

St. Martin's Church at Canterbury: A Survey of the Earliest Structural Features

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IN January 1954, as a result of excavations carried out by workmen engaged on restoration work at St. Martin's Church at Canterbury, Kent (FIG. 3), some new information concerning the earliest structure came to light. At the invitation of the then rector, the Rev. Colin Perry, I examined and recorded the structural features thus disclosed. The results of this investigation are embodied in this paper, which aims at correlating all the relevant information about the oldest part of the church.

The history of the church of St. Martin is well known. Before the year 588 Ethelbert, king of Kent, had married Bertha, a daughter of the Frankish king, Charibert of Paris. She was a Christian, and Bishop Luidhard, supposedly of Senlis, accompanied her to England as her chaplain and conducted Christian services on her behalf in a church in Canterbury before the arrival of the Augustinian missionaries.

Bede, in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed c. 731, gives the city a prominent place. He tells us that 'there was at the east end of the city an ancient church built in the honour of St. Martin, made while the Romans were yet dwelling in the Island, in which the Queen (which as we have said was a Christian woman) did use commonly to pray'.¹ Although Bede lived at Jarrow in Co. Durham, many miles away from Canterbury, he obtained his information from local circles, his main informant being Albinus, abbot of the great abbey of St. Augustine; hence the statement relating to St. Martin's Church bears the stamp of authenticity. In fact, it is now generally assumed that it occupied part of the site of the present-day church which bears the same dedication, and it is highly probable that the oldest part of the building now to be described (labelled 'early chancel' in FIG. 3) was the one used by Queen Bertha.

The following survey includes, (a) observations made by the late Rev. Canons C. F. Routledge and G. M. Livett during extensive restoration work carried out during the last decade of the 19th century;² (b) structural features still visible in the church; and (c) those seen by me in 1954.

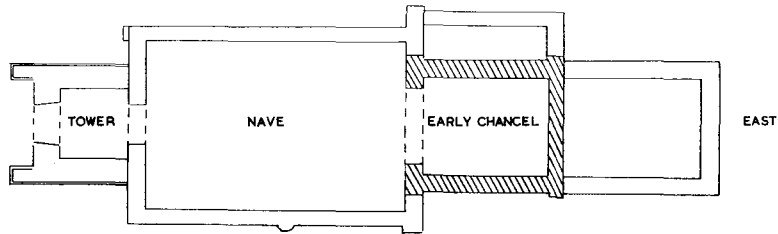
¹ Bede, *H.E.*, I, ch. 26.

Archaeol. Cantiana, xxii (1897), 1 ff.

TRACES OF THE EARLIEST STRUCTURE (FIG. 4)

THE SOUTH WALL

The original external face of the south wall is now masked by the restoration work carried out many years ago when flints were included in the facing, but the original method of construction is seen to advantage inside the church. Here, in the western part of the present chancel, the wall is built of flat Roman tiles evenly laid in courses with narrow joints averaging four tiles to one foot. The edges of



10 0 10 20 30 40 FEET

FIG. 3

ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH, CANTERBURY
Plan showing position of early chancel (p. 11)

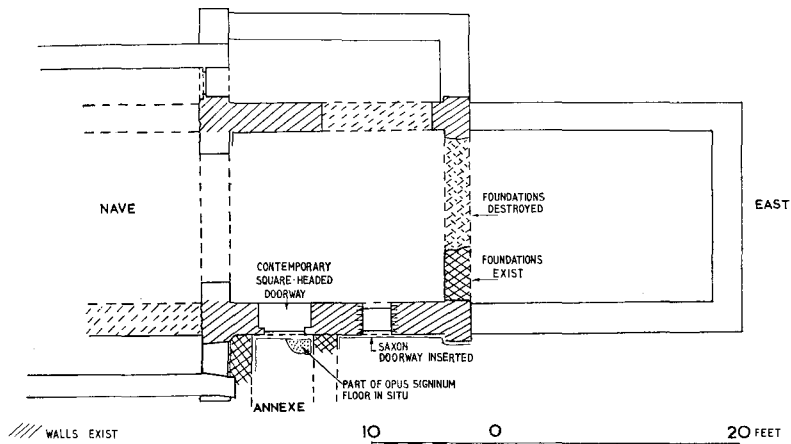


FIG. 4

ST. MARTIN'S CHURCH, CANTERBURY
Plan showing known walls and foundations of earliest part of church

many of these tiles are sharp and true, but others are now fragmentary and suggest reused building material. The wall stands on foundations laid in a trench dug into the natural sandy loam to a depth of 2 feet. The lowest part consists of four courses of flints laid in loam, on which is a single course of flints laid in mortar.

The wall as seen today extends westwards for a distance of 20 feet as far as the present chancel arch. It is not known for certain whether it terminated there,

but a foundation thought by Livett to be of the same build continues westwards beneath the floor of the nave. If this is true, the wall must have been destroyed when the nave was built and would, therefore, have been of an earlier date.

THE BUTTRESSES

Two feet from the east end of the earliest part of the south wall of the chancel just described, there is a distinct break beyond which the work is not so regular. In the corresponding position against the external face of the wall stands a buttress now built with quoins of Caen stone (added in the 19th century) to replace an earlier one built entirely of Roman tiles. This buttress is 8 ft. 4 in. high and 2 ft. wide and it projects outwards for 6 inches. It is doubtful whether anything of its predecessor survives. Above the chamfered top the coursing of the tiles is very irregular compared with that in the lower part, but the eastern bonding joint between the early tile-built wall and the much later chancel is clearly seen to a height of 3 ft. above the top of the buttress.

The foundations of the buttress were uncovered about 1895 and according to Livett accurately represented in dimension and position an early tile-built buttress. A hole cut into the wall at that time immediately east of this buttress showed a clean face of Roman tiles which was traced for a distance of 2 ft. 2 in. in continuation of the east face of the buttress on the east side of the original wall. The remains of a similar buttress at the west end of the south wall are now embedded in the east wall of the later nave. The counterparts of these buttresses on the north wall are said to have been destroyed by structural alterations to the church in more recent times.

THE NORTH AND WEST WALLS

The north wall of the earliest building is of identical construction to that of the south wall, but has been breached to give access to the present vestry. Beneath the floor of the chancel in the north-west angle slight traces of a bonding line consisting of two or three projecting Roman tiles were seen in the last century. Livett tells us that unmistakable signs of a vertical bonding joint on the face of the north wall $2\frac{1}{2}$ in. from the east face of the chancel arch suggested the beginning of the cross-wall at the west end of the earliest building, a feature seen by the present author in 1954, but now concealed by a facing of wall plaster. The corresponding joint on the south side of the chancel arch could not be seen and either was masked by earlier alterations and patchings or had been destroyed. The south end of this wall, if it existed, must have been bonded into the external buttress which is now embedded in the east wall of the nave.

THE SQUARE-HEADED DOORWAY

Certainly of the same date and build as the early tile-built south wall is a now mured-up square-headed doorway. It is 6 ft. high and 3 ft. 4 in. wide. The jambs are built of Roman tiles with sharp edges, and the lintel and sill are of

massive blocks of green sandstone. The doorway gave access through the south wall to a small annexe attached to the main structure.

THE SOUTH ANNEXE

Below ground-level, outside the doorway just described, the remains of two walls running parallel with each other and at right angles to the south wall were uncovered about the year 1895. They were each 2 ft. 2 in. wide and 4 ft. 9 in. apart, thus forming two sides of a small chamber, the extent of which to the south is unknown because of the graves. The walls were built of Roman tiles, four courses of which had survived, resting on a shallow foundation of flints and stones capped with a footing of a single tile course. Above ground-level the long-since-destroyed wall on the east side of the chamber was originally bonded into the south wall. The foundations of the corresponding west wall were found to extend 8 in. under the east angle of the present nave, thus proving that the latter is of a later date. Between the walls part of the original floor of *opus signinum* was still *in situ*.

Unfortunately, when the modern chancel floor was removed in its entirety in 1954, it was found that it was of fairly recent date and rested on the natural soil, and nothing survived of the original one, which would have been contemporary with that in the south chamber, except a line of mortar along the base of the south wall.

THE EAST WALL

Examination of the holes dug by the workmen in front of the sanctuary steps during the restoration of the church in 1954 proved conclusively that there had been a cross-wall of some kind at the east end of the earliest part of the chancel, and this must have been pulled down when the building was extended eastwards, probably in the 12th century.

Attention has already been drawn to the vertical joint at the east end of the early tile-built wall, which corresponds exactly with the west face of the external buttress. Immediately beneath the modern floor-level three broken courses of Roman tiles (PL. I) were seen to project from the base of the south wall into which they were bonded. These rested on flint and mortar footings laid on flints and loam in a trench dug into the natural soil to a depth of 2 feet. The upper part of the foundation had not survived but the lower courses of flints in loam extended for a distance of 4 ft. 6 in. northwards from the south wall foundations. Beyond that point graves of uncertain date had destroyed the foundations, which were not encountered again until the north wall was almost reached. Here broken tile courses bonded into the north wall projected from its base like those in a similar position to the south, and were based on flint and mortar footings.

It was unfortunate that the east side of the foundations could not be examined, for it lies under the sanctuary steps which could not be removed, but it was established that at the north end of the southern section the width was the same as that of the foundations of the south wall. For the same reason it was impossible to determine whether the original building terminated eastwards in an apse or was

square-ended. We must, therefore, console ourselves with the fact that there had been a wall of some kind across the east end of the earliest part of the building, perhaps a sleeper wall to support two columns beyond which was an apse, or one standing to the full height of the building, which in that event would almost certainly have been square-ended; but lacking more definite evidence it would be useless to speculate further.³

WAS THIS BEDE'S PRE-SAXON CHURCH?

In following Bede's statement that a church dedicated to St. Martin in Canterbury had been built when the Romans still occupied Britain, many have accepted the popular belief that the earliest work seen today in the chancel is original Roman work, but there is no conclusive proof of this. The church stands beside one of the main roads which led out of the Roman city, namely, that to Richborough, and is more or less in line with the slightly later churches built in the 7th century, SS. Peter and Paul, St. Mary and St. Pancras. Professor J. M. C. Toynbee,⁴ in discussing the siting of St. Martin's Church, has sought a possible parallel in that of St. Severin's Church, originally built at Cologne *c.* 300, seemingly as a cemetery church, outside the south gate of the city beside the road to Bonn.⁵ Because of this she suggested that St. Martin's Church at Canterbury may have served a similar purpose, but, attractive as this theory is, it seems unlikely to be true because all the known burial places of the Roman period lie some distance from the church.

The largest cemetery, which can hardly be later than the early 3rd century, is located on the top of St. Martin's Hill some 500 yards due east of the church. More recently during extensive digging for the foundations of the new Technical College in the grounds of Barton Court about 300 yards to the south-west, only three cremation burials were found. Finally about 600 yards to the west is another burial site at Lady Wooton's Green. Elsewhere in the close vicinity of the church no traces of burials have come to light, nor, for that matter, Roman occupation-debris, although a wide area immediately north of the present churchyard has been extensively trenched and other trenches have been dug at the foot of St. Martin's Hill. It is also perhaps significant that although the churchyard is still used for interments, nothing of Roman date has ever been found by the grave-diggers.

³ A report of the discovery of 'an earlier apse proving a closer connection with Ethelbert and Bertha' which appeared in *Archaeol. Cantiana*, LXIX (1955), 225, refers to the foundations here described and has been brought to my notice while writing this paper. This statement, of course, was not based on the facts and should be disregarded.

⁴ *J. Brit. Archaeol. Assoc.*, xvi (1953), 1 ff.

⁵ H. Rode, *St. Severin zu Köln* (1951).