

WITLEY AND THURSLEY CHURCHES :
Recent Discoveries.

BY

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WHEN I wrote a paper, some thirty years ago, for these *Collections* on the Mother Church of Witley and its daughter, or Chapelry, of Thursley, there seemed little room in either case for fresh discoveries of antiquarian interest : for both church and chapel had passed under the heavy hand of the restorer and there were abundant proofs of his destructive zeal. Yet a fortuitous chain of events in 1916-17 resulted in the discovery of a double-splayed Saxon window in the south wall of Witley Church still bearing on its inner splay a coeval painting which proved to be a continuation of a series of paintings on the wall surface to the westward of the same date : and from this apparently slight piece of evidence I was able to claim for the entire shell of the nave a pre-Conquest date and to prove that the early Norman door-case in the south wall had been thrust into a still older setting, obviously of Saxon workmanship.

At the same time I pointed out and illustrated a blocked window in the western gable of the nave, then largely hidden by ivy, and remarked that if at any time it could be cleared and unblocked, it would prove to be a double-splayed opening like that we had opened out in the south wall.

The Rev. E. J. Newill was then the Vicar of Witley and the promoter of the investigations which I had the pleasure of supervising. Ten years later—in the summer of 1927—the opportunity of verifying my conjecture arrived. Repairs to the ceiled-in roof of the nave were found to be necessary, and access being obtained to the space above the collars the

window in the west gable could thus be examined at close range. It was then found to be of plastered rubble construction, splayed from outside and inside to the heart of the wall, and at the meeting of the two splays, still in position and quite sound, was the window proper consisting of a $4\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick oak slab or centering-board pierced with an opening $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide, having an ovoid head, roughly moulded, and, like the jambs, grooved on the outside, where still remained in position clip-headed iron nails whose function, no doubt, had been to fasten down a strip of oiled linen or plates of horn to admit a dim religious light—very dim it must have been!—and to exclude the air. The slab was not centrally in the thickness of the wall, being 11 inches from the exterior and 1 foot 6 inches from the inside face. The internal splays measure 1 foot 8 inches (bottom) to 1 foot 6 inches (springing) across and the total height 3 feet 9 inches, while the opening in the slab is 2 feet 7 inches high. The outer splays measure 15 inches across at bottom, and 12 inches at springing. Remnants of a similar oak slab-window had been found in opening the other double-splayed window in 1917. I removed two of these Saxon nails, which were as perfect as when forged about nine centuries ago.

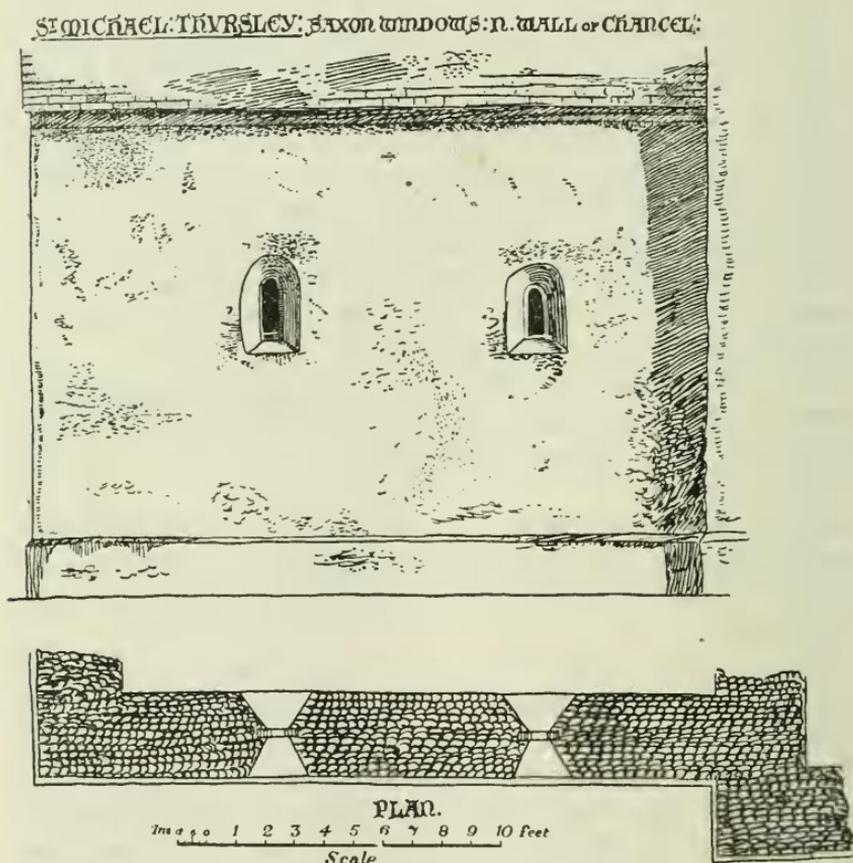


By a coincidence which I can only describe as most remarkable, while this discovery was being made at the mother church a similar one was in the making at the daughter church of Thursley.

When I had examined this in 1900, to read a paper to the Society at its meeting here, I had had the advantage of learning from the veteran architect who restored and enlarged the Church in the 'eighties what the building was like before he touched it, and of consulting his pre-restoration plan and photographs. I reproduced the plan, when publishing that paper in the *Collections*¹, and made a drawing of the early thirteenth-century chancel arch from one of the photographs, showing the base of an ancient rood-screen still in position, and since removed, and also the blank north wall of the chancel with a remarkable shelf, or set-back, in its upper part a short distance below the oak wall-plate. I commented in this paper

¹ Vol. xviii, p. 89 etc.

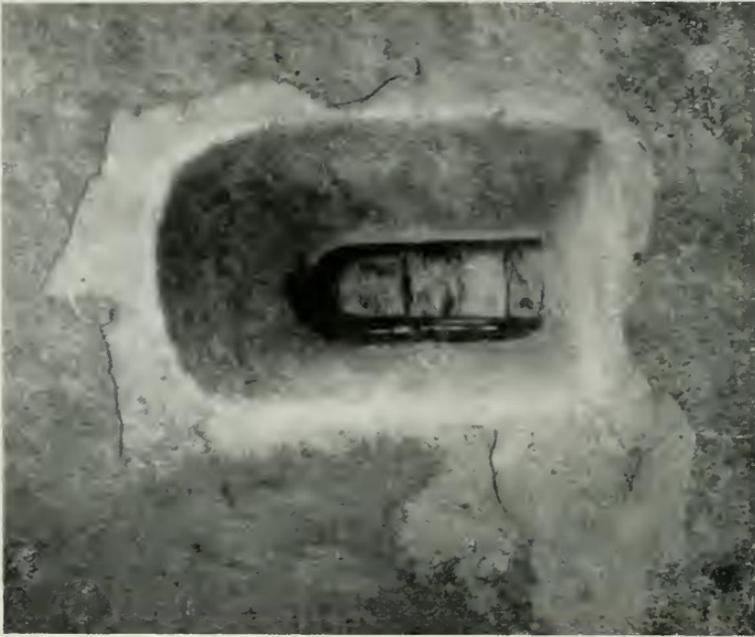
on the fact of this wall being blank and showing no trace of any window, door, or other feature although one early window, probably Norman, remained in the ancient part of the north wall of the nave, and Mr. Penfold had informed me that he found what he concluded to be another in pulling down the old west wall to extend the nave in that direction. In the light of our latest evidence there is at least a strong probability that both the north and west windows may be classed as pre-Conquest, or, in other words, of mid-eleventh century date.



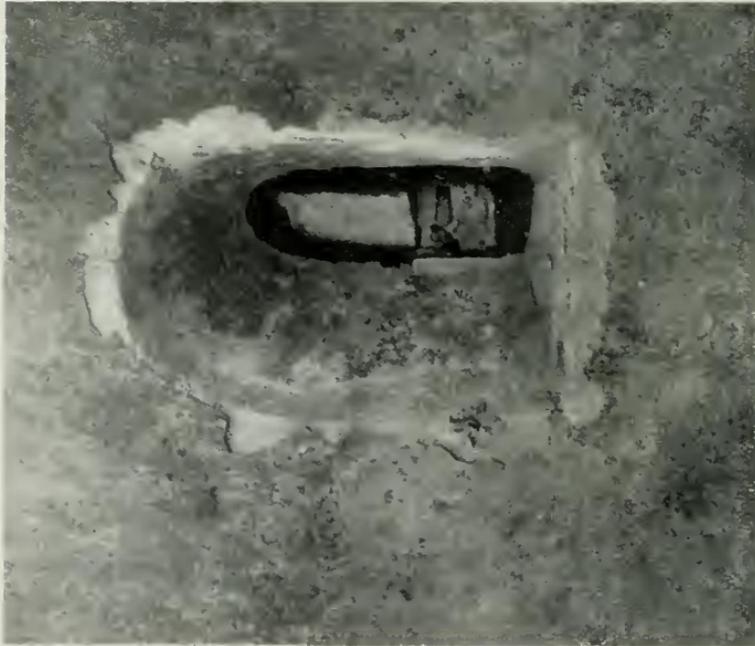
It was a happy stroke of luck that led to the discovery in 1927 of two singularly perfect Saxon windows in the hitherto blank north wall of the chancel. The Vicar, the Rev. Addison J. Wheeler, walking up to the church from that side, which is not the weather side locally, observed that there had been



ALL SAINTS, WITLEY
PRE-CONQUEST WINDOW IN GABLE AT WEST END
DISCOVERED JULY, 1927



THURSLEY CHURCH. SAXON WINDOWS DISCOVERED IN N. WALL OF CHANCEL, JULY, 1927
WESTERN



THURSLEY CHURCH. SAXON WINDOWS DISCOVERED IN N. WALL OF CHANCEL, JULY, 1927
EASTERN

a sharp scud of rain from the north, and that in dashing against the thin coating of "Roman" cement which entirely covered it, had left the faint indication in a different colour of two circular-headed windows. With admirable discernment Mr. Wheeler proceeded to chip off some of this thin cement coating—probably laid on over a century ago—and found his conjecture realized in the complete outlines of two wide round-headed windows blocked up flush with the face of the wall. This blocking, removed later on, was of local hard sandstone rubble with one or two pieces of ashlar bearing indications of thirteenth-century date. Mr. Wheeler, having sought counsel of his neighbour, the Rev. E. J. Newill, who had just opened out the window above described in Witley Church, they jointly sought my assistance in the further explorations, which were made by Mr. Wheeler and his Churchwarden, Major Street, during the autumn of 1927 and the succeeding winter, to be continued at intervals down to the end of 1930. It is greatly to the credit of these two gentlemen, that, unassisted, they took down a huge eighteenth-century monument, consisting of twenty-four pieces of different marbles, that on the inside completely covered one of the Saxon windows, and re-erected it, without injury, on a blank piece of the north wall of the nave. Looking at it now, one could swear it had never been in any other position: yet by its transference it has been possible to completely reopen the western of the two Saxon windows I am about to describe.

They and the north and east walls of the chancel, with so much of the old north wall of the nave as has survived Mr. Penfold's enlargement, and an earlier 19th-century alteration (wherein a sort of aisle was tacked on) were found to retain their original coating of a fine hard stucco, or lime-putty, exactly the same as we found the Saxon builders had faced the exterior of their walls with at Witley. There it remains, as sound and tough and hard as when spread over the rough rubble walls in *c.* 1040. As at Witley also, a stucco-faced plinth of slight projection runs along the base of the walls, and the external angles of both nave and chancel are as neatly rounded (or "screeded") as a plasterer would finish them to-day.

One can now, in the light of this strangely recovered evidence,

re-create the exact appearance of two of our West Surrey churches as they existed, fresh from their builders' hands, in Edward the Confessor's reign. With their plain whitened-plaster walls and probably roofs of reed thatch, their simple double-splayed windows, and plain "through"-opening doors of rude stone and plaster, they were curiously like the primitive Romanesque churches of Scandinavia that exist to this day.

It is evident that both Witley Church and its daughter chapel at Thursley owe their erection to that powerful king-maker and land-grabber, Earl Godwin, who may have had a stockaded manor-house in the mother-parish and who probably built, or rebuilt in stone, the church and chapel for his own use and for his tenants and churls.

Incidentally these two primitive buildings are of value as testifying to the stucco or plaster tradition in Saxon or pre-Conquest church building, of which we have examples remaining, chiefly in church towers, up and down England.¹ Breamore Church (Hants), Compton (Surrey), and the lately uncovered remains of a Saxon basilican church at Lydd in Romney Marsh, are evidence of this treatment in the external finish of walls.

The walls of nave and chancel have an average uniform thickness of 3 feet, which is one-third more than the typical Saxon church wall, though 2 feet 6 inches, which is the standard thickness for Norman and later walls, is sometimes found in Saxon work.² It may be remarked, as another proof of coincidence in date, that the walls of the nave in Witley Church are about 1 yard thick. The splays of the windows externally are 2 feet in width; internally they measure 2 feet 6 inches across; and on the outside the eastern of the two is 3 feet 3 inches high; the western 3 feet, the difference being due to a crushing or malformation of the circular head. The Witley windows are taller and narrower; but the church there is both larger and its walls higher in proportion.

There is the same truly remarkable survival here in both

¹ As at St. Peter's, Barton-on-Humber; Earl's Barton, Northants; Langford, Oxon; Clapham, Beds; Wyckham, Berks; Sompting and Bosham, Sussex.

² In Stoke d'Abernon chancel, which is early in the pre-Conquest period, the walls are only 1 foot 10 inches thick.

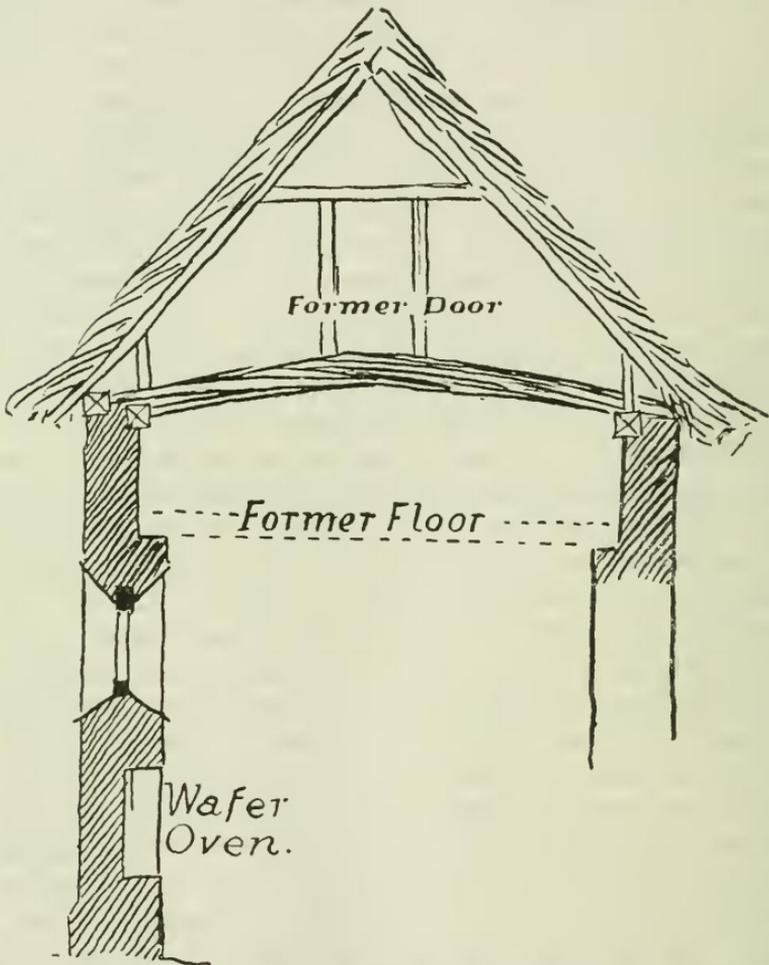
windows, as in those at Witley, of the mid-wall pierced slab of oak, tapering upwards in the width of its aperture, to admit the light. These tiny slits are $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches to $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches wide (western), and 1 foot 6 inches (western), and 1 foot $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches (eastern) high, in the clear. The eastern is widened out to 7 inches at bottom and both slabs are 2 inches thick. Both have a slot or groove on the outside face and a rough sinking or rebate on the wooden cill, into which the oiled linen or horn were fixed by means of the same clip-headed nails as at Witley, some of which still remain in position.

It should be remarked here that though this north wall has come down to us, by little less than a miracle, precisely as our Saxon forefathers built it, the east wall, save for its corners, is practically modern, though there are traces of a small circular window in the apex of its gable, which may represent an original feature to light a roof-chamber. The south wall, though on the Saxon foundation, was largely rebuilt in the first half of the thirteenth century, when two wide lancet windows replaced the Saxon openings, and a piscina and other features were introduced. The wide pointed chancel arch, of two continuous chamfered orders, then took the place of the tall and narrow round-headed chancel arch that doubtless preceded it. *Vide* illustration, S.A.C. xviii, p. 89.

But these thirteenth-century innovations, besides sparing the Saxon windows in the north wall of the chancel, fortunately left us what appears to have been a charcoal oven in the north wall below the bottom splay of the two Saxon windows; and one may surmise that this was used for baking the sacramental wafers, and heating charcoal for incense. Black wood-soot was found adhering to the soffit of the "roof" or lintel, of this tall oblong recess. Such a feature as this oven has rarely survived in our churches; and I know of only one other to which a pre-Conquest date may be assigned—the small triangular headed recess in the east wall of the mid-eleventh century church of Ovingdean, Sussex. Up to the time of our investigations this recess was filled by a modern steel "safe!" "To what base uses," etc.

The other feature undisturbed by thirteenth and nineteenth century innovators, and remaining in both north and south walls of this little chancel, is the shelf, or set-back, of about

9 inches in depth, which at first I found very difficult to account for, until it suddenly occurred to me as the seating for the floor of a roof-chamber, or chambers, that housed the resident-priest of Saxon days.¹ Now the braced collar and rafter roof, with inner and outer wall-plates that we find here,



THURSLEY CHURCH. SECTION OF CHANCEL (NOT TO SCALE) TO SHOW PROBABLE SAXON ROOF-CHAMBERS AND OVEN, ETC.

in excellent preservation is, as a form of roof framing, so elementary and obvious, that it may go back to a hoary antiquity,

¹ Another theory to account for this set-off is that the wall was heightened in the thirteenth century, but there is no evidence for this in the character and materials of the wall, inside or out.

and certainly must have been in common use by the builders of our pre-Conquest churches. Equally, its elementary practical nature would ensure the perpetuation of this form of roof throughout the Middle Ages. Assuming, therefore, a Saxon date for this chancel roof, I examined the upper surface of the tie-beam, which is not in the centre of the length of the chancel, but considerably to the eastward, and I discovered, filled up with dust, deep mortice-holes, possibly intended to take the posts of a doorway.¹ There may have been a light partition with a door in it between two roof chambers, one, the smaller, the priest's bedroom. These would probably be entered by means of a ladder from the chancel; or possibly externally by a dormer, combining door and window, set in the roof: but I consider this unlikely. I have proved the existence of a roof-chamber, or chambers, at Stoke d'Abernon Church, where the Saxon doorway, which I opened about twenty years ago, in the upper part of the lofty south wall of the nave, must have been entered through a double-storey porch, long since destroyed.

While revising this paper for publication, I have opened out the apse and chancel roofs of East Ham Church, Essex, and found a doorway from the apse to the priest's chamber over the chancel—both of early twelfth-century date. Here a ladder gave access from the apse.

It remains to mention that when the rubble blocking of the internal splays was removed the splays of the eastern of the two windows were found to be ruled out in double red lines, to imitate masonry, with a six-petalled rose in the centre of each "stone," all on a white ground, save that the border of arch and jambs was alternately white and yellow—a treatment of common occurrence in twelfth and thirteenth century colour decoration, as *e.g.* in St. Albans Abbey and East Ham Church, Essex.

The western window is bordered on the face of the wall by fourteenth-century tracery patterns in black, consisting of trefoils in triangles and spandrel pieces of similar design in the angles of the head. These have been carefully fixed and preserved, together with the masonry pattern on the eastern window.

¹ A second tie-beam is hard up against the chancel arch.