all likely considering how small regard there was for such antiquities in the eighteenth century.

An opportunity offered for the elucidation of the problem almost immediately. In 1908 we demolished the very meagre western tower of 1792, and rebuilt, from the designs of the late Mr. Hodgson Fowler of Durham, our present tower, which I

¹ See fig. 7, p. 21.

^{1a} *Proceedings*, 2nd series, vol. ix, 1890, p. 276.

venture to say in proportion and style is a very harmonious addition to the present structure. Strict orders were given that both in pulling down its masonry, and in digging the new foundations, any carved stones that might be found were to be preserved. Though we waited in patience—almost with a feeling of disappointed hope—during the early stages, the lower tiers and the final digging of the foundations afforded ample confirmation of our anticipations. We eventually lighted upon fragments of no less than three early crosses, the remains of a rude and early piscina, and two portions of early cross shafts, or of tomb slabs.

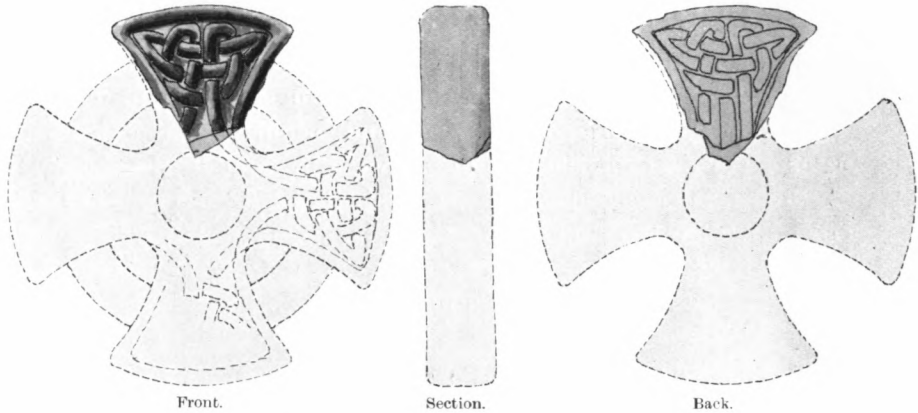


FIG. 1. FRAGMENT OF CROSS-HEAD. (SCALE $\frac{1}{2}$)

Before considering the claim of the balusters supporting the altar, I will deal with these recently discovered stones, as the problem which the baluster shafts suggest can best be answered in the light of these more recent discoveries.

ANCIENT STONES RECOVERED FROM THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY MASONRY.

The existence of these stones bedded in the eighteenth century masonry constitutes a very significant fact. They must have been

bedded in the outer walls of the Norman church of 1180-1190, which were demolished in 1792 and the stones of which were used for building the tower at that date. Again, when the church of 1180-1190 was built, they must have been existing fragments of an earlier church of pre-Norman origin, and thus have been used a second time in that building, and a third time in building the eighteenth century tower. The demolition of the eighteenth century tower yielded three such fragments.

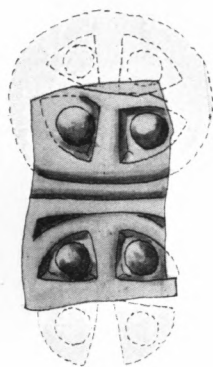
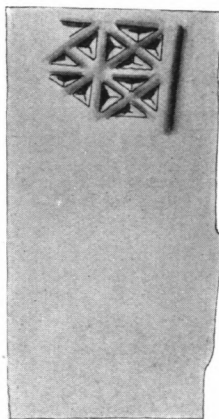
FIG. 2. (SCALE $\frac{1}{2}$)

FIG. 3.

(1) One member of a Saxon cross-head. It is of small dimensions, both faces are carved with lacertine (or Saxon interlacing) pattern. The outer edge of this member is simply rounded and has no carving on it: both internal surfaces show clear indications of a stone circle that connected the four members into a Greek-shaped or Maltese cross (fig. 1). Professor Baldwin Browne, who has carefully examined photographs of it, pronounces it 'undoubted Saxon work.' Though possibly not of the earliest years, it should be dated earlier than 901, at which date the monastery of Heruteu [Hartlepool] was burned

by the Danish army. The drawing gives a suggested restoration based on the Gosforth cross to which this surviving member presents similarity in size and decoration. The date of the Gosforth cross is probably much earlier² [*circa* 680 A.D.].

(2) A fragment of a cross shaft (or tomb slab) with characteristic early Norman carving (fig. 2). Professor Baldwin Browne considers this 'early work,' and it is certainly much earlier than the work on the cross shaft subsequently described (fig. 3). A further fragment of a cross shaft (or tomb slab), the surface of which has been unfortunately considerably chiselled at a later date so as to leave but shallow indications of its carving. What remains is the star pattern, which marks it as about the time of

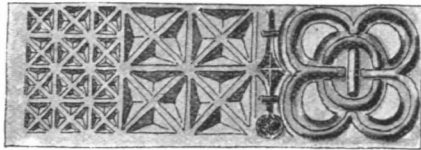


FIG. 4. (d)

1860, the carving of which is in very perfect preservation, and is shown in fig. 4.

Henry I [1100-1135] (fig. 3).

It is very interesting that this fragment (fig. 3) should have been found, as it is almost certainly a part of a cross shaft built into the north wall of the church in

ANCIENT STONES DUG UP FROM BENEATH THE FOUNDATION OF THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY TOWER, AND BENEATH THE WEST WALL OF
THE PRESENT CHURCH.

(1) Actually beneath the foundations of the west wall contiguous to the tower, a very perfect specimen of an early Norman cross-head was unearthed. It was not built into the Norman foundation but actually beneath it, and amongst stones calcined by fire, and considerable pieces of molten lead [were these remains of the Danish harrying of 901?]. It is similarly carved on both

² See *The Ancient Crosses of Gosforth, Cumberland*, C. A. Parker, 1896, p. 63.

faces. In shape it is a Maltese or Greek cross and has a continuous circular stone band level with its two faces. In the centre on each side is a boldly carved sunflower pattern with thirteen petals [is this symbolic?]. There is on this circle a round of nail-head pattern on either side (see fig. 5). Three members of this cross-head remain very perfect, and one is evidently its lowest member, being larger in its projection. This cross-head, I think, all will recognise as a very interesting and excellent piece of

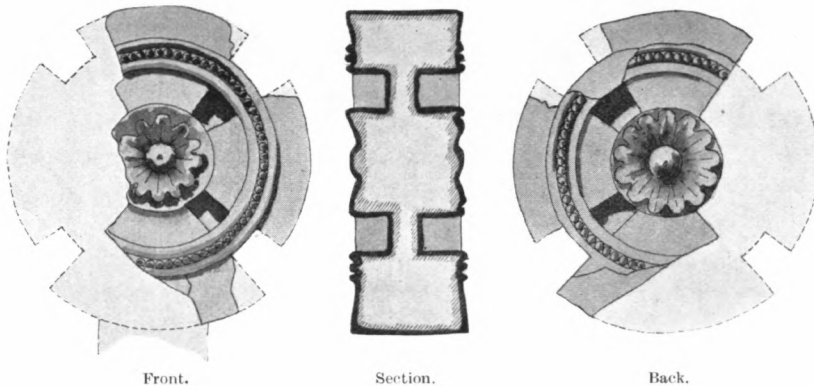


FIG. 5. NORMAN CROSS-HEAD. (SCALE $\frac{1}{4}$)

Norman carving, and of a fairly early date. I should feel inclined to place it very considerably earlier than the reign of Henry I, probably not later than early eleventh century.

(2) The central portion—a mere fragment—of another and ruder cross, which I believe may be claimed as Saxon work (fig. 6).³ By comparing this fragment with the cross illustrated we can gain some idea of its character. It has a circular central carving, and two edges which mark the line of the divergence of

³ *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 1903, vol. XXI, p. 45.

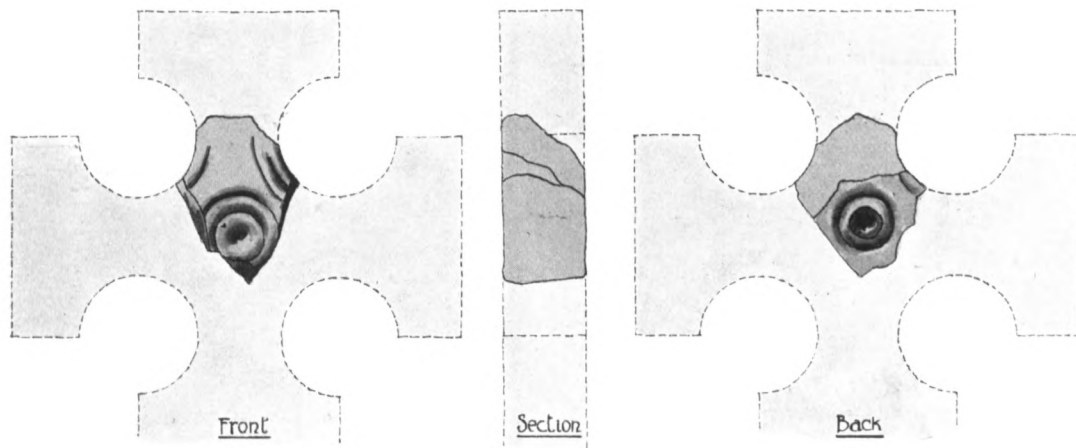


FIG. 6. FRAGMENT OF SAXON CROSS, GREATHAM. (SCALE $\frac{1}{8}$)

two of the members of the cross-head. These I have outlined so as to indicate its probable character (see fig. 6) as copied from the illustration referred to above.

(3) The fragments of a very rude early piscina. This is probably quite early Norman work, as I believe no Saxon piscina has ever yet been discovered. We have the main stone showing the internal round of the piscina basin with its rude drain,

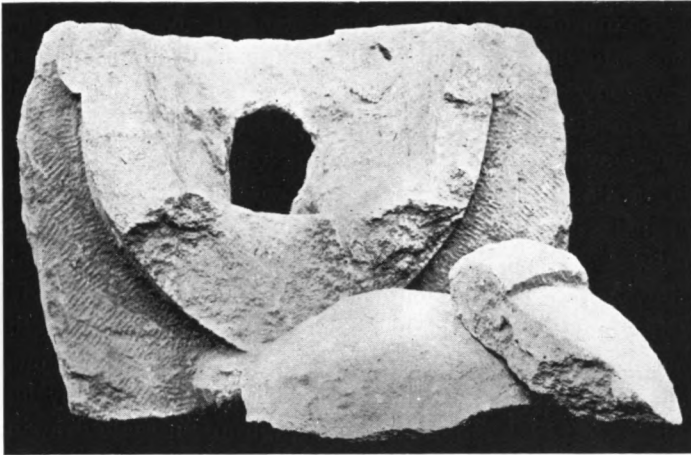


FIG. 6a. EARLY PISCINA WITH DRAIN HOLE, ORIGINALLY SCULPTURED OUT OF ONE STONE. FRAGMENTS OF LIP AND BOWL BELOW.

and the moulding of its lip; also one fragment of the lip itself, corresponding to the moulding on the main stone, and further, one or two fragments of its circular bowl, broken off (fig. 6a). Evidently the whole piscina was carved out of one piece of stone.

These are all the early remains that the demolition of the tower, and the digging of the foundation yielded. But they are very significant in their bearing on the baluster shafts, already referred to, as supporting the twelfth century altar slab. They

are types no doubt of other Saxon and early Norman stones that exist in what remains of the outer Norman walls. [I am informed by the sexton, that in the church yard, now closed to burial, he was continually in years gone by digging up stones, and in some cases old foundations, but the stones were always re-interred, and no note made of the place or character of such foundations.]

Isolated, and without further evidence, doubt might exist as to the Saxon origin of the balusters, or at any rate as to their belonging to the actual site of Greatham church. With these later evidences, discovered on the spot, ranging from the ninth century to the eleventh or early twelfth century we have confirmatory evidence of the strongest kind that we are on the site of a Saxon foundation. I have submitted photographs of the balusters to professor Baldwin Browne, and he having carefully examined them, writes: 'I have little doubt that the baluster shafts are of Saxon origin. If they stood alone without early fragments there would be no reason to deny their Saxon character, for they might well be remains of a pre-Conquest church. They are late rather than early Saxon, as they have a *base and a cap*.' I submit a photograph and a scale drawing of these balusters (fig. 7). They are rude and irregular in size. They bear indications of being turned in the lathe.

The final conclusion of the paper I have ventured to submit on these early remains is that in combination they bear conclusive testimony to there having been at Greatham on the site of the present church an earlier Saxon church, and that if this church shared the fate of Heruteu [Hartlepool] about 901, when it was destroyed by the Danes, there must have been also a second church (Norman) before the present twelfth century church was built. This conclusion I venture to draw on the following grounds. From our knowledge of their use, the baluster shafts can only have served one purpose. They have been dividing shafts in a

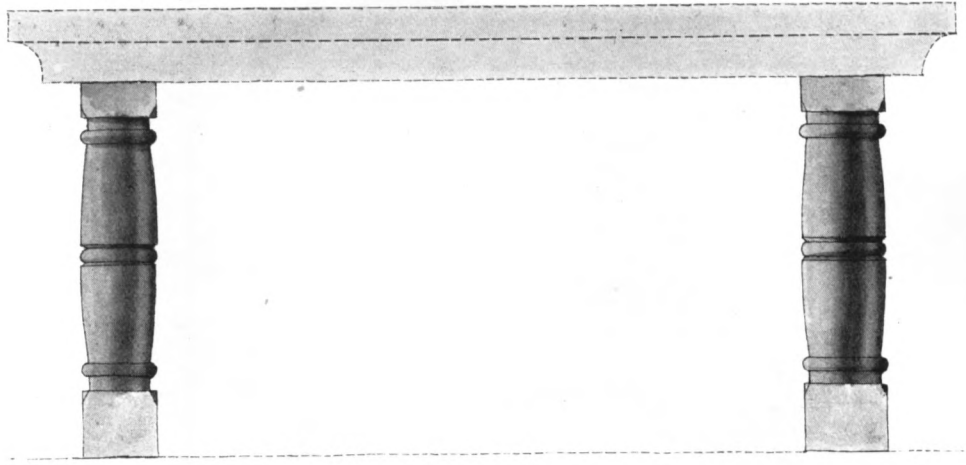


FIG. 7. BALUSTER SHAFTS SUPPORTING ALTAR SLAB, GREATHAM.

window in a Saxon church or tower. They bear a very close family resemblance to the baluster shafts figured in the illustrations and described in the work of professor Baldwin Browne, *The Arts in Early England*; to the balusters in Barton on Humber church (page 91), and at Earl's Barton (page 199), and at Brixworth (page 198). He believes the baluster shafts now ranged in the walls of Monkwearmouth and Jarrow churches, older in date, originally served this purpose. If the only remains dug up had been cross-heads and cross shafts, it might have been enough to say that Greatham was the site of a Saxon

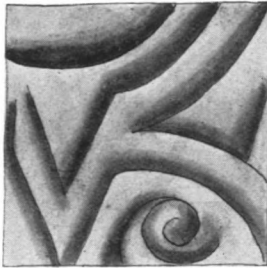


FIG. 8.

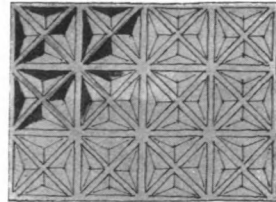


FIG. 9

burying ground, and of Christian worship in Saxon times, but with these balusters we have evidence of an actual Saxon church.

If this church suffered destruction when Heruteu [Hartlepool] was destroyed, then a subsequent church must have been built before the building of the present structure of about 1180-90. For the piscina recently discovered, and the other early Norman remains all point to an actual stone building considerably older than bishop Pudsey and Henry 1's time, and bearing also clear evidences of a building later than Saxon times. The most natural conclusion, however, would seem to be that Greatham had its Saxon church before 900, that it continued after the Danish raid to be used for Christian worship, that,

like Norton and Billingham, it underwent its Norman alterations and additions between 1060 to 1100, but unlike these churches, it was totally dismantled and rebuilt in the days of bishop Pudsey, 1180-1190, while they still retained no inconsiderable portion of their early Saxon building.

Figures 8, 9, and 11 (p. xxxvii), are other ancient stones embedded in the walls of the church, preserved by the Rev. Canon Tristram, D.D., at the restoration of 1860.

NOTE.—Since reading the above paper two further discoveries tend to confirm its conclusions. (1) In some local notes printed in 1881, I have discovered a quotation from Mr. W. D. Ramsay's 'Gleanings from Local History,' published in the *South Durham Herald* [the date of these 'Gleanings' is not given, but the newspaper in question ceased to exist 30 years ago, when it was taken over by *The Northern Daily Mail*], Mr. W. D. Ramsay there states that at the time of the restoration of 1860, 'during the progress of the work, some interesting antiquarian discoveries were made. The foundations of a smaller, *probably of a Saxon, or Norman Church were found inside its present shell, and the substructure of the old Chancel arch could be clearly traced.*' Here is a forgotten fragment of contemporary history, exactly confirming the conclusions of this paper. To-day no doubt those foundations remain buried beneath the flooring of the present church. The quotation goes on to say, 'It was seen that the walls [of bishop Pudsey's church, 1180-90] had once been covered with fresco paintings, but they were far too mutilated to be renewed or preserved. The corbels of the old side aisles were shown, and *many carved stones and fragments were found amongst the débris.* Some of these were richly sculptured with the network and reticulated carving of the Norman period.' He further notes how in the earlier restoration of 1792, 'the rubbish was left to a height of three feet inside the church, burying

the bases of the columns, and upon this the flooring was placed.' That bed of rubbish would have been an interesting antiquarian hunting ground.

(2) Another carved stone of interest has been recovered from the remains of the tower of 1792.

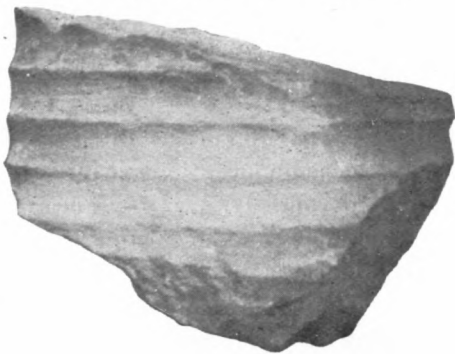


FIG. 10.—FRAGMENT OF (POSSIBLE) SAXON BALUSTER REFERRED TO IN NOTE.

Its significance at the time escaped my notice. It, however, looks extremely like a fragment of a further Saxon baluster—of an earlier and different order from those supporting the altar. As it has been split at some time in two, only the half circle of it remains. This fragment is six inches in height; its diameter is nine inches; its full circumference had been originally thirty inches. Its external sculpture consists of regular grooves one and a quarter inches wide, passing at equal intervals round its circle. They certainly suggest the working of the lathe. Its upper end in the centre has the marks of a dowel hole very clearly defined. Of the date of this fragment I do not venture to write with any sense of certainty, but our editor, who has inspected it, concurs with me in thinking that it looks like the remains of a Saxon baluster. I give a picture of it above (fig. 10).

To Mr. T. W. T. Richardson, architect, of Stockton-on-Tees, I am much indebted, and also to his assistant, Mr. Turnbull, for their great care and skill in making the accompanying drawings, entailing several visits to Greatham and many hours of work; to Mr. Edward Brydon of Greatham, also, for photography.