

THE SAXON CHURCH AT WHITFIELD,  
NEAR DOVER, KENT.

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It was pointed out many years ago by an eminent antiquary that the county of Kent, where so many churches of Saxon date might reasonably be expected to be found, had up to that time produced only two examples, referring to the Saxon work in the church within Dover Castle, and that at Swanscombe.

The expectation was a reasonable one, and if its realization has not even yet been attained, it is worthy of consideration whether or not search has been made in the right direction. Certain features of Saxon work are well defined elsewhere, and it has been but reasonable to seek for them here. But the search does not result in their being found. These features, such as long and short work, pilaster strips, baluster shafts, triangular arches, and such like, are almost entirely absent in the county, and hence the number of churches recognized as of Saxon date has remained until now almost as small as when these observations were made.

But a careful examination by a patient observer will reveal, in almost every portion of the county, particularly the eastern, the existence of a large number of examples of very plain walling, built for the most part of materials derived from some still more ancient buildings. Roman brick is very conspicuous, flint walling with masses of stone roughly and irregularly laid, quoins of squared stone, often of large size, and with evident signs of former use; quoins formed frequently of large flints more or less worked roughly to squared form, sometimes not worked at all. These features appear constantly, but seldom in large portions,

the work having greatly disappeared owing to frequent rebuildings. It is reasonable to ask: How can such work as this be actually proved to be of Saxon date?

I think that proof is forthcoming. In the first instance it is easy to shew that this is not Norman work, for in every case known to me, in Kent as elsewhere, every example has certain features which readily shew if the date be that of Norman times. If there is nothing of actual ornament remaining, the carefully worked quoins with their diagonal tool marks will at once indicate the period if it be Norman.

But there are actually evidences remaining of the insertion of Norman features in the rougher work, clearly indicating that the latter is of earlier date.

Thus, at Coldred Church, plain and early quoins of Caenstone worked with the usual tool marks have been inserted as repairs to quoins of roughly worked flint. St. Margaret's-at-Cliffe is a fine and well-known church, the chancel of which is of well-defined early Norman work, the nave being equally well-defined later Norman. The work of building began, as is so usual, at the east end, and terminated at the west. But there is structural evidence that an earlier building previously existed. On the north side, at the junction of nave and chancel, an angle of plain irregular stonework still exists, quite different from the other work to its right and its left.

Having been incorporated with the first portion of the work, it was left standing when the second part was done, and it still stands in contrast to the work of the two periods of rebuilding.

Preston Church, near Wingham, is a fairly large fabric, built almost entirely of materials taken from ancient Roman buildings. Not a single architectural feature of the date of the walling remains, but a very small amount of observation will assure the observer that all the present architectural features, plain work of the thirteenth century, simple lancets, and the like, are insertions in older walling.

Since no Norman feature exists, may we not reasonably conclude that the building needing repair in the thirteenth

century was of Saxon date, rather than that it was then only one hundred or less than two hundred years old ?

At Brenchley Church there is a plain large archway on the south side of the western tower. It has no Norman features, and its position agrees with that of the Saxon example at Barton-on-Humber.

Two more examples, in proof, may be noted. At Staple Church the base of the tower has traces of a Norman arch, opening into the nave. While the main fabric of the tower is plain thirteenth-century date, a plain round-headed window, formed of small stones, exists in a position above where the Norman arch went, where it never would have been formed on purpose. It is a portion of the west front of a Saxon church, cut into on the erection of the tower. Within the last few months we have found at East Langdon Church traces of a round-headed window, formed also of small stones, and not Caen-stone quoins, cut through for the insertion of early Norman arches. It is most probably a window of a Saxon nave, obliterated when a south aisle was erected. The form and proportion of the window never would be taken for anything else than Norman work but for the fact that it must have existed prior to the erection of the Norman arches. Need I add that I have had the traces of this window very carefully laid open for observation.

These evidences point to the early date of the plain work pointed out at commencement, the distinctive features of which, in addition to what has been already said, may be noted from the description of Whitfield Church, which I now proceed to render.

During the progress of the works at East Langdon, I heard from the Rev. V. S. Vickers, then in charge of Whitfield, that the fabric possessed some curious features of ancient work unlike what appeared in others. I accordingly paid a visit to inspect, and I found the building to be almost entirely constructed of plain work without a single Norman feature so far as the general fabric was concerned.

The plainness of the work is, without doubt, the reason why attention has not hitherto been directed to this ancient

sanctuary, and why its remote antiquity has until now escaped observation, although its position, so close to Dover, must have caused its frequent inspection.

The church stands close to the course of the direct Roman road from Richborough to Dover, and within a short distance from the site beside the road, known as Napchester.

This latter is now a field with no indications of early occupation, but its eminently suggestive name points to the existence there of some Roman building.

Whitfield Church is not a handsome building; but the unusual height of its walls at once shews that it is of different proportion to the general average of churches.

It consists of a nave, a small chancel, hardly longer than its width; a low aisle, which formerly extended along the whole length of nave and chancel, terminating flush at the east and west ends respectively. But the aisle to the nave disappeared in the seventeenth century, when a large brick addition through the whole length of the nave was carried out northwards, ending with a north gable.\* It is now separated from the nave by a huge elliptical arch, completely destroying the proportion of the nave. There is a square bell cot of wood at the west end, a porch on the south side, and some indications either of the erection of, or the intention to erect, a second chancel beyond the existing one, for there is an acutely pointed arch inserted in the east wall, now filled in with a modern window. This appears to be a chancel arch, but there are no external signs of any foundations, and the slope of the ground, which is sharp to the east, would render any foundations apparent were they in existence.

There is no tower, there are no ornamental features, and the church is disfigured, not only by the huge brick addition, but by the insertion of round-headed wooden framed windows here and there, and the whole of the interior is thickly white-washed. Such is Whitfield Church. But if we examine the

\* The flint base of this addition is doubtless formed with the flints removed when the aisle was destroyed to make way for it.

walling carefully, we shall find almost from end to end traces of such remote antiquity as to prove that this is a building which well deserves our best attention.

The angles of the aisle both at the east and at the west, where they are incorporated into the brick addition, are formed of roughly squared flints. The south-west angle of the nave is formed at the lower portion with large blocks of stone of two or three kinds, most probably brought from Napchester. Above this the quoins are of stone of smaller size, and flints. There has been a western doorway consisting of a wide semicircular arch of rough flints, but it has been long since walled up. Above it, the western window is formed by an ugly modern round-headed frame. But above this is a remarkable little gable window of stone, having its jambs not quite upright, but slightly sloping upwards to the semicircular head. On the south side, partly cut into by the porch, there is a small loop window with a semicircular head, deeply splayed externally, thus presenting one of the usual features of Saxon work.

There are no present traces of this window internally.

The south-east angle of the nave is now rounded and covered with rough-cast. The south side of the chancel is occupied by a wide arch of plain Norman work looking very much like a low Tower arch, the stones are quite plain, and have the usual tool marks. Lofty as are the walls it is apparent that they are reduced in height fully 4 or 5 feet by accumulated earth, and there is a descent into the church. Internally, the chancel arch claims attention. It is lofty and narrow, very irregular and ugly in its form, but without a doubt it is of the same early date as the other portions of the church. The aisle opens into the chancel by a plain pointed arch, but the piers are very probably of earlier date. The whitewash completely hides all traces of the construction of these arches. The unusually lofty proportions observed on the exterior are still more apparent within, agreeing in this respect with what is almost always a feature of Saxon work.

The church stands on rising ground, from which there is an extensive view; the position being also similar to what

may be observed in many other churches of known early foundation.

My remarks point to this church being one of very remote antiquity, of early Saxon date; and if I succeed in calling attention to its plain construction, I feel confident that it will be the means of bringing to notice examples of the same workmanship in other buildings, although it is hardly possible that any other church, so completely the work of one period as this is, will now be discovered in any other part of Kent.

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The following Notes have been furnished by the Rev. V. S. Vickers, for many years Curate in Charge of Whitfield:—

Hasted, in his *History of Kent* (2nd Edition, vol. ix., p. 398), states that the Manor of Bewesfeld, with the church appendant thereto, was given by Offa, King of Mercia (of whose kingdom Kent then formed part), in the *first* year of his reign, A.D. 757, to St. Augustine's Abbey at Canterbury. No authority is given for this early date of the church. Dugdale's *Monasticon* (vol. i., *re* St. Augustine's) mentions the gift of the manor, but says nothing about the church. Thomas of Elmham's *History of St. Augustine's* (he was Treasurer of the Monastery from 1407—1413) gives a copy, partly in Latin and partly in Anglo-Saxon (the latter also being rendered into Latin), of the original deed of gift:—

“Ego Offa, Merciorum Rex, anno *quinto* regni mei, do et concedo Æthelnotho Abbato Apostolorum Petri et Pauli, terram duorum manentium juris mei in loco qui appellatur Bewesfeld cum ceteris terminibus, pro expiatione criminum meorum, in jus proprium libenter concedo.”

Then follow the boundaries of the lands.

It will be observed that there is here not a word about the church. Æthelnoth was Abbot from 762—787, and the date of the gift is stated by Mr. Hardwick, the editor (Rolls Series, 1858), as 765. The conclusion seems inevitable that the church did not then exist.

The first mention I can find of the church is given in the Charters of Cumbwell Priory (*Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. VI., p. 192),

one of which confirms the gift of the advowson of the Church of Bewsfield by Richard, Archbishop of Canterbury (formerly Prior of Dover, and successor to Thomas Becket), made to the Abbey of Cumbwell (in Goudhurst) by Dionisia, the patroness, on the resignation of her son, Thomas de Neusol, the late parson.

Richard was Archbishop from 1174 till his death in 1184, in the reign of Henry II.

Dionisia was daughter of Guncelin de Badlesmere, a noble family of eminence at that time, and Thomas was her son and heir. Mr. Godfrey Faussett, F.S.A., says: "We may perhaps conjecture that Thomas de Neusol gave up his benefice of Beausfeld to become a monk of Cumbwell, his mother giving the advowson to the Abbey" (*Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. VI., p. 193).

It is probable that to this well-to-do parson, Thomas de Neusol (in Coldred), we owe the extension of the chancel both on the north and east.

The church is just mentioned in another subsequent charter, dated between 1215 and 1228:—

"We learn from Thorne's *Chronicle* that the Abbey of St. Augustine had a claim on this advowson, compromised by a charter which he dates 1221, but which must evidently have been some years earlier, whereby John, Abbot of Cumbwell, acknowledged that his convent held the Church of Bawesffelde of the Abbot and Convent of St. Augustine's by payment to them of a pension of 10s. per annum (*Dec. Scrip.*, 1878). Under the year 1285 Thorn records that John, Prior of Cumbwell, attended a chapter of St. Augustine's, and swore fealty for this church" (*Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. VI., p. 193. Godfrey Faussett).

In 1661 the living was augmented by Archbishop Juxon with £20 per annum, to be paid by the lessee of the parsonage. It may be that to his interest in the church we owe the ugly north transept in brick, which appears to date from Charles II.'s time.

In 1855 the floor of the church was relevelled, a new east window inserted, the north transept opened into the nave by enlarging the arch, and the whole reseated and rearranged.

In 1894, since the above Paper was written, the church was thoroughly repaired, renovated, and enlarged.