

PLANS OF, AND BRIEF ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON, KENT
CHURCHES.

PART II. MAPLESCOMBE, ST. NICHOLAS HARBLEDOWN (NORMAN
HOSPITAL CHURCH), ST. BARTHOLOMEW CHATHAM, ST. BOTOLPH
RUXLEY, ST. NICHOLAS PLUMSTEAD.

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THE RUINED CHURCH OF MAPLESCOMBE (Plan 5).

THE dedication of this now ruined church, hidden away in a dry valley on the northern slope of the North Downs, is unknown. It is a great pity that these ruins were not less known, for they have suffered considerable damage in recent years from the discovery of the place by speculative builders, by the depredations of the worst sort of visitor and by the vulgar practices of a section of the cheaper press in its so called "treasure hunts" which brought hordes of irresponsibles into the district, to its irreparable damage. This is all the more to be regretted because the building under consideration (Plan No. 5) though small and fragmentary, is of major interest. It is an example, rare in Kent, of the single celled apsidal church, having no structural division (chancel arch) between nave and altar, and thus no distinct chancel.¹

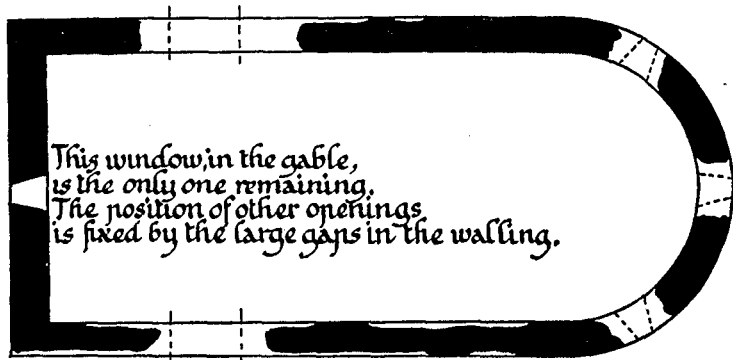
Further there is no ashlar in its construction, the material being entirely local flint, though here and there were once to be seen pieces of Roman brick. The only remaining window, high up in the gable and thus well above the sub-human destructive level, shows how understanding the builders were in the use of this intractable material, and the N.W. coin is a notable example of the skilful use of the more tabular forms of this stone. Similar careful craftsmanship can be seen wherever any original wall surface remains, notably in the curve of the apse. There were no datable architectural details remaining even when I first saw the church in 1906, and gaps in the wall were, as I have indicated in my plan, the only clue to the position of openings. There was a little contemporary plastering within and without, but the floor level was completely destroyed. The interior dimensions were 54 feet long and 22 feet 3 inches wide and its date is probably late 11th century. For comparison I give a plan of

THE HOSPITAL CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, HARBLEDOWN (Plan 6)

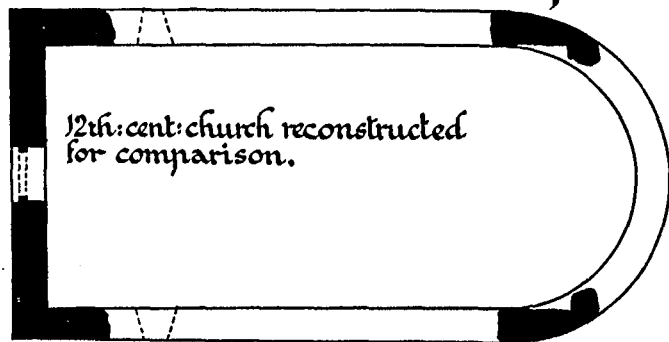
I hope later on to give a full account of this most interesting building, but meanwhile I have extracted from the more detailed

¹ Fairweather. *Aisleless Apsidal Churches*, 1933, p. 10.

Maplescombe. Dedication unknown.



Harbledown. S. Nicholas Hospital.



Scale of feet.



F.C. Elliston - Erwood. mcmxxi.

plan, the Norman portion which shows a structure of exactly the same type as Maplescombe, but slightly smaller. The original west door is preserved, but only the starting of the curve of the apse north and south. There is however sufficient to be certain of its original dimensions. The date of this church is probably late 11th or very early 12th century.

THE HOSPITAL CHURCH OF ST. BARTHOLOMEW, CHATHAM (Plan 7)

While on the subject of Hospital Chapels, the plan of this church which I exhibited to the Society when it visited the building in 1947 may be of interest. The whole of the fabric has been drastically restored but in spite of that, many notable features survive. The plan calls for some comment: it is an apsidal church belonging to the "three celled" type,¹ the church at Eynesford dealt with in the first part of this paper being another of the same class. At Chatham, however, there is an unusual feature in the addition, which appears to be contemporary, of a sort of transeptal structure of somewhat massive build, evidently intended for two altars. The north aisle and its arcade are modern. The windows on the south side of the nave have flat lintels of oaken boards and this would seem to imply the existence of the subsidiary buildings of the hospital on this side, which the presence of old walls beneath the dense mass of ivy seems to confirm. The point is that these three windows would be above the roof line of any pentise like building on this side, and to obviate the necessity for extra height to take the arched window heads, flat wooden lintels were substituted. There is a peculiar recess at the east end of this south wall which may have been devised to house a further altar, but on the other hand it may have been a means of communication with any buildings on this side. An unusual sedile in the south respond of the arch of triumph is not entirely convincing but may be of 13th cent. date. In the corner of the modern vestry is a 12th cent. pillar piscina found during the restorations.

The plan of the church has considerable bearing on the matter of date. Popular opinion ascribes the foundation to Gundulf (as is so much other work in Rochester) but it may be doubted whether such a plan was possible in his time and a documentary reference to Hugh of Trottescliffe "monachus noster" (afterwards, 1124, Abbot of St. Augustine's, Canterbury) as the founder and builder, puts the date in the first quarter of the 12th cent. a much more likely one than the period 1076-1108, the dates of Gundulf's episcopacy.

Though the hospital is actually in Chatham, all its associations lie with Rochester, being erected, as were so many similar foundations, just without the gates of the city, in this case the East Gate.

¹ Fairweather, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

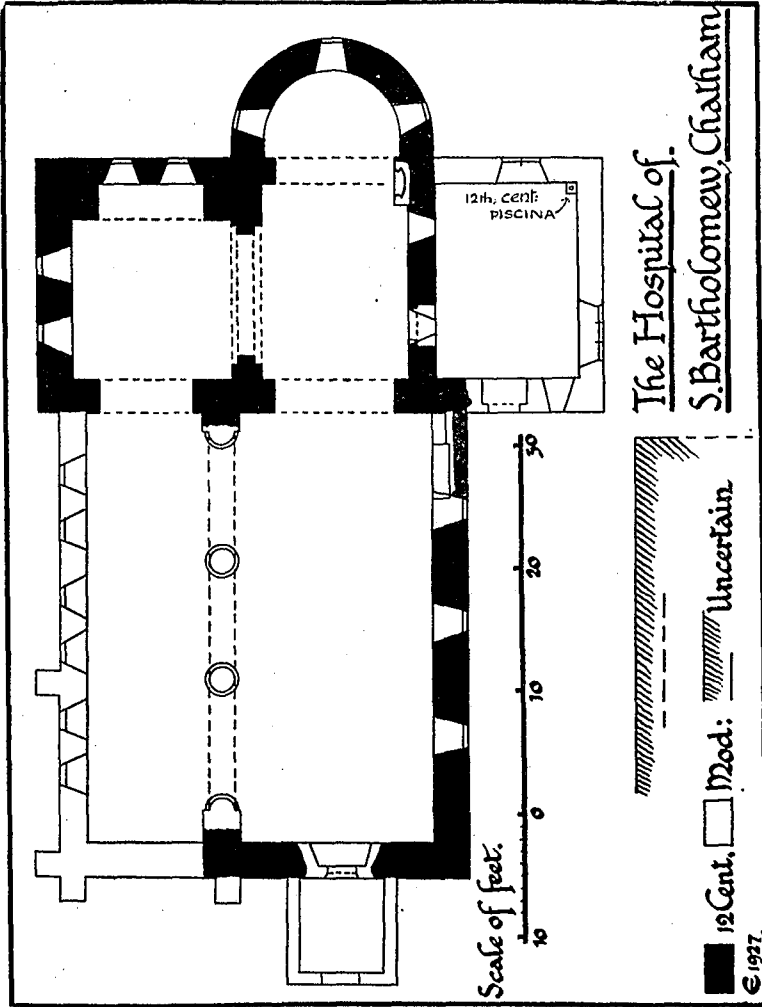
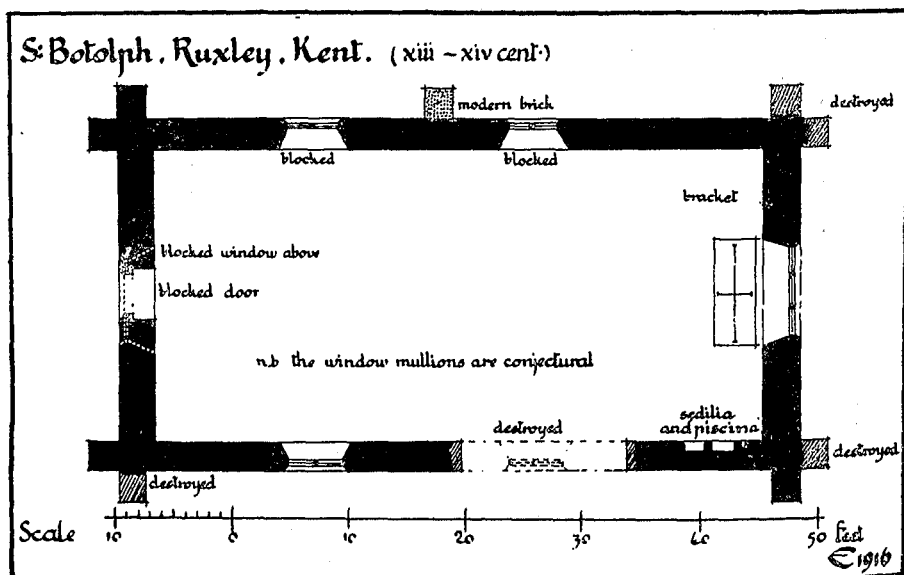


PLATE II. PLAN 7. p. 16.

THE RUINED CHURCH OF ST. BOTOLPH, RUXLEY (Plan 8)

Though Ruxley gave its name to a Kentish Hundred and though the important family of Rokesle was closely associated with it, this ruined church is late in date and insignificant in size. There was an earlier church, but it seems to have disappeared and left no trace. It may have stood (it probably did) near to the present building and the Manor House, but no trace of Norman material has been recorded and the architectural history of the place does not commence till near



PLAN 8.

the close of the 13th cent. The building, desecrated since the 16th cent. and used as a barn and cow shed is seemingly now in a very poor condition. From the road it appears to be partly unroofed and the fabric is almost certainly suffering from bomb shock.

In plan the church was a simple rectangle without aisles and a constructional chancel, 52 feet 4 inches from east to west and 24 feet 11 inches wide, very nearly the size of Maplescombe. This simple type of one celled church is often regarded as a chapel subsidiary to a larger and nearby parish church. This was certainly the case of East Wickham¹ which was a chapel of Plumstead, but there is no evidence of this sort for Ruxley which was always spoken of as a church, as also was the church of Maplescombe (above).

The building was lit by six windows and the little that can be

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, Vol. XLI, p. 209.

gleaned from the fragments of mouldings that survive, suggests a late 13th cent. date. The wall material is flint rubble externally and chalk blocks within, and there are traces of eight buttresses, two at each angle some of which are repaired in recent brick. According to an inventory of 1556 there was a bell cote over the gable and the Decorated finial now on the lawn in front of the dwelling house may be its cap.

The most unusual thing about this small church is that it possesses a double sedilia and attached piscina of a type not frequently found in much larger churches (Fig. 1). This is better preserved than the

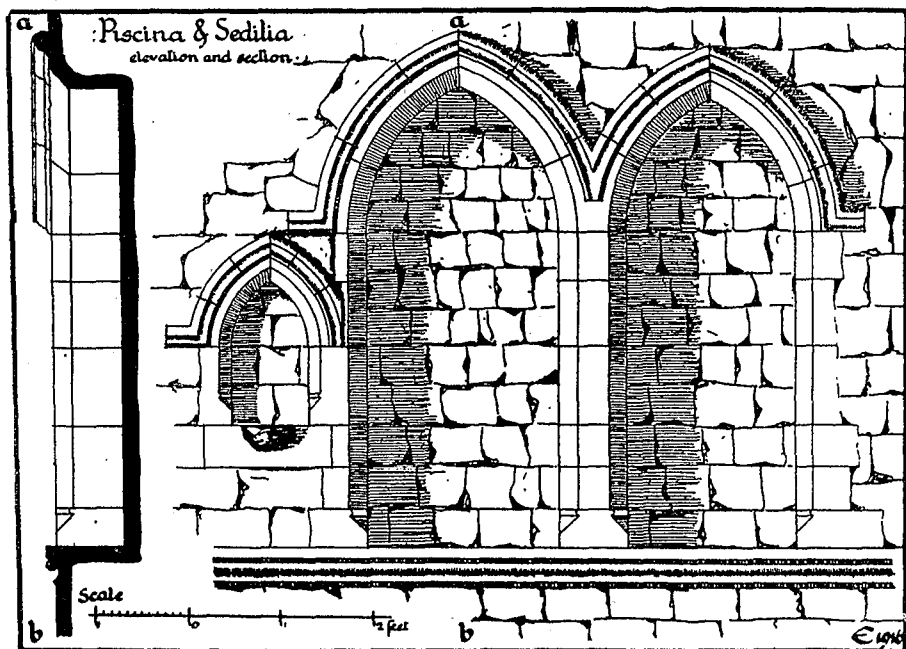


FIG 1.

remainder of the details and presuming it to be contemporary with the building fixes its date as late 13th or early 14th century.

The church was desecrated in 1575 and the original deed uniting the parish with that of North Cray is said to be still in the possession of the incumbent of that church. It bears the seal of Cardinal Pole. Popular tradition has always maintained that some of the fittings of North Cray church came from Ruxley but that is definitely not so in several instances while in others it is more than doubtful. Anyhow North Cray church was practically destroyed by a bomb and many of its fittings perished with it.

THE CHURCH OF ST. NICHOLAS, PLUMSTEAD (Plans 9, Plate IV)

Though Plumstead has been removed from Kent and made part of that chaotic conglomeration known as the County of London, its early history and geographical position are factors stronger than legislators, and Plumstead is still a part of the County. No apology is needed therefore for including a study of its parish church in this series and this is all to the good as the building has a remarkable history, well documented and, although a rocket has destroyed most of its remaining architectural features, its story can be told with a fullness of detail rare in churches on the metropolitan border. The fact that it was (till 1865) my own parish church will account for the elaborate series of plans that accompany this section of my paper. Years of contact with the building have revealed practically everything there is to know and I have found this particular church a perfect illustration of the process of architectural growth and of that vitality so frequently found in our parish churches. I might state with reference to these plans, that they show every detail that is certain, while inferential matters and conjecture, necessary to fill out the picture, are clearly marked as such.

12TH CENTURY. The earliest church that can be established here was a small structure of nave and chancel only, of the type that Canon Livett has shown to be very common in Kent.¹ The only proof of this building is to be found in the little window above the modern porch. This is definitely transitional in character, of a date somewhere about 1170. It has a slightly pointed head, a wide internal splay and one or two of the less weathered stones showed definite diagonal tooling. The walling of the church has been so often renewed, rendered and roughcast, that it is impossible to speak of it with certainty, but I think it is more than probable that the core of the south and west walls of the old nave does survive. Anyhow I have taken that for granted and it does produce such a plan as is required. Before the building was unroofed by blast, I thought I could discern in the half-light, traces of another window to the east, but the fierce light that now pours into the nave shows that this is not the case. Likewise there is no evidence for a doorway; it may have been at the west end or in the south wall.

13TH CENTURY. This century saw great changes in planning and a scheme of enlargement was carried out at Plumstead. The parts that remain are the south transept, and the west jamb of a door into an extended chancel, discovered in 1907 and preserved under a grating in the churchyard (Plate III, No. 1). The transept was lit by two lancets

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, Vol. XXI, pp. 260 ff.

PLATE III.



No. 1.

WEST JAMB OF 13TH CENT DOORWAY OF THE
OLD CHANCEL. DISCOVERED 1907.



No. 2.

INTERIOR OF CHURCH, LOOKING S.E.—BEFORE ALTERATION,
c. 1900.

S. Nicholas, Plumstead. Historical Ground Plans.

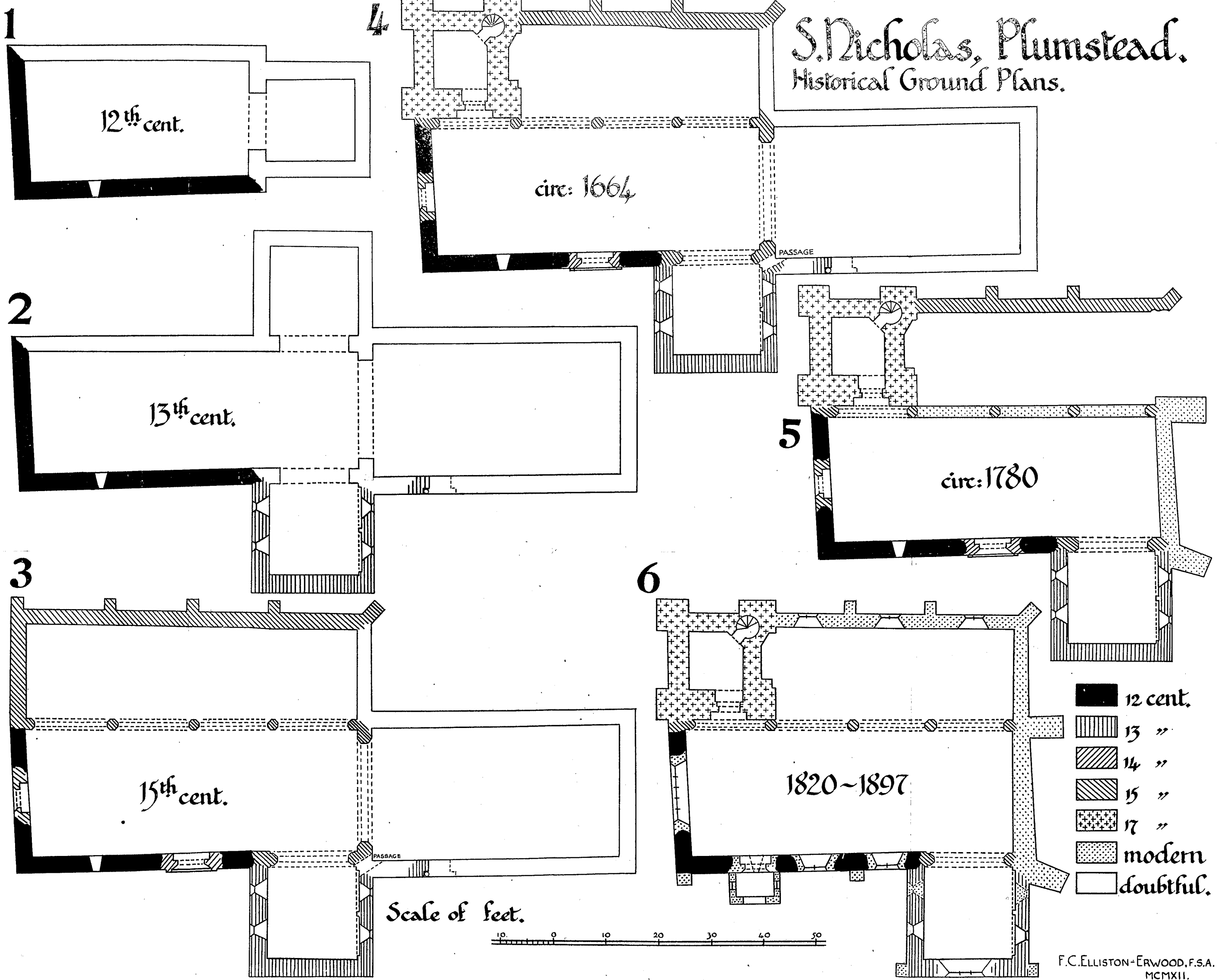


PLATE IV. PLANS 9.

in each wall east and west but the arrangement in the south is unknown. Internally the east wall carried an arcade of two arches enclosing the windows, with detached shafts (? purbeck marble) supporting carved caps, the mutilated fragments of one or two remaining. The doorway, as can be seen from the photograph, is clearly of 13th cent. date. All this is certain, but to complete the church as it probably was, it is necessary to suppose a symmetrical treatment, which has been done. But it must be admitted that the excavations made in 1907 for the new church did not reveal anything of these conjectural features, though no definite search was made for them. The plan I submit, though not without its problems, is I think reasonable, and does not conflict with subsequent developments. Rather it is in harmony with them.

14TH AND 15TH CENTURIES. There was a considerable break in the growth of the church for some time. The only addition made in the 14th cent. was the insertion of a doorway on the south side. This was later blocked and was only rediscovered at the restoration of 1907 when it was once more made visible but not reopened. Elsewhere I have endeavoured to account for this dearth of building by suggesting that the district suffered greatly from floods in the mid 13th cent.¹

On this basis it is conceivable that much of my suggested rebuilding of the 13th cent. was not carried out. It is to be borne in mind that Plumstead was one of the few possessions of St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, in West Kent and it shared in that house's prosperity to which it also contributed, and if a disaster such as I envisage did in fact happen, the Abbey would be more concerned in restoring its drowned lands than enlarging a church. The following century made amends for the neglect of the past. The old north wall was replaced by a new perpendicular arcade, a new chancel arch was inserted, as was a similar arch to the mouth of the transept, a west door was made, and of course, a new north aisle. Very little is known of the details of the new aisle as later on it was ruinous, but presuming that its successor was rebuilt on the old foundations, the details of the new have been accepted as those of the old. Only the east end of this aisle is left doubtful and I have taken the liberty of showing the north-east part of this aisle wall as thicker than the rest. If the 13th cent. transept had been built, this is what would have occurred, as later walls were generally thinner. One rather puzzling feature also belongs to this period. It is the passage cut from the transept to the chancel behind the respond of the chancel arch. This was also discovered at the 1907 restoration.

1664. Up to this time the church had not possessed a tower, but

¹ See Stow's *Chronicles*, sub anno 1236, where "WISBICH" is to be read "WOOLWICH".

in this year the fine red brick tower was built through the generosity of Churchwarden Gossage. It occupies the western bay of the north aisle and the western arch of this arcade is incorporated in its lower stage. It should be compared with the similar but earlier (1640) tower at Charlton where there is rather more indication of classic influence. Mr. Gossage's tombstone speaks of the church being ruinous. There are no specific details but, knowing what ultimately happened, it is not impossible that the chancel is the part referred to. The church had now reached its fullest extent and a period of neglect and decay was being ushered in.

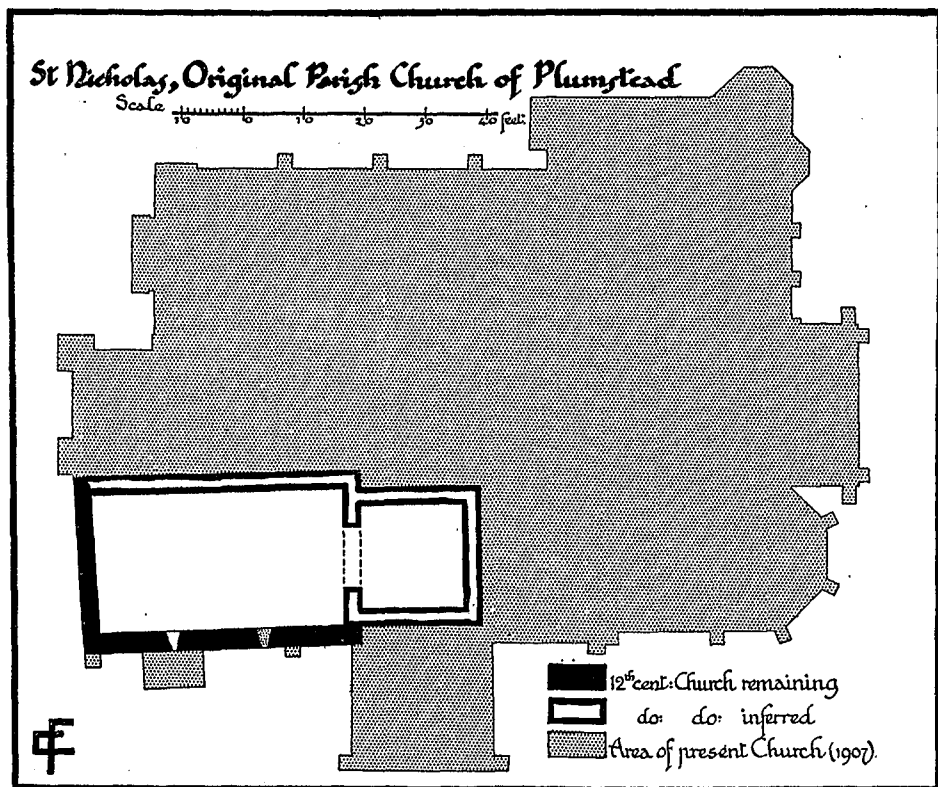
CIRC. 1780. Engravings of the church of this date (the earliest that exist) show a dreadful state of affairs. The chancel has gone, the 15th cent. aisle is in ruins with trees growing in it and cattle grazing, the arcade is bricked up and only the old nave, one transept and Mr. Gossage's tower survive.

The eastern termination of the church is now a clumsy piece of wall with dummy windows contrived from bits of tracery, and two massive buttresses mark the position of the chancel arch responds. Indications on one or two pictures that the chancel arch was intact but only walled up were not borne out by the evidence supplied when the wall was taken down.

What was the cause of this damage? when did it occur? are questions that cannot be answered. It seems inconceivable that a major disaster, such as this must have been, occurred without any contemporary reference in local or other records. Certainly none has been discovered and the fact must therefore be baldly stated and left.

1820. The first attempt at restoration took place in this year. The north aisle was rebuilt in stock brick and the arcade re-opened and for the next 77 years the church remained unaltered and the illustration (Plate III, No. 2) gives some idea of the state of the building at the latter part of this time. Some further repairs are said to have taken place between 1852 and 1864 but they were only tinkering and patching, and, as the evidence shows, of very poor quality. Heavy gun fire and explosions from the nearby Arsenal contributed to its further deterioration and as repairs consisted in the main of concealing cracks rather than repairing them the thorough overhaul of the building and its enlargement to supply the needs of a large and growing industrial population was overdue. This took place in 1907 and the size of the new church compared with the original 12th century church is shown in Plan 10. The architects for the restoration, Messrs. Greenaway and Newberry, managed to make a large church without destroying any old work at all, and the tower, the 15th cent. arcade, the 13th cent. transept and the little Norman window were all

incorporated in the new structure. During this restoration many details of the old building were revealed as has already been told, and when the great buttresses at the east end were removed, the springings of the 15th cent. chancel arch were found in situ with the voussoirs of the arch itself used as walling. This arch was rebuilt in the new church as a continuation of the original arcade. Thus



PLAN 10.

the church remained till 1945 when one of Hitler's rockets wrecked the whole structure. Only the Tower, the perpendicular arcade and the Norman window survive. The future form of the church is not yet decided, nor is it possible to say whether the 13th cent. transept can be restored.

The church possesses three bells cast in 1686 by Christopher Hodson of St. Mary Cray, a fourth cast in 1790 in Whitechapel. The vicar says that the rocket which destroyed the church smashed the bell frames. He believes the bells are intact, except that one was cracked years ago.