

ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON KINGSDOWN  
CHURCH NEAR SEVENOAKS (S. EDMUND).

BY F. C. ELLISTON ERWOOD.

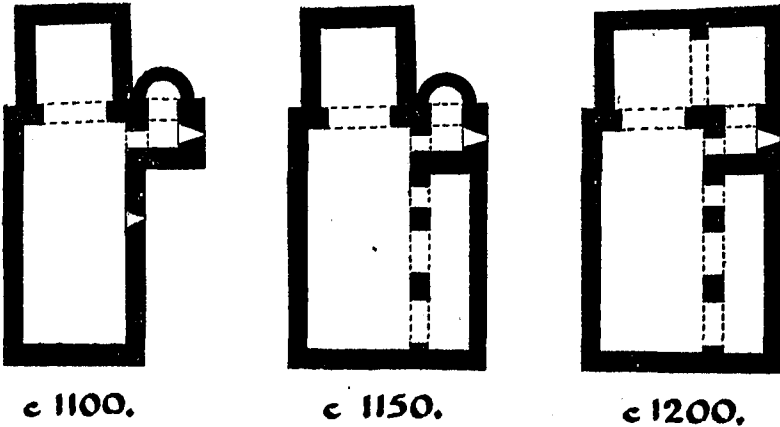
THE most remarkable feature of this Church is to be found in the fact that its ground-plan of to-day is almost exactly that of the first building erected on the site of which we have any architectural evidence. Although the evidence of enlargement is obvious, these additions have now all disappeared; and by removing in imagination all buttresses, and, in place of late windows and doors, inserting twelfth-century features, we can get an excellent idea of the twelfth-century Church.

This structure was a plain, aisleless nave, 37 ft. 5 ins. long and 17 ft. 5 ins. wide, with a chancel 17 ft. 11 ins. long and 13 ft. 2 ins. wide, dimensions which agree fairly well with those of similar early buildings. None of the angles are exactly square, and the chancel has a slight inclination to the north. At the junction of the nave and chancel on the south side is a tower, small and irregular on plan but otherwise striking, approximately 5 ft. 7 ins. from north to south and 4 ft. 11 ins. from east to west (interior measurements), 11 ft. 0 ins. from east to west with 9 ft. 6 ins. projection from the nave south wall (exterior measurements). The walls vary considerably in thickness, the south being nearly 4 ft. at the window level. Again, none of the angles are square.

There must have been on the east face of the tower a small apse similar to that now existing at Godmersham, and to that, now destroyed, which stood in an analogous position on the east face of the tower at Bapchild. No trace of the apse appears at Kingsdown, but on the east face of the tower is a recess, of early masonry, 5 ft. 10 ins. wide, 11 ft. 8 ins. high, with a circular head of roughly voussoir-

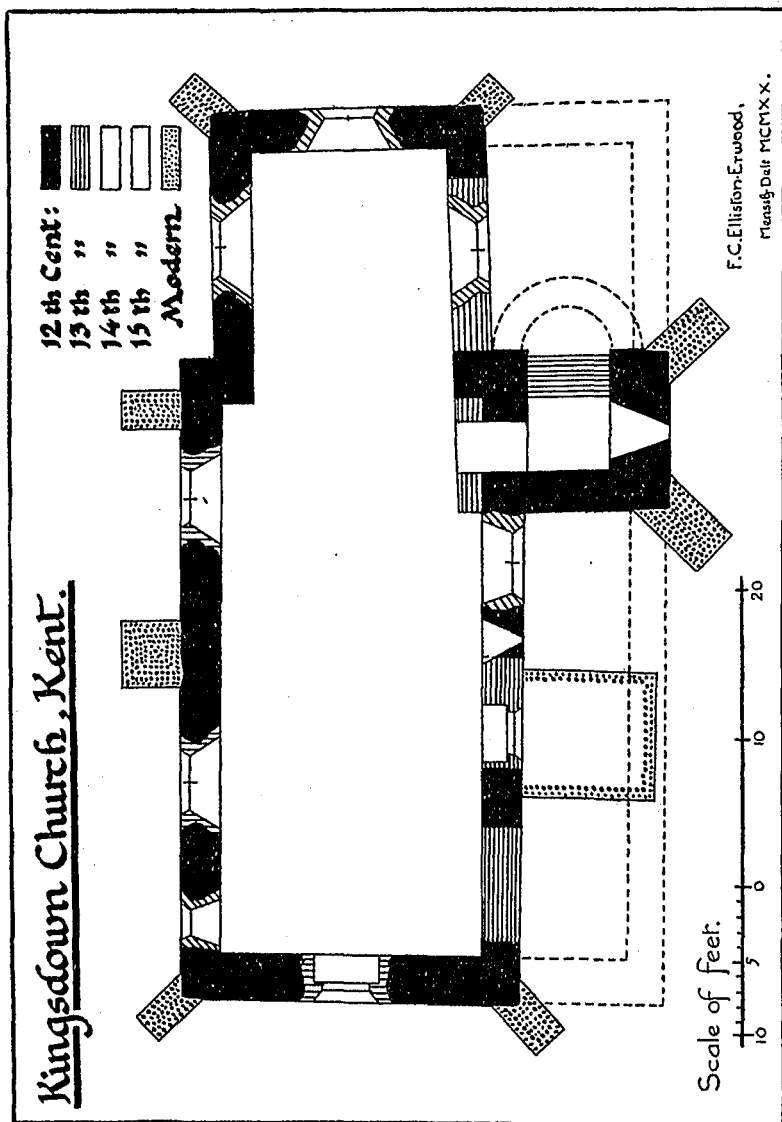
shaped flints. This is now blocked to within 6 ins. of the face of the wall, but the blocking is obviously later, and the arch is undoubtedly that which formed the so-called arch of triumph in front of the little apse.

The masonry of the building is noticeable for the small amount of early ashlar. Only two of the original windows survive, and the worked stone is of a very rough character, as is well shewn in the opening in the tower. Neither window originally had provision for glass. The rest of the fabric is of the flint rubble common in the



KINGSDOWN CHURCH—DEVELOPMENT PLANS.

more isolated parts of Kent, built in fairly regular courses, and very similar in character to the work in the ruined church at Maplescombe, now included in the same parish. It is to be regretted that the "pointing" of this wall at the recent restoration has rather over-emphasized this coursing, destroying much of its early character. Most of the original quoins of the church are destroyed, but judging from the character of the tower and the analogy of Maplescombe, they were also of large flint blocks roughly squared. The tower, above the buttresses, shews the construction remarkably, and gives to it an air of even more antiquity



than it possesses. This aspect is emphasized if the huge corner buttresses be eliminated, for then the tower appears as a gaunt yet impressive structure with a slightly spreading base, in some ways reminiscent of that remarkable primitive

tower of Manorbier (Pembroke), and of equally primitive construction.

The position of the tower calls for some comment. In the other cases where early towers exist in like positions, *i.e.*, at Dartford, Rochester Cathedral, Orpington, Betteshanger, Thanington, and St. Mildred, Canterbury, the site chosen is however on the north side. Kingsdown is unusual in this respect, as I cannot call to mind many other towers of a similar early date that stood at the *south*-east end of the nave beyond the two already mentioned—Godmersham and Bapchild.

The little circular-headed window, high up on the south side of the nave, is very important as a piece of architectural evidence. Its later history is thus: Prior to 1908 the whole of the exterior of the church was covered with cement. On removing this, the outside of this window was exposed, and, the position thus being known, the blocking of the interior splay was carefully removed, bringing to light the early paintings which are now visible on the reveals. These paintings of the history of Cain and Abel—the sacrifice on the east side and the murder on the west—are remarkable in many ways, but as architectural evidence they are invaluable. They shew that the window is a very early one, probably eleventh century, and the freshness of the paintings indicates that the window must have been blocked shortly after they were executed.

Further light was shed on the development of the church by the stripping of the cement coat, as it was then clear that at least two arches had been cut through this wall, the easternmost of which had in its construction damaged the lower part of the western splay of the aforementioned window. But as these arches are themselves Norman work, it is evident that an enlargement of the original church took place quite early. As to the nature of this enlargement one account speaks of "three Chapels," but it seems rather obvious that the addition took the form of a narrow aisle about 7 ft. wide, and that the vestiges of two arches that can now be seen on this south wall are the remnants of the arcade that gave access to the aisle.

The aisle itself extended the whole length of the nave up to the west wall of the tower, on the face of which is the much decayed weather-mold giving the line of the aisle roof. It carries on, more or less, the line of the existing roof, which is practically of the same pitch as the original. Thus we have all the features of an early aisle, narrow and under the same roof as the nave, with a south wall about 7 ft. high. The weather-mold extends the whole width of the tower, shewing that the aisle wall and the south face of the tower were practically in the same line. Of the aisle, however, no remains of walls exist, the evidence being solely that of the two arches and the weather-mold.

It is quite possible that a third arch existed east of the two already mentioned, but it must have been of smaller span. Those that are indicated on the plan are about 7 ft. 6 ins. span. There is only room for a third one of 5 or 6 feet span. There are no signs of the west wall of the tower having been pierced.

Somewhat later, but still before the thirteenth century, a further enlargement was made by constructing a chapel on the south side of the chancel, the eastward addition to the tower being removed. The pointed arch of transitional form, which led into this chapel, is still visible, blocked up on the south wall of the chancel. The voussoirs forming it (of Reigate stone) are badly decayed, but the remains which survive are sufficient to indicate a respond in the wall, flush with the east face of the tower, and an arch of about 11 ft. 6 ins. span.

Thus by the dawn of the thirteenth century the church had grown into a nave with a south aisle and a chancel with a south chapel, and the tower which originally stood free on three sides was now only free on one—the south.

What occurred next is a matter of conjecture, but the following points may be noted, viz. :—

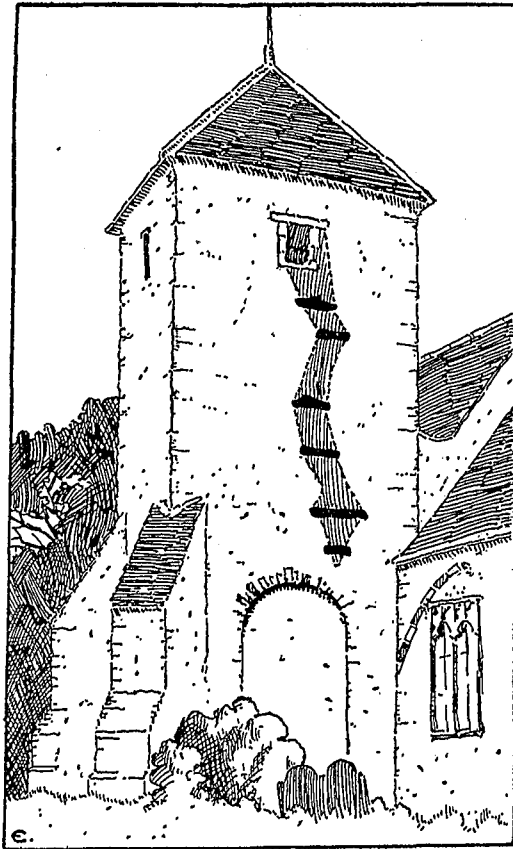
1. There is no chancel arch inside the church.
2. The tower has been internally strengthened by thickening its northern face; filling up the

south-eastern angle of the nave by a mass of masonry from 1 ft. 6 ins. to 2 ft. thick.

3. Both east and west exterior faces of the tower shew indications of a very serious crack, extending from the top of the tower down (on the east side) within 13 or 14 feet of the base. This crack has been repaired by inserting very large flat Sarsen stones to act as ties to hold the north and south sides of the tower together.\*

In addition there is inserted into the wall a thirteenth-century doorway, which originally was the porch (old drawings shew a timber porchway where now is the modern brick vestry), but which now serves as the vestry door.

These facts, with the absence of features that have been



KINGSDOWN CHURCH—TOWER FROM THE S.E.  
Shewing: (1) Fracture and method of repair;  
(2) Blocked arch of tower-apse, and (3) Trace of  
arcade on south side of chancel.

\* It was the presence of similar flat stones in the west face of the tower, resembling "long and short work," that gave rise to the suggestion at the Annual Meeting of a Saxon date for the tower.

proved to have existed at the beginning of the thirteenth-century, point then to some serious catastrophe which befel the building. What it was can only be surmised, but it was sufficient to rend the tower from top to bottom, to destroy the aisle and presumably the chapel also. Could it have been that fearful storm of 1223, which raged from Holy Rood day to Candlemas (Sept. 14 till Feb. 2), wherein—

“On St Andrew’s Day [Nov. 30] a great Thunder overthrew Churches, Castles and Houses, so that scarcely anybody escaped free from harm by the tempest.”\*

In any case it is a remarkable coincidence that, when the plaster and cement was being stripped from the east wall of the tower, a portion of the filling of the blocked arch fell out, and embedded in the fragments was a silver penny, *temp.* King John, described as being in mint condition. Architectural evidence will certainly lend colour to this theory. The tower was struck and riven, the recent additions ruined, and a hasty filling up of the nave arcade, the chancel chapel arch, and the old “arch of triumph,” together with the building of a new porch, made the church fit for use again, and incidentally restored the old plan. It is on these deductions that the accompanying plan has been founded.

In all probability the buttresses on the south side of the church, especially those at the corner of the tower, are of thirteenth century date also, but they have been refaced, and nothing about them is unmistakably ancient.

The remainder of the history of the fabric is exceedingly brief. It consists of but little more than the insertion of windows or doorways, and the gradual decay and neglect of the building until its recent restoration. This could be passed over except that in the two windows of the fourteenth century on the north side we have two quatrefoils of beautiful contemporary stained-glass, which, with the fragments dis-

\* *Stow Chronicles*, ed. 1631, p. 179, sub anno 1223. It has been suggested to me that it may have been the great storm of 1287, which among other things practically destroyed Winchelsea, but this was more in the nature of a series of inundations.

persed throughout the church, bring home the incalculable loss we have suffered through the wilful destruction or culpable negligence of the past times. Of these things Kingsdown has an unfortunate record. Its windows were destroyed, its rood has gone, the ancient font of cylinder type (possibly contemporary with the church) was cast out, and the registers were burnt, while even so recently as thirty years ago a fourteenth-century piscina was ignorantly defaced and removed.

---

NOTE I.—The painting of the murder of Abel on the splay of the little Norman window is interesting, as Cain is depicted slaying his brother with a jaw-bone, a legend referred to in *Hamlet*, Act v, Sc. i, lines 84-5-6:—

*Hamlet*: . . . how the knave jowls it to the ground, as  
if it were Cain's jaw-bone, that did the first  
murder.

The costume is that of peasants of the time of the Conquest or a little later.

The two quatrefoils of painted glass, of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Infant Christ, and of Christ displaying His Sacred Wounds, are, according to Winston, among the finest pieces of fourteenth-century glass extant. There is a brief account of this painted glass in *Jour. Brit. Arch. Ass.*, vol. xliii., pp. 98, 99; while the mural paintings are dealt with in *Arch. Jour.*, vol. lxvii., p. 89.

---

NOTE II.—In the plan of Kingsdown Church on p. 111 fourteenth-century work is indicated by vertical hatching |||||, and fifteenth-century insertions by oblique hatching //|//|. These have been inadvertently omitted from the key.