

Suffolk Institute of Archæology.

THE "OLD MINSTER," SOUTH ELMHAM.

BY REV. JOHN JAMES RAVEN, D.D., F.S.A.,

Vicar of Fressingfield with Withersdale,
and Honorary Canon of Norwich Cathedral.

THE name of S. Felix of Burgundy, whom Sigebert, King of the East Angles, invited to his realms, to bring his people out of darkness into light, is well-known beyond the bounds of East Anglia. Not only is his name perpetuated in Suffolk by the two Flixtons and Felixstowe, but in Lincolnshire by Flixborough, in the East Riding of Yorkshire by Feliskirk, dedicated to him, and in Lancashire by Flixton, at the junction of the Mersey and the Irwell. The recorded outlines of the life of one who ought never to be forgotten are comprised in the fact that he founded the See of Dunwich in A.D. 630, and was succeeded by his deacon, Thomas, in A.D. 647; that he established schools, after the manner of Kent; that, by tradition his name is connected with the "Christian Hills" at Babingley, close to Sandringham, where the church is dedicated to him, as well as with this spot.

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We stand here on no common ground. The weight of twelve centuries and more is on us. The scene around us so harmonizes the works of man with the works of nature, that it is hard to realize that these old walls arose through the labours of men of like passions with ourselves, whose arms and backs ached under the weight of stone as ours would ache. Yet, if we will use a little imagination, surely no dangerous guide in this case, we may picture to ourselves the early East Angle Christians splashing in the muddy clay to get these stones out of the soil, stooping under the summer sun to pick them up from the surface and put them into heaps, watching the builders raising the walls foot by foot, and at length rejoicing in their finished work.

"They pitched no tent for change or death,
 No home to last man's shadowy day.
 There! there! the everlasting breath
 Would breathe whole centuries away!"*

Though it would be hard to find a historical relic of greater intrinsic importance than the venerable ruin at which we are now assembled, it would be harder still to find one which has been so entirely ignored by past generations of antiquaries, and by the ordinary sight-seer of the present day.

To name no others, Camden, and his able commentator, Bishop Gibson, as well as Kirby, whose actual survey began in 1732, and the second edition of whose *Suffolk Traveller* was published in 1764, must have been unaware of the place, or they would assuredly have mentioned it. A like reticence is observed by the author of the *Topographical Description of the County*, printed at Woodbridge in 1829.

The reason for this neglect is obvious: the remoteness of the place. Yet of the many who in the last forty years have threaded their way by foot-paths, and through old pasture, to this memorial of the toils and hardships of the early heralds of the Word of Life, none, I trow, have

* R. S. Hawker, *Morwennæ Statio. hodie Morwenstow.*

failed to be impressed by the simple majesty of the scene. The squared enclosure, the solid mass of unwrought stone sleeping its everlasting sleep in the deep foliage, whether in form and outline or in rugged material, insensibly fill the mind, and especially the mind of a solitary visitor, with an indescribable awe.

Our deceased friend, Bernard B. Woodward, when he lived in this neighbourhood, drew the attention of many to this much overlooked object; and about a quarter of a century ago a paper appeared in the *Journal* of our Institute from the hand of one whose name is inseparably bound up with the archæology of East Anglia, Mr. Henry Harrod. The value of this paper is very great, though some will hesitate before adopting all the writer's conclusions. He remarks that the title of Minster is elsewhere unknown in the two counties, "there alone the Saxon title clung to a heap of ruins for many hundreds of years."

The position of the place is first to be noted. It stands well clear of the water, near the head of one of the little feeders of the Waveney, about four miles from one of the great sixteen English roads, the Ninth, noted in Antonine's Itinerary.

The low vallum and correspondingly shallow foss, with square angles, contain about $3\frac{1}{2}$ English acres, or as nearly as possible five Roman *jugera*. The enclosure has all the appearance of a small camp, thrown up at some little distance from the main road, to be occupied on occasion, especially perhaps when some baggage train was passing between *Venta Icenorum* and *Sitomagus*, or in modern language, between Norwich and Dunwich, as I have said at Rumburgh. Roman camps after the recall of the legions were frequently utilized by Saxon church-builders as sites for churches, as in this county at *Combretonium*, Burgh S. Botolph, or close by, at Ilketshall S. Lawrence, or in more distant places, as at *Delgovicia*, Goodmanham in the East Riding, or *Durovernum*, Canterbury. Thus in this spot the camp became holy ground, and in the midst of it stands the "Old Minster."

Next to the position of this building comes its material. I have in vain sought for a trace of wrought stone in these ruins. Boulder clay has supplied the raw material, and the size of many of the stones is remarkable. There is, indeed, nothing phenomenal, like the great stone which lies at the foot of Metfield tower, but the general character of the stones seems to be of unusual size. "Indurate flint" is not, as at Burgh Castle, interlined with "brick in ruddy tiers," but the matter, brought in the rough, was used in the rough, with mortar as hard nearly as itself. Whence comes this mass, weighing, as I suppose, some 600 tons? The excavation of the foss would yield but a fraction of it. The conclusion is forced on me that a large area of the neighbourhood must have been under cultivation, and fairly deep cultivation. No mere surface-scratching would have given the builders their stones. Pasture, scrub, or forest would have concealed them. The spade or the plough alone could have brought them to light. This is my tentative solution. The ridges between these affluents of the Waveney, and the slight watershed which separates its basin from that of the Blyth, were probably once covered with elms and other trees, which in their time yielded to decay. Mighty winds arise.

"Far o'er the crashing forest
The giant arms lie spread."

Natural putrefaction and applied combustion turn into a rich soil the fallen trunks and limbs. Hence the cultivated acres, the discovered stones, the walls of this God's House of the East Angles of the seventh century. The experience of missionaries of the present day, such as the Bishop of Travancore, in employing their converts in building churches and schools, may have been anticipated here.

Regarding the ground-plan, the orientation is true, but the level falls slightly eastward, following the set of the ground, so that the apse is somewhat lower than the west end. Ecclesiologists, like other people, must expect to have their nerves shocked occasionally. Some will

remember how, in the little Roman church exhumed at Silchester in 1892, the apse was found at the west end.* Indeed, the detail there may well be compared with the remains here.

Mr. Harrod's measures give 104 feet for the length, and 33 feet for the breadth of this building. These, I think, must be external measures. The narthex is nearly square, and the average thickness of the walls from three to four feet.

This narthex is a rare feature in church architecture, though found occasionally elsewhere.

Entering the building by the west doorway, the visitor finds himself confronted by a wall only occupying the middle of the building, and leaving access by wide openings into the nave on the north and south. In larger and more stately buildings there was an ante-temple, or outward *narthex*, where lustrations were performed, emblematical of that purity of soul without which no worship is acceptable, where also the dead were often interred. The word *narthex*, which, like *canon*, signifies a reed, became used for any oblong space,† and in particular for that space at the entrance of a church, which was reserved for hearers who were allowed to stand and listen to the psalms, lessons, and sermon, and were then dismissed without joining in the prayers, or receiving the benediction. The openings into the nave are called in later Greek writers, the *beautiful* and the *royal* gates. With regard to the apse or bow at the east end, it seems to have become a feature in churches after so many Basilicas, partly temple, partly law court, partly exchange, passed into Christian hands in Constantine's time.

The walls are from 3 ft. to $3\frac{1}{2}$ ft. thick, and appear to have been at least 13 or 14 ft. high. There are two rifts on each side of the nave, apparently enlargements of slit windows. The apse and the wall, probably only a dwarf wall, which separated it from the nave, now only rise just above the level of the soil.

* *Archæologia*, LIII., No. 2, pp. 563, &c. † Bingham's *Antiq.*, Book VIII., ch. 4.

On Oct. 4th, 1897, Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, F.S.A., visited the "Old Minster" with me, his main object being to find, if possible, evidence of a group of three arches separating the nave from the apsidal presbytery. We found the thickness of this wall to be 3 ft. 9 in., and the conclusion at which we arrived was that such strength of foundation was intended to carry something, and that thus there was a strong presumption in favour of the three-arch theory. The space, moreover, between the responds was 21 ft., and a single arch would have required a height inconsistent with the proportions of the building. Mr. Micklethwaite found traces of the departed external stone dressings of the windows, which are widely splayed on the inside only, another indication of early date. There were signs also of the wrought stone forming the salient angles, and of plaster. The putlogs used in the building were three-sided, the lowest side being about 9 in., and the others 7 in., thus distributing the weight as much as possible on the newly-rising walls.
