

XII.—SIMONDBURN CHURCH, NORTHUMBERLAND.

BY C. C. HODGES.

[Read on 29th April, 1925.]

The first visit to such a delightful rural retreat as the village of Simondburn, is one to be remembered. The writer has not forgotten the first time that he saw it. It was on one of the few really fine days in the summer of 1879; the coldest and wettest within memory at that time. This was before the charm of the place had been marred by the fall of several of the great trees, which over-shadowed it, during the destructive gale of 14th October, 1881; and the erection of some modern houses on the north side of the green. The scene resembled in its leafiness many of George Morland's pictures, or Thomas Bewick's life-like rendering of the rural simplicity of much of Northumberland in his time.

Attractive as the place is to the lover of beauty, and the naturalist, it is none the less so to the historian and the antiquary. The church is the chief object of interest to the latter, and its architectural history forms the subject of this brief paper. The general and parochial history of the parish has yet to be dealt with. Hodgson did not reach it, and the new *History of Northumberland* has still to undertake it. The writer therefore only attempts to elucidate the life story of the unusually complete and interesting church.

The early christian missions of St. Paulinus and St. Aidan, which had such a decisive effect in the conversion of the Northumbrians, doubtless included Simondburn and its locality. At a remote period it became the mother church of the whole of North Tynedale, as Haltwhistle did that of South Tynedale. In each case the parishes are of enormous extent, and among the largest in the country. Leland says: "In Northe Tynedale is but one Paroche

Churche cawlyd Simonsburne. In it is *Aliquot Sacella*. Sens I hard that Simonsburne is in Sowthe Tyndale, and that in North Tindale is onely Belingham chaple longinge to Simonsburne."¹

The original dedication of Simondburn is not known, but from time immemorial it has been under the invocation of St. Mungo, a Scottish saint,^{1a} and there is a St. Mungo's well within 500 yards of the church. John Wallis, who was curate of Simondburn when he wrote his *History of Northumberland*, in describing the rare plants which grow in and near the village, says: "on the bank under the hedge below St. Mungo's well at Hall Barns opposite the church of Simondburn, close to the brook."²

There is a very remarkable architectural parallel between the two mother churches. Both were rebuilt before the middle of the thirteenth century, and each consists of a nave and chancel only, and a modern porch. The plans have remained without alteration or extension, and in neither case has there ever been a tower. In each the western gable is surmounted by a bell cot. The early church of Haltwhistle is wholly gone, and not one stone of pre-Conquest date is to be seen on the site. Simondburn has been more fortunate. The remains of the church which preceded the present edifice, are of the highest value and interest, and give a clue to the architectural status, as well as the form of the building.

The church underwent restoration in 1876, and the work was in the hands of the late R. I. Johnson of Newcastle. In taking down the chancel arch "the stone work above it fell in, and among the stones thus released, were found the remarkable fragments of a Saxon cross, and other ancient carved stones, which are preserved in the porch."³ The stones of pre-Conquest date are six in number. Three of these are portions of the carved impost, or capitals of the chancel arch of the early church, and show the form

¹ Itinerary, Northumberland, fol. 74.

^{1a} The early church of Irthington, Cumberland, is dedicated to St. Mungo. (MacLauchlan, Survey of the Roman Wall, p. 69).

² Vol. i, pp. 151 ff.

³ *Arch. Ael.*, 2nd Ser., vol. xiii, p. 253.

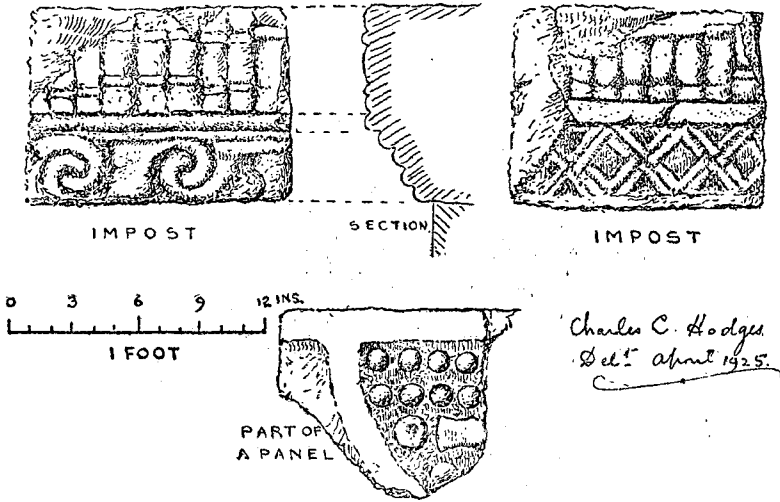


FIG. 21.

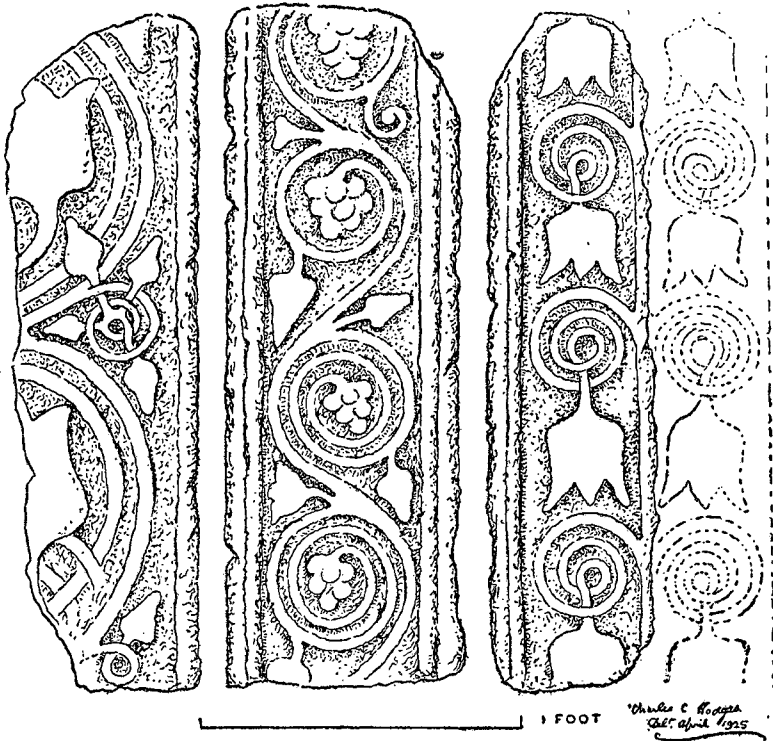


FIG. 22.

and character of the building. It will be of advantage to compare these fragments with similar details which remain in position in local churches of the same period. Escomb is the only complete Saxon church in the two northern counties, which remains unaltered. Its chancel arch is lofty and massive, and springs from imposts of the same general form as these at Simondburn, but they are entirely without ornament. The tower arch at Whittingham, springs from imposts which are ornamented in a most archaic manner. Bolam exhibits two carved impost stones, which are useful in dealing with Simondburn, but are inferior in execution and apparently later in date. The Simondburn stones carry us back to the days of St. Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop. The vertical faces are decorated by a range of diminutive representations of turned stone baluster shafts, of which a number are to be seen at Jarrow and Monkwearmouth. They were there used in the stone screens surrounding the platforms on which the high altars stood. At Jarrow, three pieces of the long stones, which footed and capped the ranges of stone pillars in the screens remain, and these are ornamented with diminutive balusters in semi relief, similar to those at Simondburn. The dates of the erection of the churches at Jarrow and Monkwearmouth are known; it is therefore highly probable that the church at Simondburn arose through the instrumentality of St. Wilfrid. The decoration of the sloping under surface, is, in one case a series of reversed spirals, a form of ornament frequently seen on stone carvings and MSS. of the early Saxon period. The other is treated with a range of lozenges, formed by double bands, in which the principal of interlacing is maintained. A fragment of one of the impost stones is built into a wall in the Rectory Garden. One of the imposts at Bolam retains a portion of the return, and shows that the projection which crossed the soffit of the arch was carried over the angle and for a short distance along the western wall face. The impost stones alone, show that the early church was erected early in the Anglo-Saxon period and that it was of a substantial and sumptuous character. It no doubt

consisted of an aisleless nave and short chancel, as does Escomb, and others of which some remains have been preserved, as at Corbridge and Warkworth.

Another stone appears to be part of a panel which displays one arm of a cross, and a series of eight hemispheres in relief, and another one of larger size, which is depressed in the centre. This may be a fragment from a large wall panel representing the Crucifixion. Parts of such panels were found at Hexham in 1907, worked in oolite stone from Northamptonshire, where St. Wilfrid held landed estates, and these panels were no doubt from the decoration of his great basilica.

The circular stone, which crowns the group built into the east side of the porch, has a cross pattée in relief, in the centre of which is a seven petalled flower. This is of a type common in crosses of early date, the stone is most probably either a head stone cross, or a gable cross of the early church. As it is built into the wall, its exact character cannot be determined.

The most important relic of this period is the portion of the shaft of a monumental cross on the west side of the porch. It is only a fragment, but is of the highest value, as it is clearly a specimen of what has been happily named the "Hexham school" of carving, of the days of St. Wilfrid and St. Acca. The shaft was 12 ins. wide and 8 ins. in thickness. One of the narrower faces is seen in full width, it is decorated with a vine scroll, of which four whorls remain. Their centres contain clusters of fruit, while small leaves occupy the intermediate spaces. Half of each of the broader faces can be seen, and they display adaptations of the beautiful great bell flower (*campanula latifolia*), a plant which grows in profusion in the Tyne valley. It is rare in carving of so early a period, to find such naturalistic treatment of plant forms. The side facing south has portions of two flowers of large size, which fill the whorls of a rolling scroll, and the space between is occupied by a smaller scroll with leaf terminations. The side facing north shows a central stem, from which branch

scrolls each way. These, after forming three convolutions, terminate in pendant bell flowers, the cups of which are divided into four petals.

Such is all we can now know of the first church upon the site. How and when it perished or was superseded is unknown. It was certainly well built, according to St. Wilfrid's practice: William of Malmesbury tells us that his (Wilfrid's) buildings "were erected by superior masons and stood long struggling with time." Roman worked stones were used, as the stations of Procolitia and Cilurnum are each but a mile or so distant. The absence of all traces of a church, of a date intermediate between the seventh and thirteenth centuries, is most significant, and forms a parallel to Hexham, where we know that St. Wilfrid's *basilica*, stood up to the incursion of the Galwegians in 1296. There are therefore but two periods to deal with, and we now arrive at the church we see to-day. It is important to remember that the early stones were in the wall above the chancel arch. This shows that this wall was the last portion built, and that the chancel arch of the early church, was the last portion of that to be removed. This is borne out by the fact, that the mouldings of the capitals of the two eastern responds of the nave arcades, are of a more advanced section than the remainder to the westward of them. In the twelfth course above the capitals of the chancel arch, on the west side are two stone corbels. These were to support the beam carrying the Rood. The large expanse of unbroken wall space above the unusually low chancel arch is one of the most distinctive features of the church. The plan and details of the nave and chancel, show that the latter is somewhat later than the former, and it is probable that the nave was begun and built around the earlier one, before the chancel was undertaken. Whatever the exact course of building was the result is eminently satisfactory, and the church is one of the most perfect and pleasing examples of the "Early English" style to be seen. It is of ample size for a village church, and well built, with walls three feet or more in thickness. The most remarkable feature of the

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plan, is the extreme length of the chancel, and in this respect the later 12th, and earlier 13th century churches contrast conspicuously with those of the Saxon, and early Norman periods. Long chancels of this date, are a feature almost peculiar to Northumberland and are seen at Bamburgh, Corbridge, Bywell St. Peter, Haltwhistle, Mitford, and some others. The nave has arcades of four bays, with octagonal columns, having well moulded bases and capitals. The arches are of two orders, chamfered, and there are hood mouldings on the nave side. The nave windows are all modern, and as there never seems to have been a clerestory, the early windows were taken out and sash windows put in, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to give more light. The chancel is a rich example of the northern phase of "Early English," of the second quarter of the thirteenth century. At that time the living was a valuable one, and the tithes must have amounted to a very large sum. It is not therefore surprising that the work was carried out in a sumptuous manner, and there are few finer architectural groups of the period, than that forming the south west portion of the chancel. The low side window of two lights, is as rich in detail, as it is peculiar in fenestration. The long lancet next to it, and that at the east end of the same side, are mainly ancient, though restored, and are beautifully proportioned. The priest's door is also a fine example, and the presence of the nail-head ornament, and the entire absence of carving gives a subdued richness to all these features, which is most pleasing. Evidence of the rich nature of the "Early English" work is afforded by the most fortunate survival of a beautiful fragment, built into the south side of the recess on the east side of the porch. This is a piece of an arch stone, with two bold semicircular roll mouldings, between which is a five petalled rose flower in high relief. The rose in this form is very rare in 13th century work. In the mouldings of the east window of Darlington church there are a profusion of these flowers, though of a plainer and earlier character than that under consideration. Darlington was begun in 1192 and was

building in 1195. The rose at Simondburn is more elaborately detailed, and points to a date early in the century. It is difficult to locate the stone, but it may have formed part of the soffit of the arch of the south doorway.

The church escaped alteration during the later mediæval period, and does not seem to have suffered much at the time of, or after the Reformation.

The best old engraving which is available is in Hodgson's *Northumberland*.⁴ This shows an old doorway on the south side of the nave, between the second and third buttresses from the east. A large chimney soars above the roof at the west end of the same aisle. The bell cot contains a single bell. The chancel roof is hipped at the east end. The large modern round headed east window is flanked by traces of the jamb shafts, which appear in a restored state in the present triplet. A long square sash window occupies the south side of the chancel, and another the east end of the aisle. These are part of the work carried out in 1763.

An important object in the interior of the chancel is the large double piscina, near the east end of the south wall. The two bowls are foliated, and are enclosed in a square moulded recess, which was divided by a detached shaft, the base of which remains, but shaft and capital are gone. Over the large recess is another, under a pointed trefoil arch, and this has formed the credence. The hood mould terminations have foliage carving.

In the baptistry, formed at the west end of the north aisle, are two fountains. The earlier one dates from the alterations of 1763, the other from the restoration of 1876.

The west end of the south aisle accommodates the vestry and the organ, and thus the church is freed from all extraneous erections.

In the west wall are two curious aumbries.

The eastern bay of the south aisle was a chantry chapel and the cuttings for the housing of its parclose screens are to be seen in the adjoining respond, and the eastern pillar. Here are arranged a number of broken effigies of

⁴ Part II., vol. iii, opp. p. 404, dated 1840.

the Ridley family, one of which is that of Cuthbert Ridley, rector of Simondburn from 1604 to 1636.

The mediæval grave covers are worth close examination, and must be described in detail. Some are laid in the floor of the baptistry, but the more important are in the recess in the east wall of the porch. In the centre of the recess is the greater part of a coped grave cover, placed on end. When found it may have been almost entire, but the ends have been squared up to make it fit its new home. This type of grave cover is the successor of the now well known "hog-backed" form, of the Saxon and Danish periods, of which there is such a good collection in the Cathedral Library at Durham, brought together by the late William Greenwell. In the Norman and succeeding periods, the high coped covers assumed the form of the roof of a building, typical of man's last house, and are valuable as showing the various kinds of tiles in use at the time of their making. The Simondburn example retains four courses of semi-circular tegulations on each side, but more may be hidden by the building in. The ridge is flat, but narrow, and bears a pair of shears, indicating a female, and two flowers of six petals. These details point to a date in the early part of the 13th century. The other notable example is the upper half of a flat cover which has the cross flower ornament worked on the angles. The cross head is formed by eight incomplete rings. These represent, it is supposed, torques, an uncommon adaptation of their ornamental use. The torque was worn in Roman times, and continued in use through the period of the early Christian missions, and it is likely that the wearers would offer them to the missionary, and they would be hung upon the cross which he carried, so that they came to be associated with the cross symbol. A large number of grave covers of the 12th century bear a cross formed of four of them, their expanded terminations are exactly like the two ends of the torque. A fine example at Bishop Middleham strongly supports this theory,⁵ here eight are used, they much more closely resemble the model

⁵ Sepulchral Slabs &c., in the County of Durham, Pl. 15, No. 41.

than those at Simondburn. At Durham⁶ is a good example with four, arranged in the arms of the cross. The shaft of the cross is shown by two incised lines, and meets the lower circle in an awkward way. On the dexter side is the hilt of a sword, and on the sinister the top of what appears to be a crutched pilgrim staff, but it is too incomplete for a decision to be formed. It is significant that the example with eight circles above quoted is associated with a pilgrim staff as the only symbol. The remaining grave covers do not demand any detailed description.

Note to Plate XXIX.—Fig. 1 shews the stones built into the east side of the porch, looking S.E. The coped grave cover is in the centre, the circular cross above it, the impost stones on either side and the moulded stone with rose on the right. Fig. 2, the west side of porch. Fig. 3, the east side looking N.E. and shewing clearly the impost stones.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Pl. 39, No. 112.



David Evans N.A. Rectory.

SIMONDBURN CHURCH AND RECTORY,
North^a

Published March 1875 by W.D. Dawson, Alnwick.



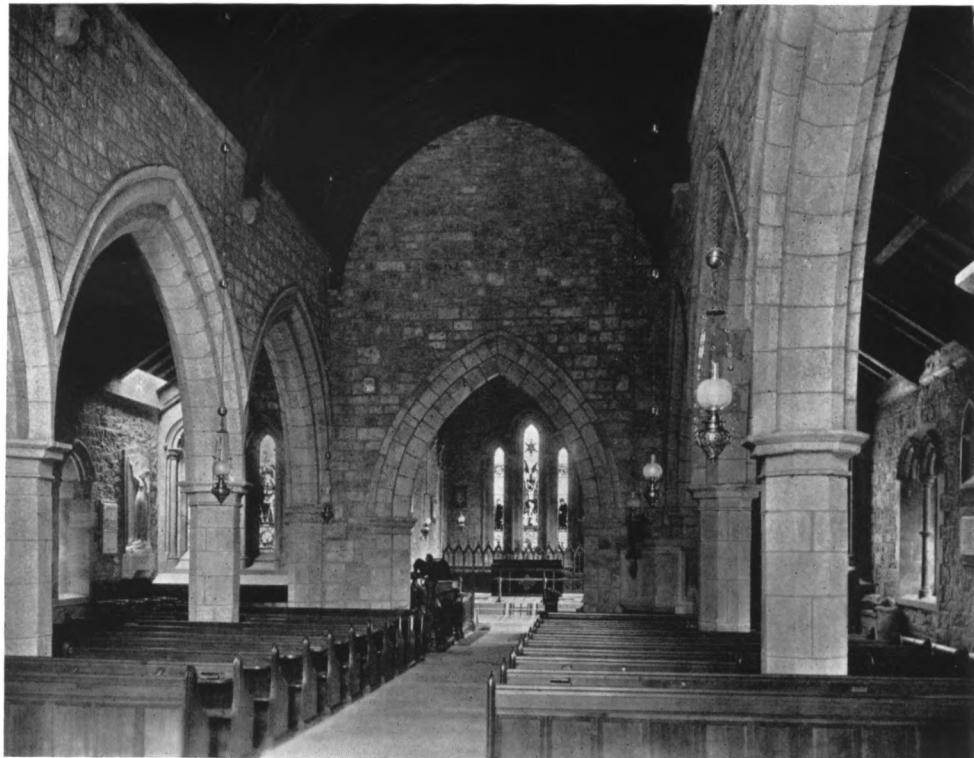


FROM THE NORTH EAST.



SOUTH SIDE OF CHANCEL.

SIMONDBURN CHURCH.



INTERIOR OF SIMONDBURN CHURCH.



FIG. 1.



FIG. 2.



FIG. 3

EARLY CARVED STONES IN THE PORCH OF SIMONDBURN
CHURCH.

