

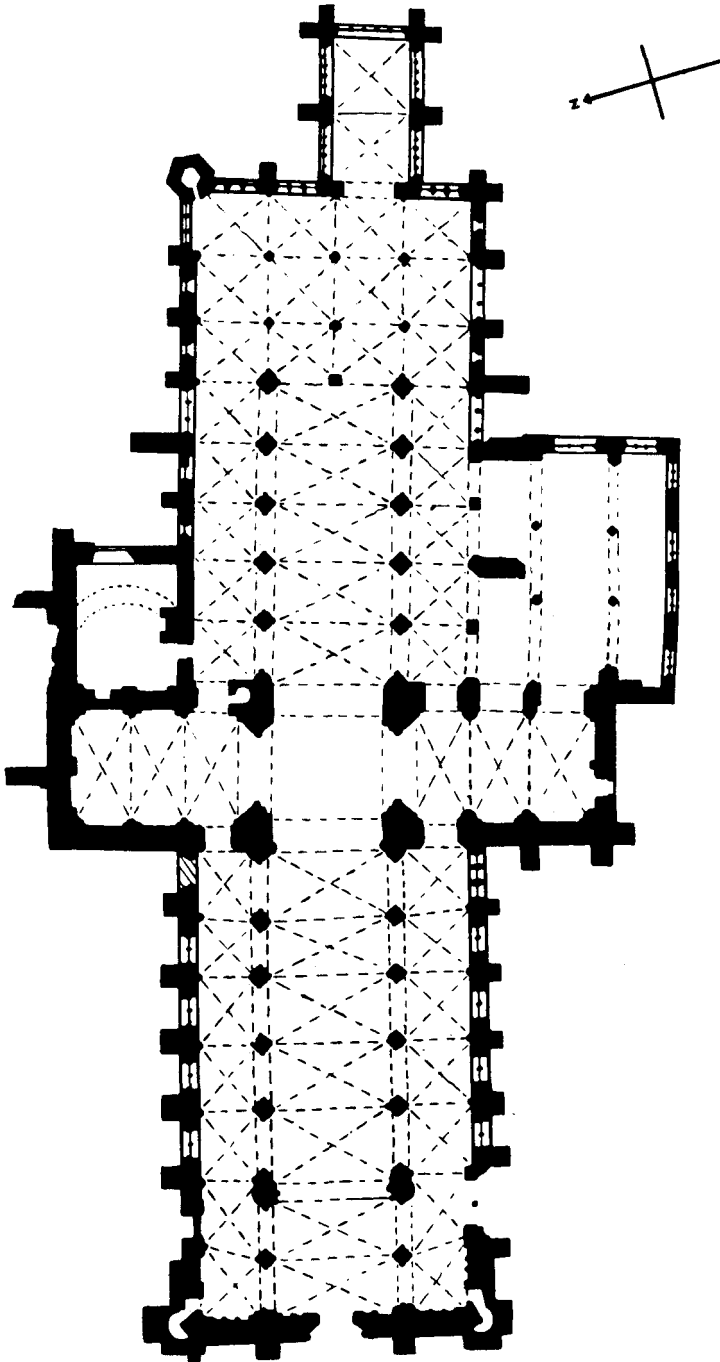
THE PRE-CONQUEST MINSTER AT SOUTHWARK

By J. T. SMITH, F.S.A.

The existence of a church at Southwark before the Norman Conquest is made clear from a statement in Domesday Book that Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, "himself has in Sudwerche one minster"¹, which in the time of King Edward had been held by the king. The origin, status and character of this church are extremely obscure, and it is hoped to show in this note that architectural evidence can supplement the slight knowledge to be derived from documents.

Indeed, apart from Domesday Book, there is only one source for the pre-Conquest period, a tradition which John Stow incorporated in his *Survey of London*. "This Church or some other in place thereof was of old time long before the Conquest an house of sisters founded by a mayden named Mary, unto which house and sisters she left (as was left to her by her parents) the oversight and profites of a crosse ferrie or traverse ferrie over the Thames, here kept before that any bridge was builded. This house of sisters was after by Swithen, a noble Lady, converted into a Colledge of Priests, who in place of the Ferrie builded a bridge of timber, and from time to time kept the same in good reparations, but lastlie the same bridge was builded of stone, and then in the year 1106 was this Church againe founded for Channons Regular, by William Pont de le Arche and William Dauncey, Knights Normans"². The immediate source of this tradition was "Bartholomew Linsted, alias Fowle, last Prior of St. Marie Overies Church in Southwarke"³. Clearly the passage of time has distorted the details of the story; "Swithen, a noble lady", can possibly be identified with St. Swithin, Bishop of Winchester from 852 to 862⁴.

We have now exhausted the literary sources, but in order to discuss the architectural evidence it is necessary to carry the history a little further. Early in the 12th century—perhaps about 1106—a religious community of some sort was established at Southwark which was transformed a few years later into a house of Austin Canons⁵. The change may have taken place about 1120-5 with the help of Bishop Giffard⁶. In July 1212 the priory was severely damaged by fire⁷, and the consequent rebuilding went on for the greater part of the 13th century; it was not finished by 1273⁸. Further medieval developments are of no importance for the present purpose.



100 FEET

THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST. MARY OVERIE,
SOUTHWARK

Alongside these facts derived from written sources we may set out the accepted architectural development of the church during the same period. "Of the early 12th-century church only two doorways and a recess in the N. wall of the nave, possibly the core of the transept walls and the N. spring of the apse of the N. transept chapel, now remain. The church at this time consisted of an aisled nave, transept with one apsidal eastern chapel probably in both arms and a presbytery of indeterminate size and form"⁹. To this may be added one further inference: "From the great size of the westernmost piers of the old nave, it seems likely that the Norman church had had, or had been intended to have, a western as well as a central tower, or a great narthex"¹⁰. The extensive 13th-century work which was and in part still is visible is ascribed to the period after the fire of 1212. "The north wall of the nave, the lower part of the north transept, and the lower stage of the tower appear to have escaped total destruction, while the quire, south transept (if it had ever been built), upper part of the tower, and the nave above the piers called for complete rebuilding". Moreover "it is probable that he [Bishop Peter des Roches] used the old nave piers, casing them with Caen stone"¹¹. The nave and aisles were first rebuilt, then the quire, followed by the north transept. "In the meantime the remains of the Norman central tower were left standing, probably to the full height of the crossing arches"; only at the end of the 13th century were the new crossing arches inserted¹².

Turning to Dollman's plan of the nave and crossing, there are three peculiarities which invite explanation: the crossing is wider than the choir and nave, and forms bold salient angles with them, and in a less marked fashion with the transepts too; the bays of the nave are irregularly spaced; and the second pair of piers from the west end of the nave are exceptionally heavy. The first of these features has not specifically been discussed in any account of the church, although the late 13th-century building or recasing of a Norman crossing has been presumed¹³.

The second has been pointed out but not explained¹⁴; and the third, as has been stated above, has been taken to indicate an intended Norman tower or towers¹⁵.

Now it happens that just these three features, or features astonishingly like them, are found in combination at the abbey church of Sherborne where they have recently been the subject of a brilliant and convincing explanation by the late Sir Alfred Clapham¹⁶ which is the whole basis of this article.

Of the crossing at Sherborne Sir Alfred remarked: "It can be shown . . . that most of the major churches of the late 10th and early 11th century date were cruciform on plan and had a well-defined crossing supporting either a masonry tower or a timber lantern. The distinguishing feature of those crossings is that they were wider than the chancel and transepts, and perhaps than the nave also, thus forming salient angles between those parts of the structure. This feature . . . is presumptive evidence of this date"¹⁷. Dollman's plan of Southwark shows the very bold salient angles to the presbytery and the medieval nave; the others are much less evident, but the crossing does seem to have been slightly wider than the N. transept and perhaps than the S. transept too. If it be objected that there is no salient angle towards the transepts corresponding to the bold projection of the tower piers into the aisles, another Saxon church may be cited, Milborne Port in Somerset, where the tower preserves the salient N.E. and N.W. angles with an undoubted pre-Conquest moulding running round them, whereas the projection of the S.E. and S.W. angles is concealed by later addition. If the analogy be accepted, we have at Southwark either a recased late Saxon crossing, or, less probably, a post-Conquest crossing rebuilt on Saxon lines. Either way it is evidence of a pre-Conquest cruciform church.

At Sherborne the nave is only about 85 ft. long and of five bays. "This might well represent the restricted dimensions of the pre-Conquest nave and is quite at variance with the normally prolonged naves of the Anglo-Norman builders"¹⁸. Similarly the nave at Southwark seems at one stage of its existence to have been about 75 ft. long and also of five bays; the measurement is taken from the crossing to the two exceptionally heavy piers west of the fifth bay. These piers have earlier been taken to prove the former existence of a tower or the intention to build one (p. 176 above), and there is some evidence that this previous termination of the nave antedates the 13th-century work. The two westernmost bays were certainly earlier than the rest of the nave as drawn by Dollman and were probably of very late 12th-century date; proof of this may be seen in Dollman's plates nos. 9 and 14, and in a drawing and note by John Buckler¹⁹. The simplest explanation of these two bays is that they represent a lengthening of the earlier nave beyond the former W. tower or front. Sir Alfred Clapham's remark that Sherborne nave does not conform to normal Anglo-Norman proportions applies equally to Southwark; the two west bays were added presumably, to give it a length more appropriate to a church of Austin Canons.

One further resemblance between the naves of Sherborne and

Southwark is that in each case the bays are of curiously irregular length. At Sherborne this is seen most clearly by comparing the bays of the arcades with the regular setting-out of the 15th-century clearstorey above²⁰. Dollman's longitudinal section of Southwark (his plate 9—not reproduced) shows the same thing in a different way. The trefoiled arches of the triforium were all of identical span, yet the number to each bay of the arcade varies. Disregarding the two westernmost and presumably post-Conquest bays, the number of triforium arches to each bay of the arcade is respectively, from west to east, six, five, five, four and five²¹.

It is unfortunately impossible to demonstrate at Southwark the intended lay-out of the Norman nave. Sir Alfred Clapham was able to do this at Sherborne, and to superimpose on a plan of the existing church the setting-out of the intended 12th-century arcade. His conclusions were as follows: "Setting this . . . out on the plan it becomes clear that the regularly spaced bays of a 12th-century nave could not have been responsible for the erratic lay-out of the existing arcades and the six bays of the [intended Norman] nave are not extensive enough to allow of two if not three successive campaigns of building to explain this irregularity, particularly as so great a builder as Bishop Roger of Salisbury was directly concerned in the matter."

"One explanation alone would seem to fit the facts, and that is that work on the church had only reached the crossing and the E. responds of the nave²² when Bishop Roger fell from power in 1139 and that the rest of the pre-Conquest nave was still standing. Pre-Conquest building, as is well-known, was not distinguished by any degree of exactitude in the setting-out of the structure or in the symmetry of the piers, and furthermore, the structural history of the nave is entirely unknown. It is thus perhaps remotely possible that the irregularity of the existing nave is due to unknown factors of this nature the character of which it is idle to surmise"²³.

It would be equally idle to surmise that the nave of Southwark is susceptible of exactly the same explanation, yet the coincidence, taken in conjunction with the other similarities between Sherborne and Southwark, is remarkable and suggestive. In both churches it is hard to believe that the 12th and 13th-century builders would have put up of their own volition arcades of unequally spaced bays, since in both it can be shown that other parts of the structure were built in regular bays: the 15th-century clearstorey at Sherborne, the 13th-century triforium at Southwark. If this be accepted it is necessary in both cases to seek the explanation in the existence of an earlier structure.

What conclusions about the pre-Conquest church at Southwark can we draw from the architectural evidence? The salient angles of the crossing prove that it was a cruciform building, and perhaps we cannot go beyond this with certainty. But the other evidence suggests strongly that it was aisled, that it either had a western tower or was intended to have one, and that in size it was comparable to the larger churches of Wessex.

If these conclusions be accepted, Southwark must have been by the standards of surviving late Saxon architecture a big and imposing structure. In terms of ecclesiastical organisation this implies rather more than a parish church; something like the loosely-knit college of priests implied in Linsted's tradition would be appropriate. And if only the more limited implication of the architectural evidence be accepted, it does at least throw a little light on the nature of the Domesday minister.

- 1 D.Bk. text in translation, *V.C.H. Surrey*, I, 305.
- 2 John Stow, *A Survey of London*, ed. C. L. Kingsford (1908), II, 56.
- 3 *ibid.*, I, 21.
- 4 *V.C.H. Surrey*, II, 107; L.C.C. Survey of London, XXII, *Bankside*, 6.
- 5 The date commonly accepted for the establishment of the Augustinians is 1106 (*V.C.H. Surrey*, II, 107) but there is reason to doubt this; cf. J. C. Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons . . .*, 119-120 and note.
- 6 *loc. cit.*
- 7 *V.C.H. Surrey*, II, 107, quoting Matthew Paris, *Chron. Major.* (Rolls Series), II, 536, and rejecting the date 1207 given in the Bermondsey Annals, which nevertheless is repeated in *V.C.H.* IV, 155.
- 8 *V.C.H.* IV, 155; *R.C.H.M.*, *East London*, 59.
- 9 *R.C.H.M.*, *East London*, 58.
- 10 *V.C.H. Surrey*, IV, 155. This is deduced from the set of drawings in F. T. Dollman, *The Priory of St. Mary Overie, Southwark* (1881), based largely on measurements and sketches made by George Gwilt before the nave was demolished in 1838.
- 11 *V.C.H.*, *loc. cit.*
- 12 *ibid.*; but cf. *R.C.H.M.* plan and p.59: "the piers of the central tower were probably rebuilt or recased at the same time" as the rebuilding of the S. transept, i.e. c. 1310. On the plan the core of the piers is marked as 13th century and the casing as 14th century.
- 13 *V.C.H.* IV, *loc. cit.*; *R.C.H.M.*, *loc. cit.*
- 14 *Arch. J.*, LXXI (1914), 203.
- 15 This is also the view taken in *Arch. J.*, *loc. cit.*
- 16 'The Early Church at Sherborne'; *R.C.H.M. West Dorset*, xlvii-1.
- 17 *ibid.*, xlviii.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 *Archaeologia*, XXIX. (1842), 241-2, and plate XXIX.
- 20 *R.C.H.M. West Dorset*, xliii.
- 21 The only bays for which Dollman gives measurements are the first, fourth and fifth E. of the crossing, respectively 10 ft. 3½ ins., 8 ft. 10 ins. and 11 ft. clear of the shafts.
- 22 The responds were used by Clapham to determine the spacing of the intended Norman arcade.
- 23 *R.C.H.M.* *loc. cit.*, with plan.

NOTE: The illustration is traced from E. T. Dollman's plan, and shows the Church approximately as it was in 1469, before the collapse of the nave vaulting.