

THE OLD MINSTER AT SOUTH ELMHAM.

CLASSIFIED AND DESCRIBED BY

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Prefatory Note—

In the whole County of Suffolk, the long period of six hundred years from the departure of the Romans in the fifth century, to the Norman Conquest in the eleventh is, apparently, only represented architecturally by four Saxon church buildings: J. H. Parker, in his *Glossary of Architecture*, mentions as probably Saxon parts of the churches at Barham, Claydon, and Gosbeck. There is also the "Old Minster" at Sandcroft. The remains in the first three examples are inconsiderable in extent, though distinctly precious. Hence the peculiar importance, in Suffolk, of the Old Minster.

Most fortunately, it happened that in 1897 the attention of the most eminent English student of ancient buildings, the late Mr. Micklethwaite, was directed to the venerable ruin at South Elmham, in the course of a comparative study of our most ancient English churches. Taking the form of a private letter to the late Canon Manning, his valuable contribution to the hitherto slight literature connected with the Minster has never been placed on permanent record, but only appeared for a brief day in the columns of the *East Anglian Daily Times*. Canon Smith-Rewse has most kindly lent a copy which he preserved.

It is not quite apparent why Mr. Micklethwaite fixed on Bisi as the founder of the Old Minster, rather than on any of the other early bishops of the East Angles. Bede tells us that Bisi was present 24th Sept. 673 at the synod held at Hertford and that afterwards (*postea*)—how long after we cannot say—“whilst he was still alive, but hindered by much sickness from administering his episcopal functions, two bishops, Eccī and Badwin, were elected and consecrated in his place,” and he adds that from that time until the date when he was writing (c. 729) “that province (*i.e. of the E. Angles*) has had two Bishops.” It seems more likely that Eccī or Badwin required a new home and minster. The earliest mention of a Bishop of Elmham in the charters, by that title, occurs in a subscription to the Statute concerning the liberties of the Church, 12th Oct. 803, * Ego Alheard *Elhamis ecclesiae* episcopus signum crucis subscripsi : * Ego Tidfrith Dummucae civitatis episcopus signum crucis subscripsi.

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. . . The late Mr. Henry Harrod has in the fourth volume of the Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology given good reasons for believing that South Elmham in Suffolk, and not North Elmham in Norfolk, was the centre of early Christian work in East Anglia. My argument tends to confirm his conclusion, but is based upon facts of which he made no use.

I have lately been attempting to classify the ground plans of our most ancient English churches, with the hope of possibly finding a chronological

sequence in them. The first result of this work has been a Paper read at the Canterbury meeting of the Royal Archaeological Institute last year, with the title, "Something about Saxon Church building," and since printed in the 53rd volume of the Archaeological Journal, p. 293. In that Paper, I was able to arrange several distinct groups of plans, and the Old Minster finds a place in one of them. The members of this group, which is a well marked one, have in common a rectangular nave, rather broad for its length, and a round-ended presbytery, nearly as wide as the nave, and about as deep as it is wide. I have found six examples, *viz.*, the churches of St. Martin and St. Pancras at Canterbury, Rochester, Lyminge, St. Peter's-on-the-Wall at Bradwell, Essex, and the Old Minster at South Elmham.

Now the churches of St. Martin and St. Pancras at Canterbury are known to have existed in the time of St. Austin; Rochester was the See-place of Justus, the first Bishop, contemporary with St. Austin; at Lyminge a church for nuns was built in 633; at Bradwell, Cedd, the first bishop of the East Saxons, built his church about 653; and at South Elmham, we believe that Bisi, fourth bishop of Dunwich, 669—673, when he formed a second See in East Anglia, fixed his head-quarters. Every one of these places, therefore, is known to have had a church in the seventh century, and in the first two perhaps a little earlier; and when we find in each, the remains of a building of a marked type, such as we have not yet found elsewhere, it is a fair inference that we have in them the work of the original builders. There is a point of detail in some of these buildings which also suggests their being near to one another in time, and early in date. The church of St. Pancras at Canterbury, that at Lyminge, and that at Bradwell

have had the presbyteries opening from the naves, not by single arches, but by a group of three arches with intervening pillars. The church at Rochester very likely had the same, but that part has not been examined, and we do not know it. Now this peculiarity is only known to have existed in two other churches, and they are both of the seventh century, namely, Reculver in Kent, built about 670, and Brixworth in Northamptonshire, about 680. One or two other examples, in which the evidence seems to point to the same arrangement, but is not complete, are of like early date.

I very much wished to find out whether this characteristic feature had existed at the Old Minster, and it seemed possible that by a little digging some traces of the pillars, or their foundations, might be found. I have to thank you (i.e. Canon Manning) and Dr. Raven for your kind offices in obtaining leave to dig, and Mr. Smith-Rewse, the rector of St. Margaret's for helping to do it. We made our search on Monday, October 4th, and it soon became evident that the ruin of that part of the church had gone below the floor line. There was, therefore, no hope of finding any part of the pillars in position. But something is left of each of the responds, and a solid foundation wall, 3ft. 9ins. thick, is carried across the space between them. The responds are about 21 feet apart, and therefore if they were formed by a single arch, it must have been of considerable height, and of a proportion quite different from any found elsewhere in early work. And, further, it is not likely that the foundation would be continued across such a space unless there was something for it to carry. I am therefore quite convinced that the pillars we were seeking did once exist, and I think all who helped in the search are so too.

The chief object of my visit was attained in settling this point. But as, so far as I know, no adequate description of the building has been given before, I will add a few notes upon it. The ruins stand within a rectangular enclosure of banks. The walls are built of local flints and pebbles arranged in regular courses on the outside, and bedded in a mortar so hard that it seems able to resist the weather, and the destructive efforts of the ivy, which obscures and disfigures some part of the ruin. Its plan is tripartite, having a Western chamber with a doorway in the middle of the West wall, and two doorways in its East wall leading into the nave; beyond this was the presbytery with its apse. Its total length was about 104 feet. All the walls of the Western chamber exist to a considerable height, and the South wall of the nave; but a large part of this has been forced out of its place by a fine tree which grows close to it. I think the destruction of some of the missing walls has been brought about by the growth of trees, and this piece will certainly be lost unless it is attended to very soon. A good deal remains of each of the East corners of the nave, but of the North side of the nave, and of all the presbytery, only foundations are left.

The salient angles, both inside and out, have been of wrought stone, all of which has been taken away. Re-entering angles are neatly formed in the rubble walling without stone quoins. The wall-faces have been finished on both sides with plaster of the same quality as the mortar, and some of it still remains. The putlogs used in the building have been three-cornered in section, the bottom being about 9 ins. wide, and the sides about 7 ins. This form seems to have been used to give the putlogs as broad a bearing as possible upon the newly built walls. I do not re-

member to have seen it in any other place. All the floor had gone in the part where we dug, but from some fragments which were found in the digging I think it was of lime and sand, and not less than 2 ins. in thickness. It is possible that some may remain in the Western part of the building, where the ground is higher.

The Western entrance, and the two doorways between the fore-building and the nave go straight through the walls, as is usual in Saxon work. The lower parts of the jambs have been much knocked away, but the upper parts and the springing of the arches are left, so that the form is easy to be seen. The arrises have been worked in stone, which is all gone. There have been two windows on each side of the forebuilding, and apparently three on each side of the nave. They have had stone dressings on the outside, and are widely splayed on the inside only, which is another indication of very early date. One small fragment of tile of uncertain date was found. It may, perhaps, have been part of the roof-covering, but I thought it modern. I looked carefully for evidence of the use of brick, or any other Roman material, but found none.

The building is of such singular interest that I hope the owner of it will not take it as an impertinence if antiquaries ask that special care be taken of it. It needs no more than to be protected from the growth of trees too near to it and the clearing of the ivy and other weeds off the walls. And the local antiquaries should do their part by obtaining careful drawings of the whole building. To do this properly, a little more digging than we were able to do should be done, and a systematic examination of the Western part might lead to interesting results. What we found

did not confirm the story, mentioned by Mr. B. B. Woodward in the fourth volume of "Suffolk Archaeology," of the whole surface having been dug over, and I think there may be something left for the Suffolk Institute to find.

I am, &c.,

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15, Dean's Yard, Westminster,

11th October, 1897.

[Sir William St. John Hope, F.S.A., writing in January, 1915, to a correspondent in Suffolk, said "the remains of 'The Minster' are those of an undoubted 7th century church At North Elmham there is a curious earthwork that is probably Danish, and a queerly planned building of no earlier date than the 12th century."]