

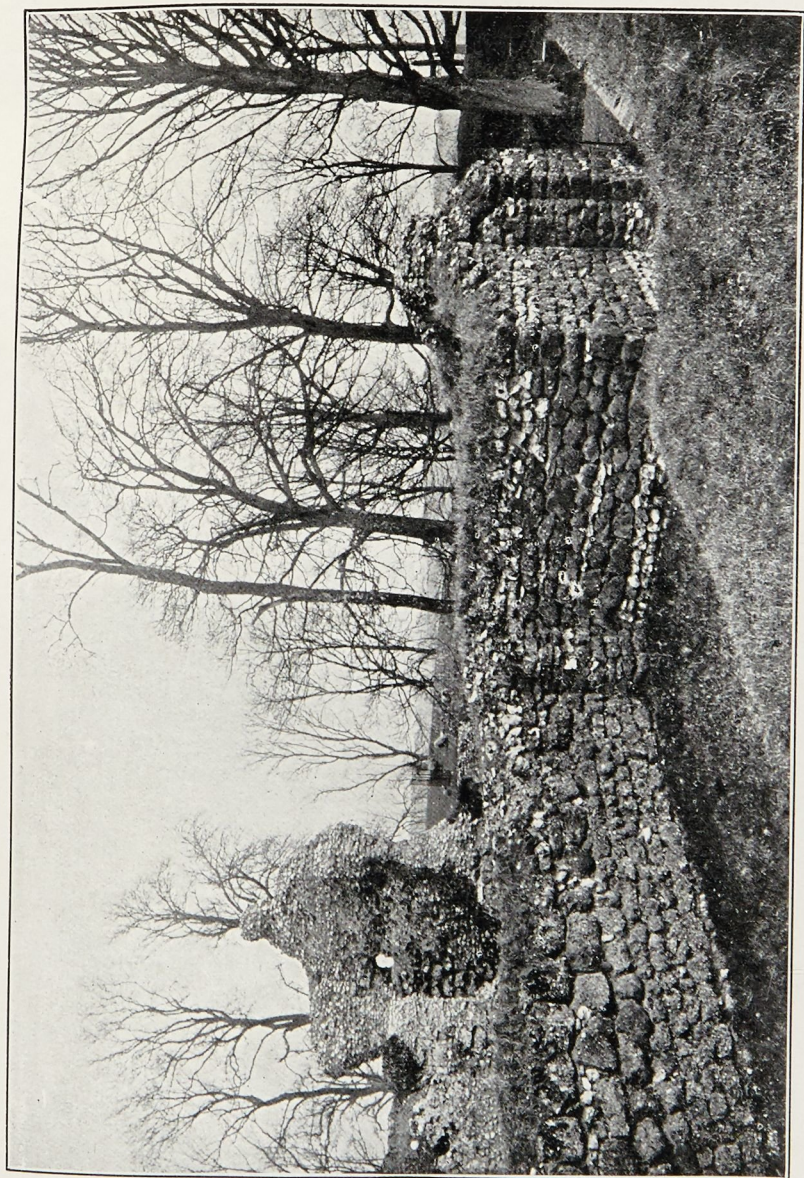
The Saxon Cathedral of Elmham.

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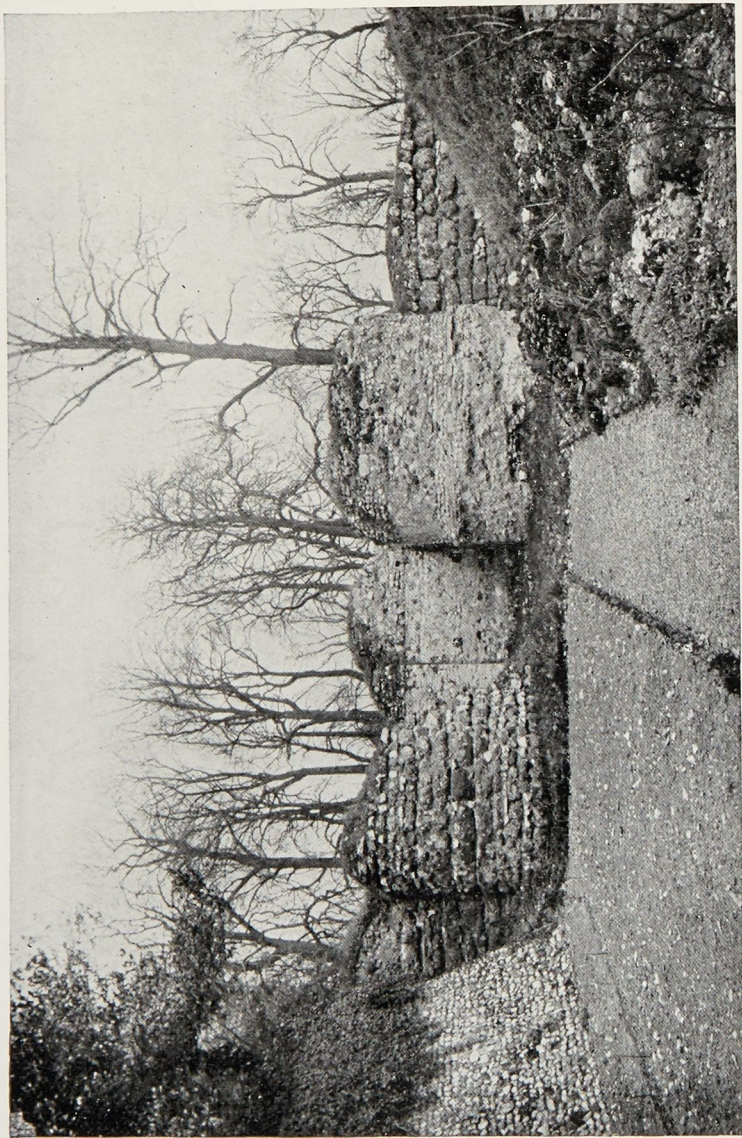
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The site of the See of Elmham has been the subject of one of those entirely artificial controversies which troubled the archæological peace of the nineteenth century, and arose from a curious and then very prevalent phase of archæological thought. Plain, and one would have thought obvious, statements of fact were first queried and then rejected to substitute in their place theories unsupported equally by evidence, tradition, or probability. Such was the theory which endeavoured to transfer the See of Elmham from North Elmham in Norfolk to South Elmham in Suffolk, in the face of all definite evidence and reasonable probability and solely on the ground that a pre-Conquest church, known traditionally as the Old Minster, existed in the Suffolk area. The fact that the word Minster is sufficiently widespread and seldom indicates a cathedral was not considered, and the statesman Theodore was credited with the inconceivable stupidity of splitting up the East Anglian



NORTH ELMHAM: S. SIDE OF NAVE AND S. TRANSEPT LOOKING N.E.



A. V. Clarke, Bungay, photo.

NORTH ELMHAM: S. SIDE OF NAVE AND W. TOWER LOOKING N.

See by establishing two bishop's stools within thirteen miles of one another. This theory, which received the tentative support of more than one distinguished antiquary, has now, one may hope, been finally consigned to the limbo from which it should never have emerged; the paper of the late Mr. Richard Howlett¹ sets forth the clear facts of the case and the overwhelming evidence in favour of the Norfolk site.

North Elmham is a small village some seventeen miles north-west of Norwich containing the remains of a large earthwork, in the south-west angle of which stands the ruin of the Saxon cathedral, transformed into a fortified manor-house by Bishop Henry Despencer late in the fourteenth century. A few yards south-east of the earthwork stands the parish church.

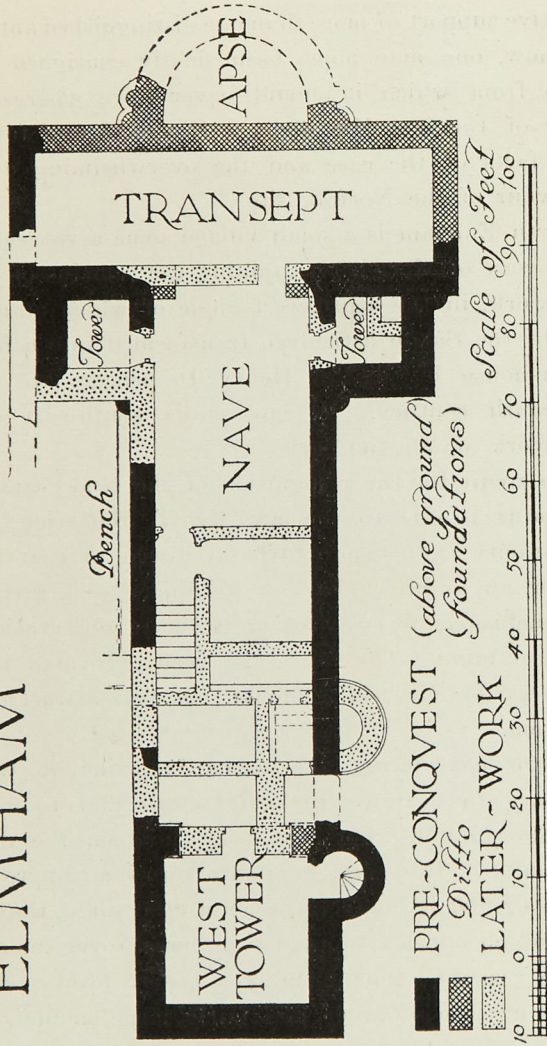
The credit for the recognition of the true character of the ruins is due to the late Mr. T. Butterick,² whose perspicacity is the more to be approved in that he was neither an architect nor an antiquary and arrived at his conclusions by way of an accurate observation and a logical mind. The ruins had been excavated in 1891 by an earlier vicar of Elmham, but had attracted little attention.

Before considering the actual remains it will be necessary to examine the earthworks and to consider the important bearing that they have on the date of the church. The main enclosure forms an approximate square of 300 ft., surrounded by a deep ditch, the upcast from which appears to have been spread over the surface of the "island," thus forming a nearly level platform; in the north-west angle is a fairly large mound, which

¹ "The Ancient See of Elmham," Richard Howlett, F.S.A., in *Norfolk Archaeology*, vol. xviii., p. 105. He quotes a report prepared for Bishop Anthony Bek, in which the statement is made "Manerium de Northelmham fuit antiquo tempore sedes episcopalis."

² See *The Builder*, March, 1903.

SAXON CATHEDRAL of ELMHAM



PLAN OF THE SAXON CATHEDRAL AT NORTH ELMHAM, NORFOLK.

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appears to have been reduced in height and was apparently not separated from the rest of the enclosure by a ditch. The scale of the main ditch and the presence of the mound would seem to imply that the earthwork, as it stands, was the work of one of the early Norman bishops of the See—Herfast, Herbert de Losinga, or one of their immediate successors—but the general form of the enclosure may indicate that it followed some earlier line, either that of the Saxon precinct or yet some earlier work. Be that as it may, it seems evident that the earthwork is later than the cathedral building which it buried for some six or eight feet above its floor-level. It will be shown that the cathedral presents certain late features which prevent its being dated much before the year 1000, so that the earthwork must be subsequent to this period. It follows also that the cathedral must have passed out of use as a church when the earthworks were constructed, and the existing parish church contains the responds of a former chancel-arch of the first half of the twelfth century re-set in the north and south walls of the chancel. The site continued to belong to the See of Norwich, but nothing further is heard of the buildings until 1387, when Bishop Henry Despencer obtained a licence to crenellate his manor-house at Elmham. In the interval it must be presumed that the bishop's house consisted of a timber hall and other buildings, such as was usual in twelfth and thirteenth-century castles of the non-stone districts of the east of England and which subsisted throughout the middle ages at such important castles as Hertford and Pleshy. Henry Despencer, however, determined to transform the remains of the Saxon cathedral into a more substantial house, and the results of his operations are partly apparent to-day. He enclosed a small area in the south-west angle of the main enclosure by a shallow ditch, which

incidentally destroyed the apse of the Saxon church, and he formed a rectangular house out of the body of the church, west of the transept, contriving a lower floor in the buried portions of the building. This house was still occupied towards the close of the sixteenth century, but was subsequently demolished or fell into ruin, leaving only a few fragments of walls standing above ground before the excavations of the second half of the last century. Such appears to be the general history of the site; we will now turn to the consideration of the ruins of the cathedral, their structure and form, and try to arrive at some definite conclusion as to their date.

The *Materials* of the building are more or less uniform, the coursed rubble of the walls being of fairly large blocks of pudding-stone stained to a dark brown colour with iron; some of the blocks have almost the appearance of slag. The quoins and dressings are of the same material (as are the steps in the turret-staircase) with four exceptions: (a) the surviving west-jamb of the doorway in the north transept; (b) the quoins of the west splay of the blocked north doorway in the nave; (c) the quoins, where visible, of the west tower; and (d) the bases of the responds of the west tower arch; all of these are of oolitic limestone except certain stones, where the mason has attempted to use the pudding-stone as ashlar. The base of the walls of the transept and nave and the foundations of the apse are of large flint rubble, laid in courses, and it is possible that this construction is continued under the west tower, but the existing ground-level is not low enough to expose it.

The general *Plan* of the building consists of an aisleless nave (72 ft. by 20 ft.); a transept (50 ft. by 14 ft.) of *Tau*-form with an almost semicircular apse (19 ft. wide) projecting to the east of it; small towers (each 8 ft. 6 ins. square) in the angles between the transept

and the nave, and a large west tower (19 ft. by 18 ft.) having a projecting staircase-turret on the south side.

The *Apse*, as has been said, was mostly destroyed by the digging of the ditch surrounding the late fourteenth-century manor-house, and the surviving walls have been removed to the ground-level, as forming no part of the scheme of the house, which terminated west of the crossing. The remaining portions of the apse consist of the sleeper-wall across the chord and the start of the curved walls on either side. On the south side the wall has mostly gone but retains the base of one of the cylindrical angle-pilasters which are the most remarkable features of the building. On the north side more of the wall survives, and here not only does the base of the angle-pilaster remain, but 9 ins. to the east of it is the base of a second pilaster of precisely similar form; this pilaster is about 1 ft. 10 ins. in diameter, semicircular in form and, like the angle-pilasters, has an off-set at the base of about 7 ins. projection. The semicircular form of this off-set is perfectly preserved; the shaft above survives only in part, but all doubt as to its form is set at rest by the fortunate survival of a portion of the curved mortar-facing adjoining and containing the mortar face of the wall between the pilasters. It is necessary to stress these details to establish beyond a doubt the existence of a very curious feature, so far unparalleled in English architecture. The surviving remains are not sufficient to show if the pilasters were continued at regular intervals round the apse, in which case there would have been fifteen of them, or if they were grouped with occasional spaces to admit of windows larger than the existing interval of 9 ins. would allow.

The *Transept* has been destroyed to the ground-level except at the north end, where it appears to have been retained for some outbuilding in the house-scheme, and

on the west side where it formed the east end of the house. Only three features need be noticed: (a) in the north wall is a doorway of which the base of the west jamb remains; it is cut straight through the wall without a rebate; the east jamb has been partly cut back and a rough rebate made, probably when the house was built; (b) in the re-entrant angles between the transept and the small side towers are the same cylindrical pilasters that we have already noted in the apse; here, however, at any rate on the south side, they survive to the full height of the existing wall; the north pilaster is buried in a later thickening of the wall, but the south pilaster is fully visible and is constructed of the same material as the adjoining wall; it says not a little for the ability of the masons that the cylindrical form has been well preserved in the pudding-stone of so small a feature; (c) the underlying flint courses of the west wall of the south arm of the transept present a curious dip and a rather abrupt termination which may indicate that at this point it differs in date from the pudding-stone walling above. The transept was separated from the nave by an arch, of which only the footings of the two responds, of indeterminate projection, remain.

The *Nave* retains its south wall largely intact up to about 8 ft. in height, but the north wall has been much patched and altered; towards its western end is the internal west jamb of a doorway, but externally this feature has been obliterated. Against the outside face of the north wall is a bench of flint rubble about 18 ins. wide, but except that it has been applied to the face of the earlier wall there is no indication of its date. The re-entrant angles made by the small side towers have each a cylindrical pilaster similar to those already described, but that on the north has been destroyed almost to the ground-level.

The *Side Towers* have no distinctive features, as the two doorways opening from the nave have both been reconstructed late in the fourteenth century. The function of these two buildings as flanking towers is evidenced by the increased thickness of the outer walls above that of the adjoining walls of the transept and nave; the wall in particular, which is common to the towers and the transept, is thicker by nearly a foot than the gable-walls of the transept. The north tower has been considerably altered and the west wall almost entirely rebuilt. Against the north wall on the outside face is a later thickening which extended beyond the line of the tower towards the west. Its date and purpose are alike uncertain.

The *West Tower* is externally of the same width as the nave, but the walls are 6 ins. thicker. Projecting from the south face is a turret-staircase, enclosed in a rounded projection. The west face of the tower is still buried in the mass of earth which formed the platform of the supposedly Norman castle. Between the tower and the nave was a wide archway, of which the whole base of the respond on the north and one stone of the respond on the south still remain; the base is rectangular with a plain chamfered plinth. Some 18 ins. to the east of the line of the arch, in the north wall of the nave, is a line of ashlar quoins which may indicate a former doorway or possibly the north-east structural angle of the tower.

Such are the chief features of the building, which in no place rises to a sufficient height to have retained traces of the original windows. We must now consider its general characteristics and attempt by this means to arrive at its approximate date.

Taking first the *form* of the east end—the “Tau-cross” plan belongs originally to the earliest period of building after the Peace of the Church. It is the plan of the

more important churches of the age of Constantine in the City of Rome, such as St. Peter's, St. John Lateran, and the second St. Paul without the Walls; the same form is reflected in the little fourth-century basilica of Silchester. The sequence is carried on by the late fifth-century Church of SS. Peter and Paul at Como (with a slight modification) and the early seventh-century Abbey Church of St. Denis, built by Dagobert. Its presence in this country has been surmised at St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, *c.* 600, and at St. Wilfrid's Abbey at Hexham, but the only actual remains of such a structure which have yet come to light are those at Elmham. North of the Alps the "Tau-cross" plan as a type appears to have almost died out before the Carolingian revival, though it lingered on in Italy¹; nearly all the great churches of that age have a rectangular bay or presbytery interposed between the apse and the transept. The plan, then, by itself would lead us to suppose that this part of the church at Elmham dated from 673, when Archbishop Theodore divided the East Anglian Diocese, thus creating the See of Elmham. With this date the plan of the east end well accords, but it is otherwise with the structure, which can hardly be dissociated, in any part, from that of the rest of the building, and presents unmistakable evidence of a much later date. One is forced, therefore, to conclude that in the later rebuilding, either the plan and perhaps the foundations of the earlier east end were retained, or the builder consciously or unconsciously archaized.

The rest of the building is chiefly distinguished by the presence of three towers, of which the two eastern

¹ Compare the Church of Loppia, near Lucca, the plan and part of the structure of which dates from the foundation of the priory in the tenth century; also Heiligenberg (Germany), said to have been built 865-891.

are certainly contemporary of the body of the building and the western cannot be far removed in point of date, as, though it is differentiated from the rest of the church by having ashlar quoins, the general structure of the walls is so nearly similar as to render most unlikely any long interval between the two builds.

The introduction of bell-towers into this country can hardly, if at all, antedate the Carolingian revival. Of all the earlier churches of which we have remains or written descriptions not one is provided with this adjunct. The Carolingian revival hardly took full effect, or at any rate lacked much opportunity for architectural expression, in this country before the ecclesiastical revival of St. Dunstan, but in his day there was a great outburst of building activity in which the majority of cathedral and abbey churches had their share. The general features of these tenth-century churches were borrowed almost exclusively from Carolingian models on the Continent, and among the most notable of these features was the form and disposition of the towers. The most common model followed in England was that of the two towers, placed axially, one over the crossing and one over the west end, but this was not the only Carolingian type available; on the Continent subsidiary staircase-towers were often built flanking the presbytery or the west front, and it is to this type in all probability that the smaller towers at Elmham belong, though it is quite uncertain whether they contained timber staircases or not. Towers of a similar type still exist in several of the Carolingian-Romanesque churches of the Rhine district, which though of eleventh or twelfth-century date yet only reflect an earlier tradition. Fully developed towers flanking the presbytery are found at Ivrea Cathedral, late tenth century, St. Germain des Prés (Paris), early eleventh century, and numerous other

places.¹ The semicircle staircase-turret of the west tower belongs also to the same school and may be compared with the similar turret adjoining the west tower at Brixworth. This form, with the circular external face, we know was a commonplace in Carolingian architecture but is rare in Norman-Romanesque, where the turret-staircase was almost invariably enclosed in a rectangular mass placed at the angle and not on the side of the building. Finally we have to consider the curious cylindrical pilasters ornamenting the re-entrant angles and the apse of the building. Buttresses in the form of columns or half-columns are comparatively common in most forms of eleventh and twelfth-century Romanesque, but the use of the half-column shaft as a purely decorative feature round an apse is in a rather different category. In origin it would appear to be the logical outcome of the arcaded corbel-table below the eaves, which in normal Italian-Romanesque is often supported on shafts or pilasters carried down the walls between every third or fourth arch, the intervening arches resting on corbels. Here and there an example can be found where every other support is carried down the wall as a shaft, but instances where every arch of the corbel-table rests on a shaft are far to seek. The whole arrangement is very uncommon in English-Romanesque where the flat pilaster-buttress was almost invariably employed in its place, but in the scanty remains of the Church of St. Martin-le-Grand at Dover, built probably *c.* 1070, the re-entrant angles of the apsidal chapels opening off the ambulatory are provided with cylindrical shafts of Caen stone. These shafts are comparatively slender and have nothing of the clumsy grossness of the Elmham cylinders, which must belong to an earlier age.

¹ These towers are almost invariably *east* of the transept, a position rendered inconvenient at Elmham by the absence of a rectangular presbytery.

To sum up the evidence, the church must be earlier than the earthwork which partly covered it, and this earthwork can at the latest estimate be of Norman date. The doorway, without a rebate, in the north arm of the transept is a definitely Saxon feature. The form and structure of the towers cannot be dated before the ninth century, and in East Anglia, overrun by the Danes, not before the tenth century. The homogeneity of the structure forbids us to assign an earlier date to the east end, though this may rest on foundations of the age of Theodore. On all counts the most probable dates for the structure are the second half of the tenth century or the first half of the eleventh century, with a possible interval between the building of the main structure and the western tower and a balance of probability in favour of the later date.

It seems unnecessary, in view of what has been already advanced, to labour the impossibility of a post-Conquest date, but it should be borne in mind that North Elmham had, from before the Conquest, been the property of the bishops of the East Anglian See and any building within their enclosure must of necessity be the work of such bishops. We know the form and manner of Losinga's building at Norwich and of the earlier Norman bishops elsewhere. That any one of them should have been responsible for the strange structure at Elmham is inconceivable.