

DISCOVERIES DURING THE DEMOLITION OF THE CHURCH OF ST. MICHAEL, BASSISHAW.

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BY

F. C. EELES, Esq.

THE work of clearing the human remains from the church of St. Michael, Bassishaw, previous to its demolition is now at an end. Many interesting discoveries have been made and much valuable light has been thrown upon the previous buildings which occupied the same site. The foundations, and in places considerably more, not only of the church which perished in the fire of 1666, but also of at least one earlier building, have been laid bare, and various relics, Roman, mediæval, and of later date, have come to light. It is here proposed to give a short outline of what can be learnt of the earlier churches and a description of the more important of the "finds."

The church, as it stands at present, was rebuilt by Sir Christopher Wren in 1676-9, ten years after it was burnt in the Great Fire. As with most of the City churches, the plan is not rectangular, in this case it widens towards the west and also towards the north. The building consists of nave, north and south aisles, with tower at the west end of the nave standing disengaged from the aisles. The mediæval parish churches of London (at least in their final development) were not provided with structural chancels, and in this respect, here as elsewhere, Wren imitated

the arrangement of the previous building. Since his time, in the angle between the south side of the tower and the west end of the south aisle, a vestry has been added, and the corresponding space on the north side of the tower has been walled in, probably at no very distant date, and used as a yard for coals and wood. Engravings of 1754 and 1812 show a small walled-in churchyard containing trees at the east end of the church, perhaps the relic of a once much larger churchyard, for the City has been continually encroaching upon church land from time to time. The church now stands on ground coterminous with its own walls everywhere, except in the north-west and south-west corners of the site, which are occupied by the yard and vestry already mentioned.

After the removal of all the lead coffins of which the existence and position were known, the soil within the church was carefully sifted with the object of collecting the loose bones. This involved excavations to a depth of from twelve to seventeen feet over the whole site. Work was begun in the south aisle one bay from the west end, and was continued eastward. Then the chancel, nave, and north aisle were excavated from east to west, then the tower and the yard in the north-west corner. The west end of the south aisle was next taken in hand, and lastly the vestry. The present writer was in Scotland during the earlier part of the work and cannot speak from personal observation of the south aisle and the eastern part of the church. For these Mr. Welch's paper may be consulted.

It has long been known that as at St. Michael, Wood Street, SS. Anne and Agnes, and in other well-

known cases, the two lowest stages of the mediæval tower were used again by Wren, and three arches densely coated with whitewash are visible from the loft behind the organ. The recent excavations have also shown that, as might have been expected from the unsymmetrical plan, the 17th century church was built upon the foundations of its mediæval predecessor. It was, moreover, cheaply built, and in most places rather more than the foundations of the old church were used, but nowhere except in the tower were any large portions of the walls left. The present church was built at a higher level than the old church, the 15th century floor of which has been found at a depth of a little over four feet, while traces of much lower floor levels were also discovered. The excavations at the west end revealed the important fact that Wren curtailed the length of the aisles, those of the old church having extended westwards on each side of the tower, occupying the ground now covered by the vestry and yard. Thus the tower originally stood engaged, the west side being flush with the west ends of the aisles, into which the arches opened, which were under the north and south sides of the tower.

The earliest church on this site of which we have any record was in existence in the 12th century, but no certain traces of it have been found. Most likely it was small, and it was probably swept away to make room for the large building which appears to have succeeded it in the 13th century. To this later period belong the lowest portions of the foundations which have been discovered, and the plan of the church as settled in the re-building of this date does not seem to have been departed from in any important degree until

Wren cut short the aisles in 1676. These early foundations contain several rough, low arches, used perhaps to make them more secure on account of a marshy site. Fragments of worked stone of 14th century date show that something was done then, but how much is not clear, probably only a few repairs. In the earlier part of the 15th century, or at any rate, some time before 1460, the church seems to have been practically rebuilt from the benefactions of one John Barton, and Agnes, his wife, and it was this building which survived until the fire of 1666. The tower was rebuilt from its foundations at this time, and the floor of the church was raised two feet two inches. The general appearance of the church after this 15th century rebuilding must have been something between that of St. Giles without Cripplegate and St. Sepulchre without Newgate, not nearly so large as the latter, although the interior of the engaged tower at the west end must have looked not unlike it. There seems to have been a clerestory, as a doorway in the east face of the second stage of the tower, now built up, must have led on to the roof above it. This and a piece of coping found point to battlements having existed. The roofs, tiled outside, were low pitched or flat within and unbroken by any chancel arch, the rood screen alone forming the division between the chancel and the nave. The tower must have risen at least two stages above the clerestory, it had no buttresses, and the staircase being inside, the familiar feature of the projecting turret must have been absent. The towers of St. Sepulchre's and Isleworth have no turret, though both have stone staircases. The making a prominent feature of the staircase turret seems to

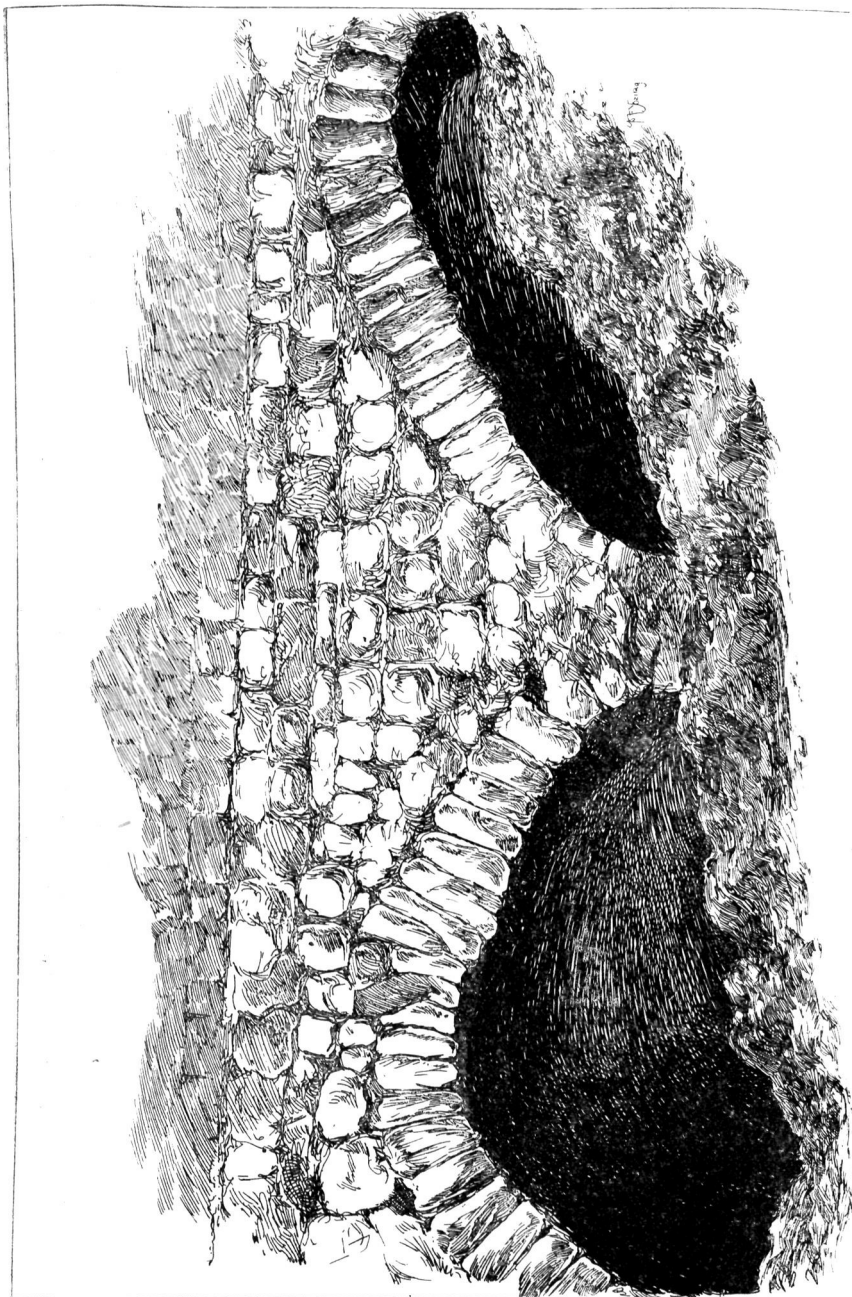
have been a rather later development in the construction of towers ; it may be remembered that the majority of the perpendicular towers in this part of England were built after the middle of the 15th century. The tower of St. Michael, Bassishaw, perhaps had small pinnacles, like that of Isleworth.*

Having discussed the general plan of the church, it will now be well to describe in greater detail what has been found, following the course of the excavations.

At a depth of from twelve to fifteen feet under the south wall, are what are believed to be the foundations of the 13th century church. The height of these is roughly about six feet, except towards the west end of the aisle, where they give place to a little 14th century work at a height of about four feet. In the eastern half of the wall are the three rough, low arches at regular intervals, already alluded to. (*See illustration.*)

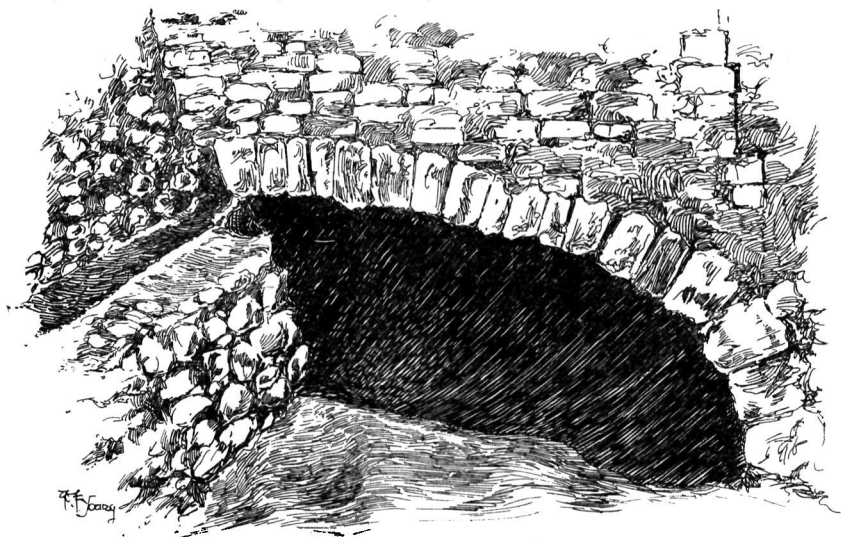
Between this work and Wren's floor level are several courses—about four feet to five feet in all—of what seems to be 15th century work. The extreme east end of the south aisle is occupied by Sir John Gresham's vault—a brick structure joining the south wall, and built in 1555-6, of which a fuller description will be found in Mr. Welch's paper. Here it is only necessary to say that the east wall of the aisle was cut into to give

* Middlesex towers may be roughly divided into two classes. (1) Those of the so-called Kentish type, which includes the larger towers, such as Edgware, Heston, or Twickenham, with stone staircases running up in a projecting turret. (2) Those of the more peculiarly Middlesex type, which includes all the smallest towers in the county, some of which are also diminutive. In these cases the stone staircase is not made an architectural feature, usually stopping short of the highest stage, as at Finchley and Hendon, and sometimes absent altogether, as at Hayes.



ARCHES BENEATH WALL OF SOUTH AISLE, ST. MICHAEL, BASSISHAW.

the vault additional length, and that the vault was subsequently raised in height and slightly extended westwards, what was formerly the east end being reduced to a mere recess. As may be imagined, this vault effectually obscures the earlier work in the south-east corner of the church. Further north, across the east end of the chancel, there is a rough irregular arch in the foundation of the wall ; it seems later than the 13th century. A piece of walling was found which ran westwards from the east wall and at right angles to it, north of the centre of the chancel, but south of the line of Wren's pillars. (See illustration.)



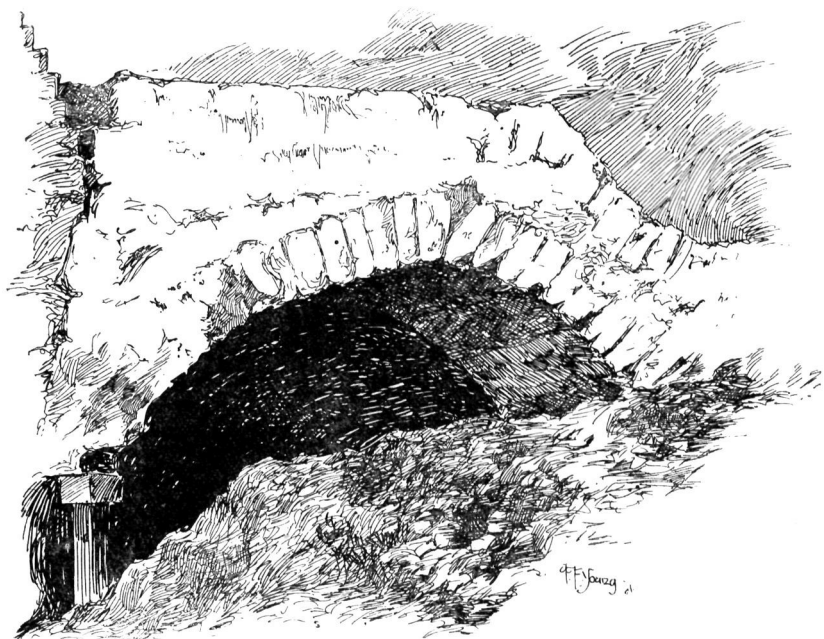
WALL RUNNING AT RIGHT ANGLES TO EAST WALL, ST. MICHAEL, BASSISHAW.

The writer, unfortunately, did not see this ; it may possibly have been a fragment of the 12th century church. What is here assumed to be 13th century work was found throughout the north aisle, but

without arches, except at the west end. Several of these arches were found under the line of the pillars on the south side of the nave, and are clearly the foundations of an arcade; of what date is uncertain, as no such foundations occur under the pillars on the north side, though two or three rough pieces of masonry were found in a line a little to the south of them, and may have formed the foundations of an earlier arcade than that of the 15th century, as it will presently be shown that Wren followed the line of the 15th century work. The writer did not see the arches under the south arcade; they were described to him as being similar to the early foundation arches under the walls, although it is possible that they are of much later date, and were built in the 15th century. (*See illustration, p. 172.*)

Below the north doorway, which occupies the westmost bay of Wren's north aisle (the second bay, that is to say, in the earlier churches) a rough arch exists in the earlier foundations, like the foundation arches in the south aisle. Over this arch is clearly to be seen the level of the 13th century floor, six feet two inches below Wren's floor, with three courses of the 13th century wall, two feet two inches thick, in which are the plain jambs of a doorway three feet ten inches wide. Between these jambs a step has been built at a later time, as the level of the ground outside gradually became higher. Wren seems to have removed all traces of any 15th century doorway which may have existed, although the offset which marks the level of the floor of that date is clearly to be seen.

The south doorway was opposite; it seems to



ARCH IN FOUNDATIONS, NORTH SIDE OF SOUTH AISLE,
ST. MICHAEL, BASSISHAW.

have been similar; the levels are the same; there is a deep offset on the level of the earlier or 13th century floor, but no arch in the foundation of this date.

The earlier work at the west end is much obscured by the 15th century tower, but excavations under the yard and vestry leave no room for doubt but that the 13th century church extended over the site now covered by them. A rough arch, like those under the north doorway and in the south aisle, was exposed on the north side, directly under the yard gate, but there are none at the west end of the aisle, where the foundations are by no means deep. No trace of a west doorway was found under the tower, and no very

definite traces of earlier work than that of the 15th century.

The foundations of the tower are not as heavy as might have been expected;* they chiefly consist of large masses of stonework in the corners, that in the north-west corner being by far the largest. An enormous mass of masonry, seemingly 15th century work, was found projecting southwards from the face of the tower at the south-east corner. The old floor of the tower was found intact four feet below Wren's floor; it originally consisted of very large thick red tiles, but had subsequently been repaired with bricks and a few pieces of stone. In the north part of the west side was what seemed like a step, in the top of which some earlier figured tiles had been laid. The staircase is carried up in the south-west corner, partly in the thickness of the wall, but chiefly in a projection built *inside* the tower, something after the manner of the staircase-turrets so commonly built *outside* towers. Wren used this, accommodating it to his raised floor by making a new doorway in the north-east face of the projection which holds it. The base of the original doorway to the staircase was found lower down, and in the east face. Wren blocked up all three arches under the tower with heavy masonry in which he made small doorways leading on the east into the church, and on the north and south to the outside. The last now lead into the yard and vestry respectively. To support his new walls, he built very broad arches of brick just above the old floor level,

* Although it is just possible that the 13th century church may have had an engaged tower like that at Watford, no certain indication of its existence has yet been found, and the evidence points rather the other way.

stretching from base to base of the 15th century responds.

Outside the tower, in what were the south-west corner of the north aisle and the north-west corner of the south aisle, were found the bases of the responds of the 15th century arcade. They were close to the tower, but free from it. That on the south side is in the best state of preservation, and shows that its pillars had octagonal bases with simple mouldings supporting plain octagonal shafts. These are in line with Wren's pillars and with the arches in the foundations on the south side of the nave, but they are outside the line of the isolated pieces of stonework on the north of the nave. They are especially interesting as showing a type of 15th century arcade of which there is now no example in the City of London. They also show that the tower stood free of the arcade, which passed by it upon each side. This accounts for the large chamfer which has been found on the eastern corners of the tower, which stood inside the church. What one would expect with an engaged tower is that the responds of the arcade would have been attached to the east face of the tower, one on each side of the tower arch.

On the east face of the tower, on the north of the arch leading into the church, was found a late Perpendicular stoup, or basin for holy water, evidently an insertion, probably of about 1520 or even later, as bricks were used to build it in. The wood moulding and the projecting part of the basin had been knocked off. Through the kindness of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners this has been presented to the Guildhall Museum, where it can now be seen. Now that the

basin has been removed and it is possible to examine it carefully, one finds from its form that it was not originally intended to be built into the wall. Perhaps it once stood on a pillar, like a small font, and was afterwards built in to economise space.

Wren built large brick arches to support his new west ends to the aisles. That on the north stretches right across the aisle. After its erection it gave way by reason of a large buttress for the tower having been built with the lower end resting on the middle of it, and it had to be shored up from below. The fact is that Wren had very little money to spend on the church, and there was carelessness in the rebuilding of it. On the south side the brick arch is smaller, as Wren was able to use part of the large mass of stonework already mentioned as existing to the south of the south-east corner of the tower. Here, too, he ran up a large buttress of ashlar work in diagonal courses.

Much of the 15th century aisle floor was still left under the vestry. It consisted of large plain green and yellow tiles. The middle of the floor had been destroyed to make room for a small rectangular brick vault 8 feet 6 inches by 6 feet 1 inch, entered from above, and built in 1780. On the removal of the floor of this vault it was found to have been built on the top of an older one of the same size, which was below the level of the 15th century floor. At the east end of this vault six steps were found leading upwards towards the south aisle, but rendered useless by Wren's curtailment of the aisle. The vault was empty and very low; two skulls had been carefully built into the brickwork on the south side, the one 2 feet 9½ inches from the east end of the vault and the

other 1 foot 7 inches further west, both on the same level. This recalls the two skulls—said to be those of Danes killed in battle at an early date—which remained until recently in at least two churches in the north-east of Scotland*, although the cases are not really parallel, for in the Scottish cases the skulls were in the church and not merely built into a vault. This vault was perhaps built in 1630, and used as a charnel house or bone crypt. That work was done on the church in 1630 we know from Hatton's "New View of London," and several pieces of dressed and moulded stone of about this period were found to have been used by Wren to support the foundation arch at the west end of the north aisle.

We will now turn to the carved stone and other relics found in the church. Of the carved stones the earliest is one of 13th century date, showing the bases of two small semi-detached shafts. It is probably part of a doorway. A group of stones, worked in the early part of the fourteenth century, was found in the south-west part of the nave, apparently having been used as foundation for the fifteenth century arcade. Among them are two or three pieces of a label or hood-moulding, and two pieces of plate-tracery showing part of the trefoiled heads of two adjacent lights, the spandrels being unpierced.

Only two fragments of 15th century work were found (besides what actually remained *in situ* in the lower part of the tower), a section of the respond

* Gamrie, St. John the Evangelist, on the north coast of Aberdeenshire and Barry; SS. Marnoch and Stephen, on the Forfarshire side of the Firth of Tay. J. B. Pratt, "Buchan," p. 186; Andrew Jervise, "Epitaphs and Inscriptions in the North-East of Scotland," v. 2, pp. 326-333.

of the east arch of the tower, evidently cut out and thrown aside by Wren, and a piece of coping, probably from the battlemented parapet. The rest of the 15th century stones were probably used up again by Wren in the walls of the new church or else thrown out so as not to interfere with burials.

Part of the volute from the top of some gigantic Ionic or Composite column was found on the north side of the yard. It is hard to say where this can have come from, or of what it can have formed a part ; there is nothing like it anywhere about the church. It probably belonged to some of the work done in 1630.

Besides the tiles already mentioned, many others have been found. Some are of the 13th century and a few are of the 14th. Most of the ornaments are conventional or geometrical, though some are heraldic. A few were found set alternately with plain red tiles in a piece of 13th century flooring on the south side of the nave. The 15th century floor was partly of large plain red tiles and partly of the mixture of green and yellow glazed tiles which has already been mentioned. It was only found *in situ* under the tower and vestry.

The pottery and glass found consisted of (1) some pieces of common red Roman or Arctine ware found in the south-west corner of the church ; (2) fragments of mediæval vessels of several kinds ; (3) pieces of 17th century glazed ware, two bottles, and some Dutch tiles ; (4) an unusual quantity of clay tobacco pipes, all of one date, and probably left by Wren's workmen. Towards the west end of the nave, laid upside down, were three fragments which, when put together, form the greater part of a fine early

13th century cross slab. These have been carefully preserved, and are now in the Guildhall Museum. There is a plain hollow round the edge of the stone, no inscription, and on the face of the slab a plain cross on a shaft in low relief. The lower part of the slab, with the base of the cross, together with one edge, are entirely gone, and could not be found although search was made.

Among the rubbish used by Wren to fill up the space above the 15th century floor of the tower, was a small piece of a censer of "latten," or some similar material. It may, perhaps, be part of the lid, corroded and battered past recognition, but it is more probably part of the pan which held the charcoal, having belonged to a censer of more valuable metal. Such pans are mentioned in the inventory of the goods and ornaments of St. Mary-le-bow in 1552 :

"Item two irons that were in the sensures to putt ffyer in weying—xix oz."

The remarkable thing is that in the Edwardian returns for St. Michael, Bassishaw, no censer is mentioned, either among ornaments remaining or among ornaments sold. The Edwardian inventories do not, however, seem to invariably specify everything which the churches possessed. This fragment of a censer or pan is now preserved in the Guildhall Museum.

In conclusion, the writer must express his indebtedness to Mr. J. H. Edmonds, the representative of St. Michael's churchwardens, and to the foreman and workmen of Messrs. Dove Brothers, the contractors, who put every facility in his way. Lastly, he would thank Mr. W. R. Lethaby and Mr. Philip Norman for giving much valuable help.