

## VI.—THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY MAGDALENE, MITFORD, NORTHUMBERLAND.

BY CHARLES CLEMENT HODGES.

[Read on September 30th, 1925.]

In order to realize the importance of the church of Mitford as being a peculiarly fine and interesting example of the architecture of the twelfth century, of the phase so characteristic of the "Border Country," it is desirable to consider for a moment the history of the manor and the position and character of its earlier lords.

William Bertram, a Norman knight of whose origin nothing is known, married (*temp.* Henry I) Hawise, daughter of Guy de Baliol, lord of Barnard Castle and of many other northern manors. He probably received Mitford and other lands and manors in Northumberland as her marriage portion. Mitford he held in chief of the king by the service of five knights' fees. He it was who founded the priory of Austin canons at Brinkburn and also made gifts of land to Newminster abbey. He was succeeded by his son Roger (c. 1157-1175), who added to and confirmed his father's gifts to Brinkburn and Newminster. Roger was followed by his son William II (d. c. 1199), who confirmed the gifts of his father and grandfather to these churches. It is to these lords that we owe the church at Mitford, which had been laid out and probably built in part before the church now remaining at Brinkburn had been begun. They were clearly great churchmen, as their gifts to Brinkburn and other churches prove, and the architecture of Brinkburn and Mitford show that they were men of high ideas and only

work of the most sumptuous kind was desired by them. Mitford is, in fact, in the first rank among the ecclesiastical buildings which arose in Northumberland in that prolific period following the Norman conquest, which culminated in the second half of the twelfth century when the romanesque architecture of the Normans was slowly changing to that termed "early Gothic."

The architectural achievement of bishop William of St.-Calais at Durham, where arose the mightiest and most magnificent cathedral of the time, which in great part still stands, the grandest example of a Norman church in Europe, gave a powerful impetus to church building in England, and so provoked the zeal of the great nobles and ecclesiastics that they vied with each other as to who should build the stateliest fane to the honour of God.

The Northumberland group of large Norman churches comprises the priory church of Lindisfarne and the churches of Norham, Mitford and Warkworth, placed in order of their architectural merit. They all date about the middle, or a little later, of the twelfth century. Durham cathedral was then completed to the top of the walls, and vaulted throughout; it was well known to the builders of the churches farther north, and, as has been proved, as far south as Selby. We find, therefore, at Mitford the influence of the great cathedral. The plan of the church is one of considerable ambition and far more monumental in its character than that usually adopted for the average parish church. Whether it was completed and afterwards partly demolished, or never fully carried out, must ever remain a matter of conjecture. It is fortunate that enough exists, *in situ*, or in detached portions, to give the whole plan and the character and beauty of its details. (Plate XXIII.)

The plan comprised a nave, five bays in length, with north and south aisles, from the east ends of which semicircular apses were thrown out. The chancel, without aisles, was of extreme length, and its east end was apsidal. The proportions of the nave may be considered

quite normal for a church of this magnitude, but those of the chancel can only be regarded as abnormal amongst churches of moderate dimensions, and demand some comment. The long chancel is a peculiar feature of northern churches, and is seen in a large number in the two northern counties. In Northumberland the most remarkable are Bamburgh, Norham, Corbridge, Lindisfarne priory, Mitford, Elsdon, Haltwhistle and Bywell

MITFORD CHURCH: STONE FROM OUTER ORDER OF CHANCEL ARCH

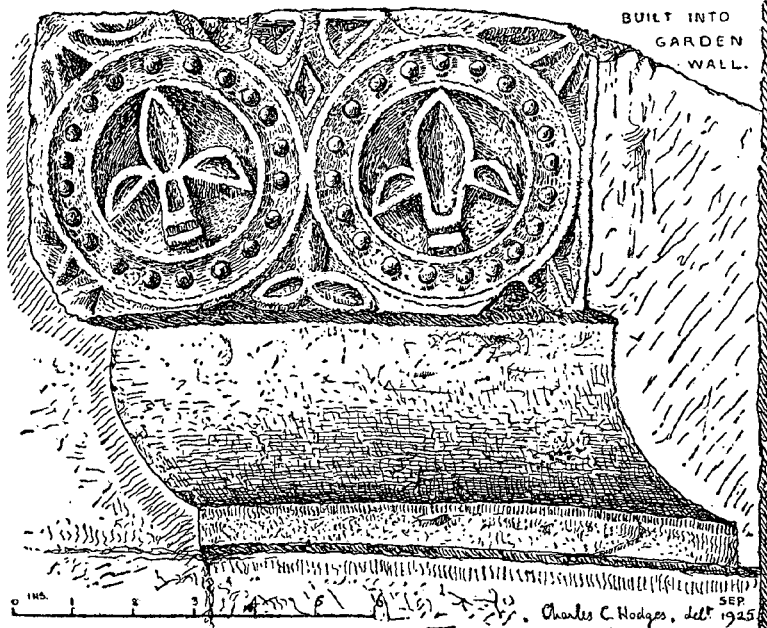


Fig. 1.

St. Peter. The three first exceed Mitford, while Lindisfarne is of the same length. These proportions are far exceeded in the choir of the priory church of Coldingham in Berwickshire, which was subject to Durham. Here the length is eighty-one feet, by a breadth of twenty-three feet, while the length of the nave was ninety-eight feet. The date of the choir (now used as the parish church) is about the end of the twelfth century.

The parts of the original church at Mitford now remaining internally comprise (Plate XXIV): (1) the three eastern bays of the nave on the south side and the eastern one on the north side; (2) the northern jamb of the arch opening to the apse at the east end of the south aisle with its angle shafts, closely resembling the same details at Lindisfarne, and (3) last, but by no means least, the internal jambs and adjoining portions of the wall on either side of the arch of the main eastern apse. The jambs retain their angle-shafts, with scalloped capitals, and their abacus mouldings, which extended from the capitals to the angles of the wall. Externally, at the south-east angle of the nave, an angle-shaft remains above the jamb of the apse of the south aisle, and a short length of a string-course with an elaborate chevron moulding. All these remains are *in situ* and give the key to the whole scheme of the architecture. There are also some detached pieces which demand attention. The chief of these is a single voussoir from the outer order of the original chancel arch (Fig. 1). This is built into the wall of the garden on the north side of the churchyard and shows how lavish was the adornment of the stonework. The present chancel arch is modern. The original one seems to have sprung from twin shafts high in the wall and supported by corbels formed of two carved heads. One of these is built into the south wall of the south transept, called the "Mitford chapel." The peculiar double-headed corbels, the heads facing outwards at an angle of about forty-five degrees, are rare, but occur at Corbridge, the old St. Nicholas's, Durham, the gateway, Prudhoe castle, and the bishop of Durham's castle at Stockton-on-Tees. Another important detail is built in on the west side of the west capital of the arch at the east end of the north wall of the nave. This is a very rich detail and is probably part of the string-course which continued the abacus mouldings of the chancel arch capitals to the angles of the east wall of the nave.

The details of the nave arcades are worth careful examination. The bases are unusually fine and large.



They have square chamfered plinths and sub-bases. The base mouldings at the feet of the columns are circular, and the vacant spaces between these and the square sub-bases are adorned with spurs in the form of leaves projecting from the mouldings, out of which they seem to grow. (Plate XXV.) This feature is confined in England to the work of the "Transitional period," and is rare, but is quite usual in France, well into the thirteenth century.

The capitals are scalloped with seven or eight divisions on each face. The arches are in two orders: the soffit and outer orders, on the nave side moulded, on the aisle side plain. There is a plain hood moulding on the nave side.

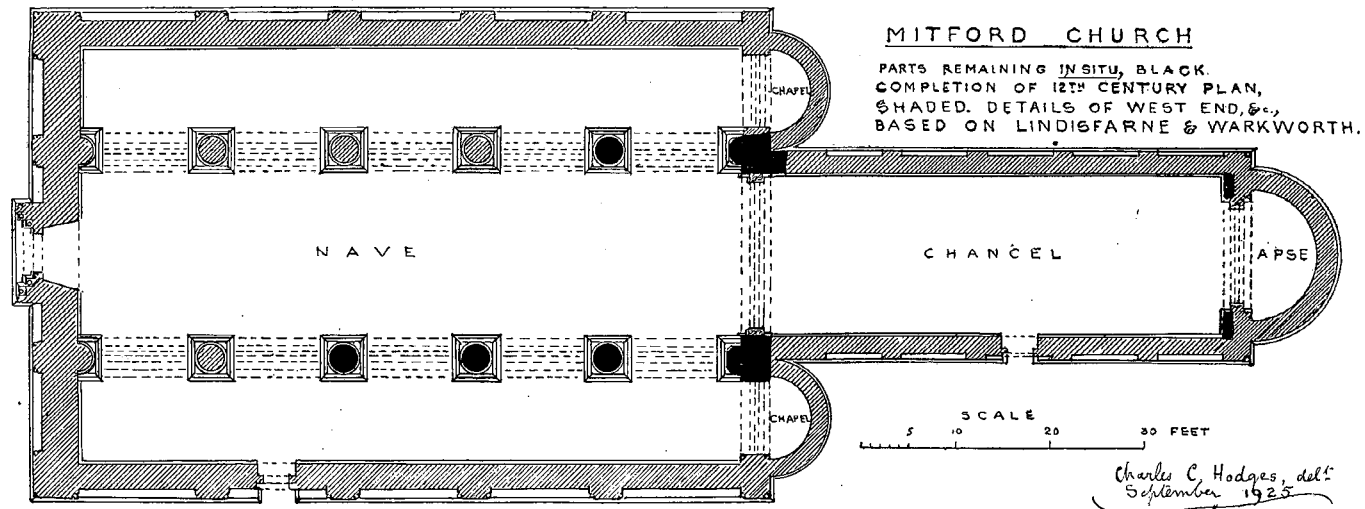
There is a reset, or rebuilt, doorway on the south side of the chancel. This is the original doorway which was in much the same relative position in the former chancel, and this, along with the jambs of the apse arch, proves that the Norman chancel was of the same extent as that erected in the thirteenth century.

An engraving in Scott's *Border Antiquities* shows a porch on the south side of the nave with an enriched doorway. This also seems to have been the early south doorway reset. It was quite a usual procedure, when Norman churches had aisles added, to move the south doorway and reset it in the new aisle wall. Many instances of this could be quoted, and the chancel doorway at Mitford shows clear signs of removal.

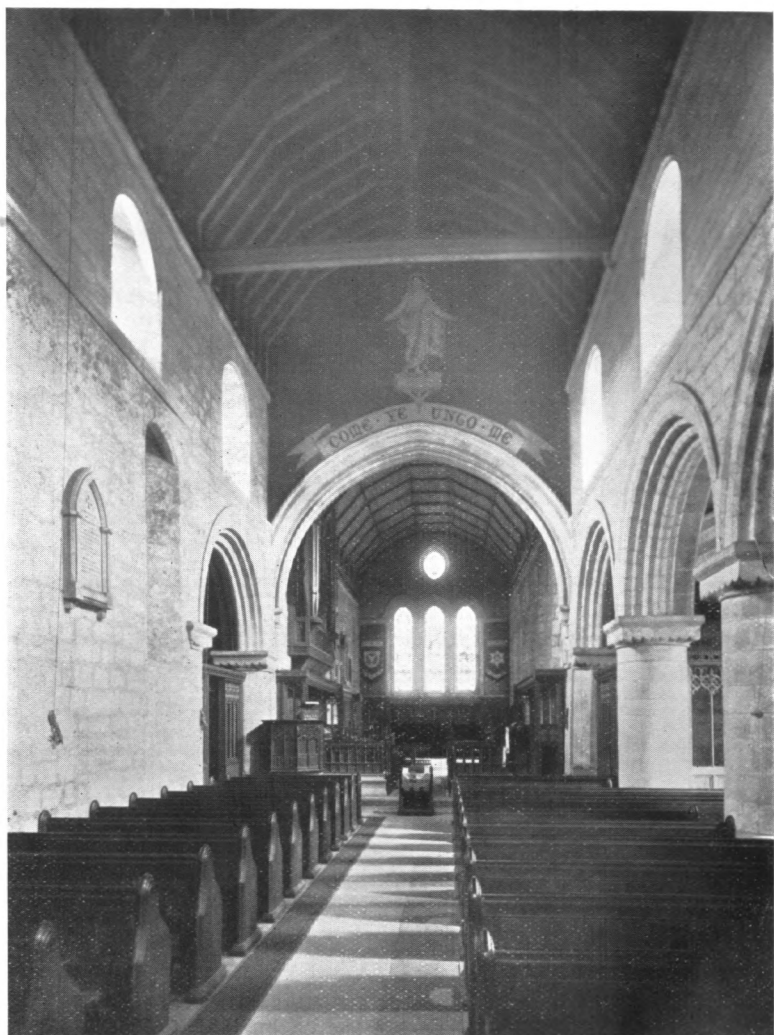
Felton church is a curious variation, where a portion of the wall of the aisleless nave, with its doorway, remains *in situ*, while another doorway is in the later aisle wall built farther out.

The Norman church was reconstructed about the beginning of the thirteenth century in the style of the period, the chancel being one of the finest of its kind in the country. This is, however, outside the scope of these notes, which are only intended to describe the original Norman church, to recover its plan and to locate such parts of it as have survived. There are several old drawings and engravings which show the church as it was

in the eighteenth and earlier part of the nineteenth century (Plate XXVI). The nave was partly a ruin, and its western wall and one bay had gone. The chancel and the south transept, called "Mitford porch," were kept in repair. In this state the church remained until 1874, when the late Robert James Johnson of Newcastle was commissioned by the late Lieutenant-Colonel Osbaldeston Mitford to undertake a complete restoration. This was done at the cost of about £10,000. The nave was repaired, the walls raised, a clerestory and new roof added. The south transept was also re-roofed. A fine tower and spire were added at the west and a partly new porch to the south. The interior is spacious and imposing and one of the most pleasing and satisfactory in the county.



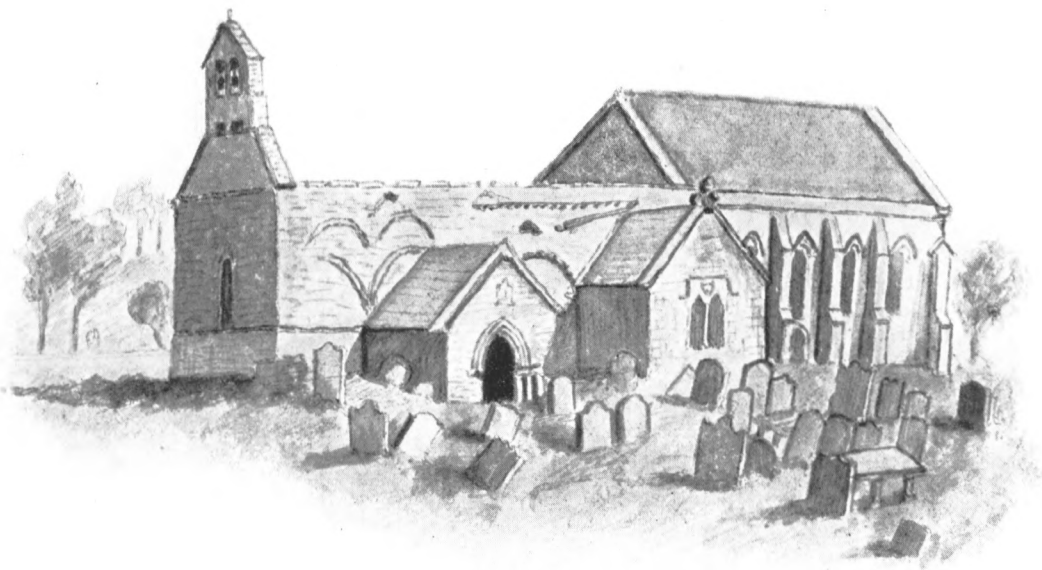
PLAN OF MITFORD CHURCH.



MITFORD CHURCH  
FROM THE WEST.



MITFORD CHURCH, SOUTH ARCADE.



MITFORD CHURCH  
BEFORE RESTORATION.