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SKETCH OF THE ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE OF ERITH CHURCH, KENT.

BY F. C. J. SPURRELL.

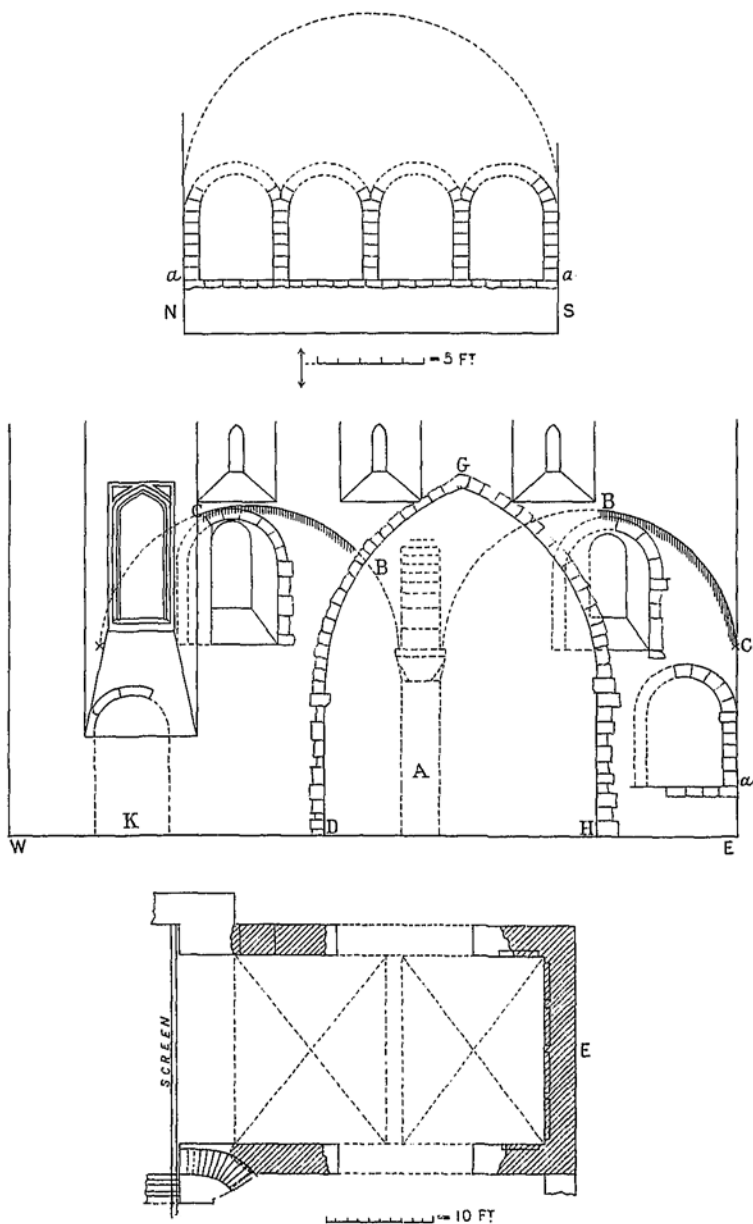
IN modern times, up to the late "restoration," made in 1877, this church consisted of a nave, chancel, south aisle, and south chapel; since which a north aisle and chapel or vestry, balancing the old ones, have been added. I shall confine myself to the ancient work.

The nave measured inside 52 by 24 feet. The chancel 33 feet 9 inches by 17 feet 4 inches. The south aisle 52 feet by 20 feet 6 inches. The Lady Chapel (now the Wheatley Chapel) 34 feet 6 inches, by 23 feet 3 inches. The Norman walls average 3 feet in thickness; and those of the Early English period are about the same.

The floor level of the greater part of the church is the same. I shall call this the *base level*, and measure thence; there is evidence, however, that the oldest level was 3 or 4 inches lower. There is a rise in the chancel at the west end of $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches; further east are three steps of $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches each; and, lastly, there is a foot pace of $5\frac{1}{4}$ inches, which, it will be seen, is now within 6 inches of the level at which the Norman altar stood.

NORMAN PERIOD.

Chancel.—I believe that this "base" level may be taken as the old level of the west end of the chancel in Norman times, as proved by the foundations, and by the Norman doorway (K) at the north-west corner. At the east end of the chancel there is evidence of a rise of the floor to 30 inches above the "base," as shewn by the masonry; but there is no evidence left of the number of steps by which this rise was attained. The highest points to which the Norman walls can now be traced are 8 feet 4 inches at the east end, and to B C 15 feet 6 inches from the floor on either side. The east wall was ornamented with an arcade (*a a*) recessed 8 inches deep; each arch being 3 feet 6 inches wide, and 5 feet high from the old bench table (*a a*), whence the jambs arise. The width of masonry between each pair of arches was 8 inches.



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ERITH CHURCH, KENT.

EAST AND NORTH WALLS OF CHANCEL.

Showing where Norman vaulting, windows, and archways formerly stood.

It is clear that the Norman altar must have stood quite separate from the east wall, and some feet to the west of it.

The arcade was continued round the side walls, certainly for one arch, but not past the middle of the chancel. There are imposts to the arches in the side walls; but none in the eastern arcade, where the whole was flush with the wall. None of these six arches were doorways. The work in them is rough, but it was smoothed with mortar.

On the north wall of the chancel are parts of two round-headed windows shewn in the Plate with the apex of one marked B, and that of the other C; their sills stand a little above the level of the top of the arcading. The south wall had similar windows (of which the western one exists almost complete). Springing from the level of the top of the arcade, on the north and south walls, may still be traced a line (through A) which marks where the stone vaulting joined the wall. By a comparison of the two walls the vault arches (A B C) may be defined accurately. There was a window under each bay of vaulting. There appears to have been an arch at A across the chancel, between the bays (see Plate), and of course one in the west; this arch was 29 feet 6 inches from the east wall.

At the east end, the arch of the vault was somewhat wider, but there was not room enough for more than two windows; and this I suggest would be in conformity with the very unusual number of four arches in the arcading below. Outside the chancel, on the north-west corner, now hidden by a buttress, is the heading of a small Norman doorway (K), blocked up; no part of it is now visible inside.*

EARLY ENGLISH PERIOD.

The somewhat wide Norman vaulting, with the insecure situation of the building (so near the water), must have caused its early fall, and this perhaps brought about the general rebuilding of

* As to the Saxon church. There was a church in Erith in the Confessor's day. It is mentioned in a deed of that King, and also in another of William the Conqueror. But it is *not* mentioned in Domesday, and it is not mentioned in documents again until Stephen's reign. In this interval the church was doubtless destroyed, and rebuilt at the end of the eleventh or beginning of the twelfth century. This is in perfect accord with the Norman architecture of the chancel, which in style and plan is *all of one piece*. I cannot help alluding to the tradition that the old bell of Erith Church was once carried off and thrown into a part of the neighbouring river, reputed to be of an unknown depth, and called therefrom Church Hole; whence it was said the sound of the bell might be perceived on stormy nights. The tale is now but a faint one, recalling, however, the time when there was but one bell, and of pagans, who could carry it away.

the church on a larger scale in the thirteenth century, in the Early English style. This outline of the edifice remained good until 1877.

In the Early English period high arches, without mouldings, were pierced near the middle of each wall of the chancel (that in the north wall is marked D & H, in the first Plate; and it appears, blocked up, in the second Plate), and chapels were built; that on the north dedicated to St. Nicholas, and that on the south to Our Lady. The top of the Norman arcade in the east wall was cut off, and three narrow lancet windows* put there.

An arcade of three Early English arches still divides the nave from the south aisle, but the Early English north wall has lately been replaced by an arcade resembling the old one, but not exactly like it. The arches are chamfered, the two pillars have moulded caps and bases; from the base line to the apex the arches average 16 feet 6 inches high; the pillars are 7 feet 7 inches high. The eastern arch falls into the wall without a corbel, but 2 feet 6 inches south of the chancel wall; and this end of the arch does not fall so low as the others by 7 feet. One half of it is therefore unsymmetrical, but it was so planned by the original builder. The western arch falls into a respond, but is supported by a pretty moulded corbel, with a lizard for finial.

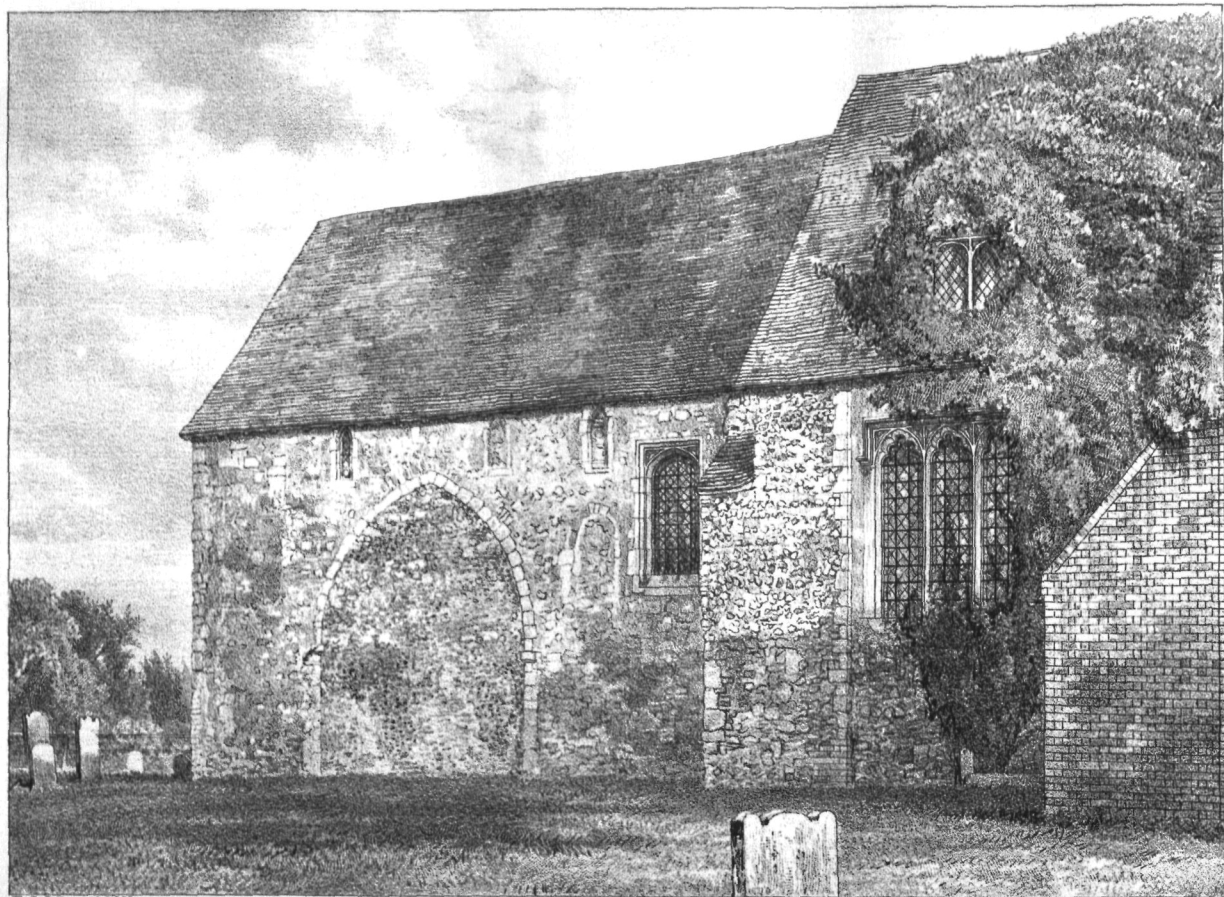
In the middle of the west wall of the nave can be seen the outline of a pointed doorway, 9 feet wide, the apex 13 feet 6 from the ground. It appears to have been the great western door of this period, as it is altogether unconformable to the present tower, and in the centre of the wall. I suppose there was no tower here in the Early English church.

In the east wall of the Lady Chapel there certainly were two lancet windows, or if three, they were much closer together than those in the chancel; also two lancets in the south wall.

In the west wall of the south aisle is a single lancet at the same level as those in the east of the Lady Chapel, but with a hood-moulding.

Two plain lancets were placed in the south wall of the south aisle, exactly opposite two in that wall of the nave which was

* The three windows differ in height, the centre being highest by about 18 inches. The aperture of the middle one is 1 foot 6 inches wide, 10 feet high; the sides 1 foot 1 inch wide, 9 feet high. The splays below spring all 8 feet 4 inches from the base level, are 4 feet 8 inches wide, and rise, the centre 13 feet 6 inches; the side ones about 18 inches less. The space between the splays is 8 inches.



F. C. J. S. and W. K.

ERITH CHURCH, KENT.—NORTH WALL OF CHANCEL.—ABOUT 1864.

destroyed in 1877. This wall was not in a straight line with the north wall of the chancel, but 2 feet 4 inches north of it. A small north door lay midway between the two windows. Opposite stands the south door. This is a pretty doorway, with Purbeck pillars having square caps. The doorway is finished off outside with a drip-moulding for the adaptation of a wooden porch. There never was a stone porch until now. The oak door belonging to the old wooden porch still remains, and the hinges are very elegant (the opening is 10 feet 8 inches by 4 feet 8 inches).

A string-course, down to which came the splays of the Early English lancets (each 10 feet 6 inches high), ran along the Lady Chapel, falling rapidly towards the east; this injurious settlement was the origin of much of the renovation of the church in the Decorated period. Signs of a string-course were visible in the nave.

As to this settlement, I must point out that the church stands on a low spit of river gravel, and the marsh clay reaches up to the graveyard. The church is within 220 yards of the river wall now; this is marked on the Ordnance map as 17 feet 5 inches above the datum line; the floor of the church is 3 feet 3 inches below the top of the tide wall. It is recorded that in mediæval times the river broke repeatedly through the Erith banks, and this must have greatly weakened the foundations of the building. In winter and wet weather the vaults under the church were very lately on certain occasions found full of water, nearly to the floor. This wetness of the foundations may perhaps explain, as of use for ventilation or drainage, the unusual hole in the heavy masonry at the bottom of the tower, which has so often been repaired.

The oldest brass formerly in Erith Church is a small strip with black-letter inscription in Norman French, now in my possession. Many times has it been printed, but never rightly, as it is now for the first time given:

✠ *Felice atte Cok gist icy*
dieu de sa alme eit merci.

The capitals F and C are Lombardic, and the inscription belongs to the early part of the thirteenth century.*

* The name of Cok is important in early Erith history. In the Lansdowne MSS. is the seal of Resi Cok A.D. 1234. Another seal, A.D. 1279, also in Lansdowne MSS., bears the legend, "*Sigill Mauricii filii Resi Cok.*" In the MSS. of the Society of Antiquaries is a deed giving land in Erith to the Priory of Holy Trinity in London, with a witness, Adam Koc; and another similar deed, with a witness, *Johannis Coc filius Ade Coc* (for Adam, I suppose, or perhaps Atte), dated A.D. 1279. In another, A.D. 1316, concerning land in Erith, one witness

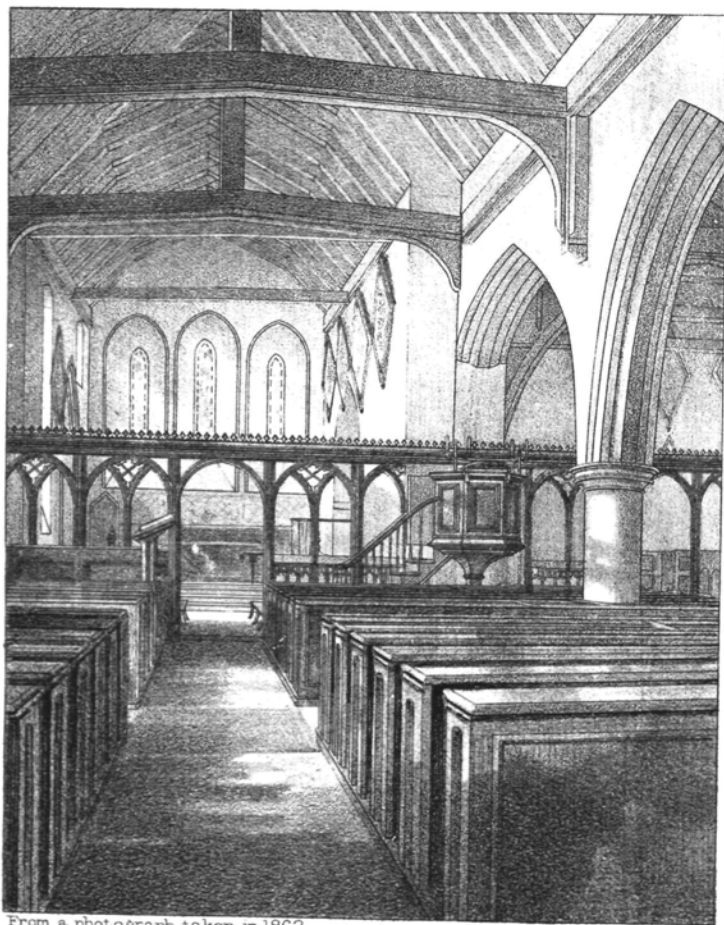
DECORATED PERIOD.

During the Decorated period was inserted, in the west end of the Lady Chapel, an arch, which remains; it springs from responds. In the roof a tie beam was placed close to each side of the top of this arch. In the chancel were similar tie beams, but no arch, nor corbels, nor responds; yet there must have been an arch, and its absence can be explained by the excavation or construction of the rood staircase at this period. This staircase has a stone doorway in the walled-up north-west angle of the Lady Chapel, and twelve steps (only nine are now left) once led to a square aperture on the west of the wall. This passage was so wide (over 2 feet inside) that it must have greatly weakened an arch, whether supported by a corbel or otherwise, but no base or other sign remains to tell anything about it. The aperture was 2 feet wide, 5 feet 9 inches high, and the bottom 8 feet 6 inches from the base level. This shews that the rood loft must have been of that elevation; and the Decorated screen, lately removed, was the one for which the aperture was made, as shewn by the height of the uprights remaining. After the rood loft was taken off the screen, the date of which can only be guessed, the upper portion was finished off by a simple moulding, with the flat ornament characteristic of Elizabeth's time. It ran across the church from the north wall to the south wall of the aisle, *outside* the chancel.

The old rood staircase and aperture were used in modern times as the mode of access to the pulpit (which stood at the level of the rood loft), until Archdeacon C. J. Smith, a man of fine presence, could no longer endure so undignified a hole to scramble through. The rood screen, which had as usual suffered by rough usage and time, was once painted to resemble granite. The parishioners in vestry assembled got rid of it, with many other things, in 1862. At the same time they discarded the pretty Perpendicular parclose screen which divided the chancel from the Lady Chapel.

The wood-work of the roofs of the nave, aisle, and Lady Chapel, was, I think, of the Decorated period; and doubtless the chancel roof was once like the rest, but it was afterwards replaced at a lower level by weaker work in a different style, probably after the fire in the fifteenth century. These three old roofs are of oak (the chancel has a new one in pitch pine, like all the new work), and they are

is *Ricardus filius Coci*. Peter att Coke possessed lands in Lesnes (Erith) in 37th Edward III. And, lastly, for three generations from the reign of Henry VIII., a family of the name of Cooke possessed the manor of Erith.



From a photograph taken in 1862.

ERITH CHURCH, KENT.

LOOKING FROM N.W. CORNER OF NAVE.

It is to be noticed that the Screen is in the Church, not in the Chancel.

somewhat peculiar. The rafters have collar beams with stretchers; the ridge beam is not seen from below. The collar beams rest on a central purlin, and this is supported on kingposts, which rise from tie-beams bracketed on corbels. From the upper part of the kingposts diverge curved stretchers of equal length. The effect is very good.

In the Decorated period a three-light cusped window was placed at the east end of the Lady Chapel; it has been replaced twice by different designs since 1864.

TOWER.

The tower was built in the fourteenth century. If there had ever been a tower before, no signs of it exist, and no place can be assigned for its probable site. It was built against the west wall of the nave, but its centre did not coincide with that of the nave or of the old doorway. This "Early English" west doorway was partly blocked, and a new doorway (6 feet 3 inches wide) was inserted within it, utilizing the northern jamb. But though the tower fell away from the west wall more than once, that wall still stands true and sound. The tower measures a little over 14 feet square inside; it has two stories, and a shingled spire. It is recorded that the property of the church and altar vessels were kept "*in solario campanilis*" at the end of the fourteenth century. On the second floor of the tower, in the "solarium," was a large pointed window, the outline of which is just visible. In its outline was subsequently inserted a smaller square-headed sixteenth century window, looking into the church.

On the south side of the tower, resting on the foundation course, was a small opening, 18 inches high by 6 inches wide, flush with the outside wall; it was splayed within, and extended to the depth of 20 inches (half the wall), where it ended. I had an opportunity of seeing the masonry explored from the inside, and can say certainly that the little aperture never passed through to the inside. I believe it to have been an air hole to keep the masonry dry, and nothing more. I have already remarked on the dampness of the soil.

Inside the tower are two rude arches of chalk, and of such stones as all that part is built of; these only extend into the substance of the tower to the depth of the component stones; they might be called discharging arches, for they had no jambs; the apices are 6 feet from the ground.

PERPENDICULAR PERIOD.

In the Perpendicular period the two lancets in the Lady Chapel were replaced by two square-headed two-light windows, as were those in the aisle by three three-light windows; the north-eastern lancet in the nave was replaced by a three-light window.

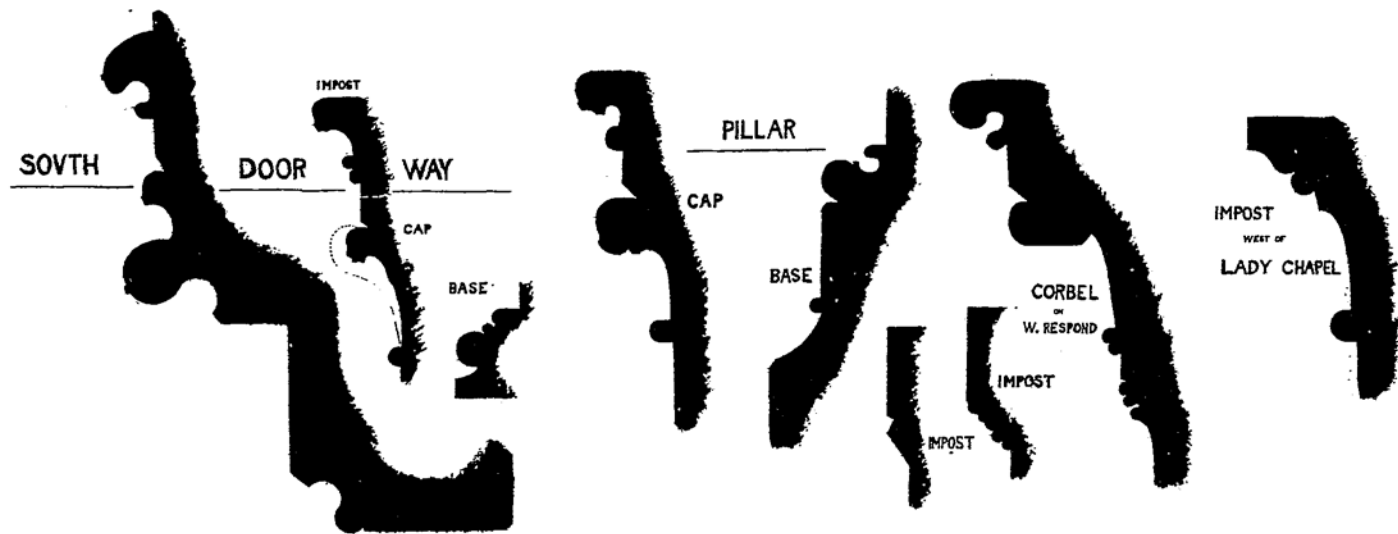
It is plain that some time after the building of St. Nicholas's Chapel, in the thirteenth century, a great fire burned all the north wall of the chancel, destroying the chapel. It is possible that it may have occurred between the years 1476 and 1482; for in the first-named year John Trell left benefactions to the high altar and those of St. Mary and St. Nicholas; and in the latter, Edmund Schypman (significant name in this matter) leaves a benefaction to St. Mary's Light instead of the light of the mariners' patron (see Rochester Wills).

This date accords with the three little pointed clerestory windows inserted at the top of the north wall of the chancel, which appear to be late Perpendicular, and which could not have coexisted with a chapel on that side. They are curious windows (shewn in the first Plate near the upper letters B, G, and C), 7 inches in width, with very wide splays inside (4 feet), with signs of having had wooden shutters outside (there is no lead glazing line). Perhaps they served for ventilation, and could be closed in bad weather; for there can be no doubt that the very gloomy chancel required extra lighting, and was smoky, with the votive lights. There were none of these windows on the opposite wall. These windows were very needlessly destroyed in the late alterations; only parts of them are now visible.

There is evidence that there was a good deal of carved stone decoration of this date built against the walls about the high altar and that of St. Mary. A piece of Perpendicular work, brought from some other situation, of Purbeck stone, has been utilized in making a cupboard or aumbry on the north side of the high altar. A little Perpendicular stone niche has been inserted in the south side of the east wall of late years from elsewhere; it is not a piscina, having no basin nor drain hole. No piscina or stoup has ever been discovered in Erith Church.

The squint between the chancel and the Lady Chapel is ill built, and of uncertain date. It is 2 feet 6 inches wide by 4 feet 3 inches high, and 3 feet through the wall. Its direction is askew, making an angle with the east wall of 12° to the west. It

ERITH CHVRCH



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SECTIONS OF MOULDINGS.

is so wide that a priest ministering could see the other altar; but for this use it certainly was not needed. I cannot help thinking that it was opened to let light into a very dark corner; even at midday now it is exceedingly dark there, and must have been still more so when the rather high parclose screen, with close *cancelli*, filled the southern arch, and painted glass filled the windows. A square-headed sixteenth century window is oddly inserted, high up, at the north-west corner of the chancel. This is splayed below, in an unusual manner; but having broken into the Norman doorway at K below, it was not thought necessary to build up the wall more strongly. This window was so placed, I suggest, for the purpose of affording light to the readers *on the rood loft*, as well as at the chancel step, when it was the custom so to read.

Niches, 7 inches deep, 7 feet high, and 1 foot 7 inches wide, exist, but are blocked up, on either side of the great window of the Lady Chapel; they are of sixteenth century work.

The walls seem to have been profusely decorated with colours. The Norman painting coeval with the round-headed windows was plain, in the usual red outlining, with five-leaved roses, without stalks. Early English colouring perpetuated this pattern, and added more; joining it on to the Norman here, and changing the patterns elsewhere. In the Lady Chapel, especially, painting was lavished on the walls; in one part was a pattern in red, of squared slabs, with a stalked flower and leaves, the stalk *running* vertically from one slab to another, together with some good borders. A picture of hell, with demons, was there according to custom.

At some period, probably in the fourteenth century, the walls of the church were chipped smooth of all beading, etc., and carefully plastered to a level surface fit for painting on. One portion of a fourteenth century painting of remarkable delicacy, I was able to decipher; it was painted in colours true to nature, and well drawn. On the extreme left was a hill-side, with a dignified figure of a woman walking down it; she seemed to represent an angel in disguise. There was no halo or any conventional sign, but from the fact that round about were flocks and herds of goats and sheep, oxen and asses, and a shepherd, unconscious of her presence, she must have been part of a vision. Over this was one diapered pattern, and several others. There was evidence all over the church of three and four and five coats of *paintings* having been superimposed, except in the chancel, where darkness prevented aught but the plainest work being seen. A rude picture of the Crucifixion

in outline was on the eastern pier of the arch on the north side of the chancel, and another like it under the opening into the rood screen in the church. What remained of the painted glass was utterly destroyed by the gunpowder explosion on October 1st, 1884, with much else.

Some of the corbel heads are grotesque, but two are not—a queen and an angel. One so-called grotesque is very remarkable; its date is Early English. It represents, projecting into the church, a terrible wolf-like gaping head, with mouth held distended by delicately shaped human arms and hands; the teeth are regular and human; the hair is strongly waved, and evidently of feminine length. Altogether it represents what I understand to be the united characteristics of the northern deities—Hela and Fenris.

A few pieces of squared stones, all cut with one diaper pattern, are here and there to be seen. They are such pieces as may have come from the tympanum of a door. They are Norman in style, and seem to have belonged, with other pieces of carving, to this church. They are unlike any stones in the ruins of Lesnes Abbey, and are built into walls of a date long preceding the destruction of the Abbey, none being visible in walls later than the Decorated period.

A stone coffin of Transition or Early English date, possibly earlier, is now in the Lady Chapel. On the lid is a cross with plain trefoiled ends, rising from a calvary of three steps; in the middle is the serpentine pattern seen often at that early date; it is 6 feet 4 inches, by 2 feet 2 inches, by 1 foot 3 inches. It was employed to form part of the steps which once led down to the church in the south entrance, and very likely came from Lesnes Abbey. If such a repair was needed in the time of Weever (author of the *Funeral Monuments*), who was rector of this church, it is likely that he secured some of the materials unearthed from the precincts of Lesnes Abbey Church (the founder's vault, etc.) in 1630, at which operation he was "not the hindmost," as he says himself. Another piece of a coffin lid, containing a floriated cross, of the fourteenth century, lies with it.

Some pieces of Roman tile and mortar were used as building material (which was very scarce) and rubble, in the earlier works in the church, but in very small quantities; there is no sign of Roman work "*in situ*" in the church.