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EAST WICKHAM CHURCH

WITH NOTES ON ITS REPAIR BY THOMAS F. FORD, A.R.I.B.A.

EAST WICKHAM is situated near Bexley, upon the hills south-west of Woolwich. Its ancient Parish Church had fallen into extreme need of repair, which was carried out in 1926-7, under the direction of Mr. T. F. Ford, Architect.

The Church, dedicated to St. Michael, is a rectangular building, measuring internally 55 ft. long by 18 ft. wide, and having no structural division between nave and chancel. The walls are faced externally with a mixture of flint, chalk and firestone ; later repairs being executed in harder limestone and brick. The roof is of steep pitch. The whole of it was reconstructed and retiled in 1897, when the old tiles were relaid on the north side only, while the south side was newly covered with tiles of smooth, machine-made type. At the west end, rising above the roof is a timber-framed belfry (mainly dating from 1897) which terminates in a shingled spire, containing three bells.

In general appearance the building is akin to many of the smaller churches of the county. Of the ancient history of the building, little is known beyond such facts as can be gathered from the fabric itself. A tradition exists that it was built originally for secular purposes and converted subsequently into a church. Singular as this tradition is, it is not incompatible with certain discoveries made during the recent repair works. The vestry, on the south side, appears to have been added between 1780 and 1820. It was erected with very slight foundations.

On removing the old pews, it was found that the boarded platforms on which they stood were badly decayed, and much dry rot was disclosed. The damaged parts therefore, were carefully removed, and burnt, whilst such parts of the pews as were of any interest were preserved for a time.

Upon removal of the dado boarding, the wall behind it proved to be unplastered, and built very loosely, the joints being generally devoid of mortar. Consequently a great deal of pointing and rebuilding had to be done before it was possible to plaster this portion of the interior walling. In the course of this work four stones were found built into the north wall, which proved to be of great interest. One, which was observed bedded endwise in the wall, was recognized as of Norman workmanship, and on being withdrawn from its resting place, disclosed the typical bell-shaped capital, or impost, of a small door jamb. Immediately above it another stone was discovered of the same date, in the form of a semi-circular window arch, in one piece, with a double splay, but no rebate for glass.

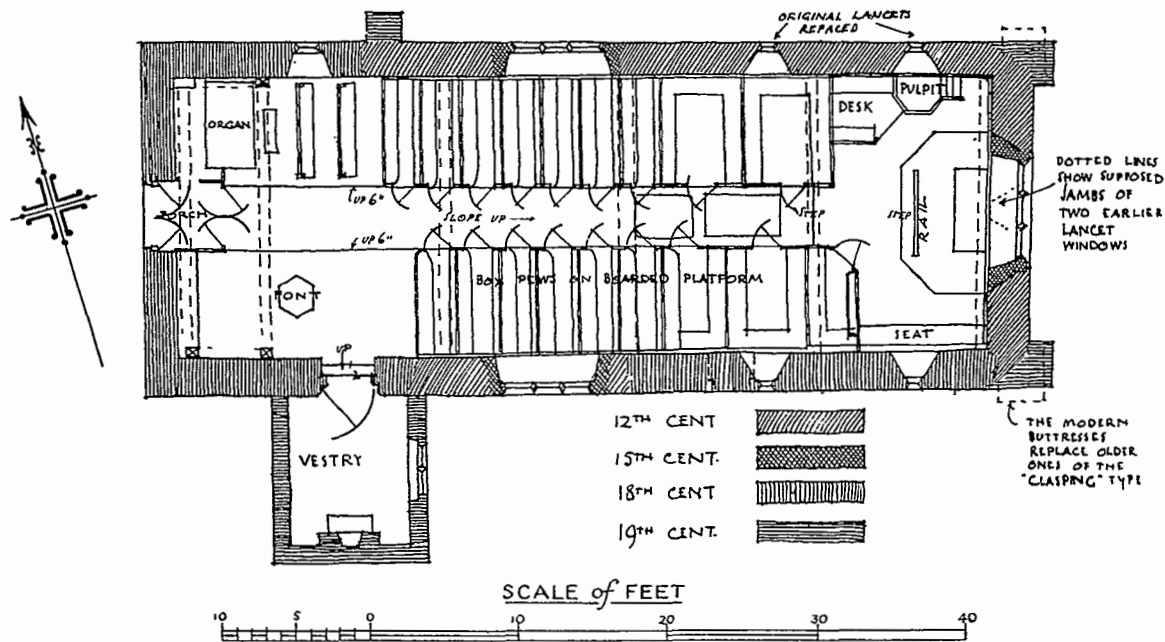
Near these two finds were noticed two lettered crosses scratched on irregular pieces of stone, which may date from the twelfth century. These four stones have now been carefully preserved inside the building.

On the south wall a patch of later brickwork was investigated and as a result the remains of the Priest's door were found. The upper part had been pulled down when the wall was rebuilt, probably at the beginning of the nineteenth century; but the lower portion had escaped demolition. The stone jambs are well preserved and retain their plaster, whilst the stone threshold is visible at some distance above the floor line. What remains of the opening has been formed into a permanent recess by the insertion of oak lintels to carry the wall above it, and in this recess are now preserved the four ancient stones previously referred to. The date of this doorway may be as early as the year 1200, judging by the strongly marked vertical tooling on the stone.

At the time this wall was re-built a second lancet window was inserted, to match that in the north wall, and to complete the fenestration of the chancel, which thus has now two original windows on the north side, and one old and one new on the south. As this new window is partly over the remains of the door, and at such a level that it could not

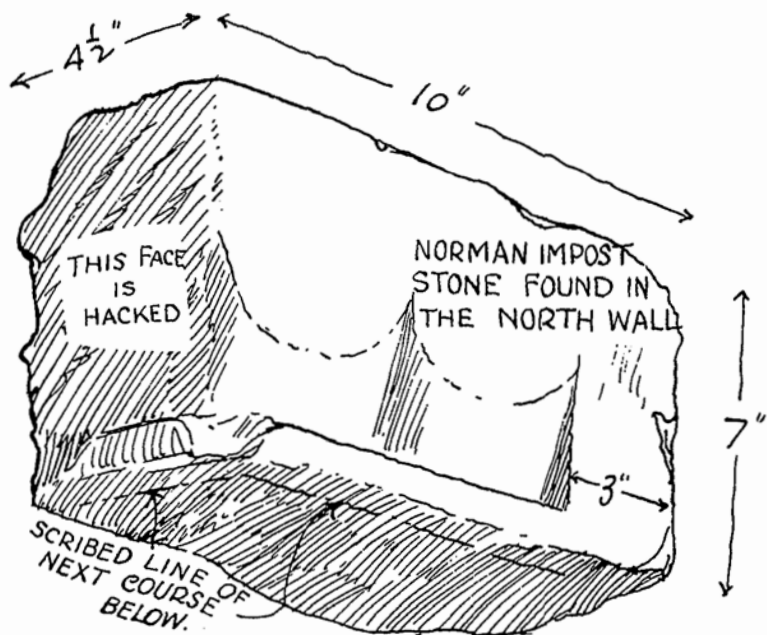
EAST WICKHAM CHURCH

PLAN, BEFORE RESTORATION 1926

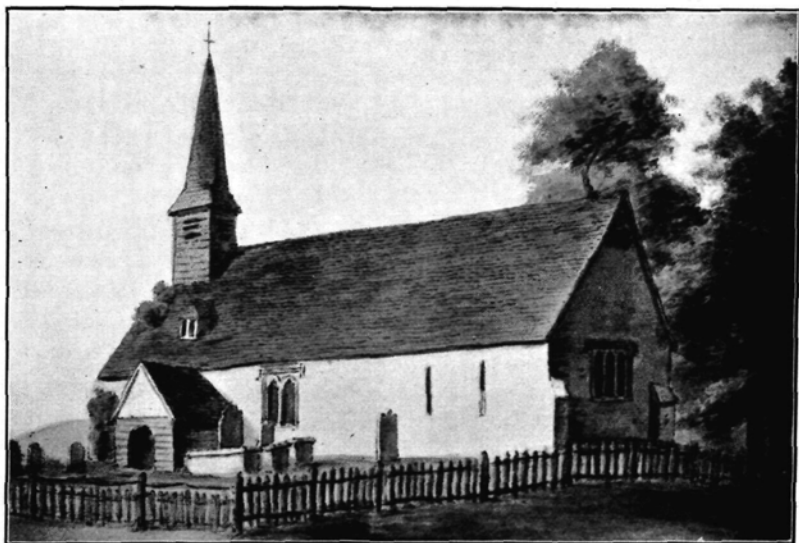


have been there at the time the door was in use, it is legitimate to conclude that the window is simply an insertion, and not the replacing of an earlier feature.

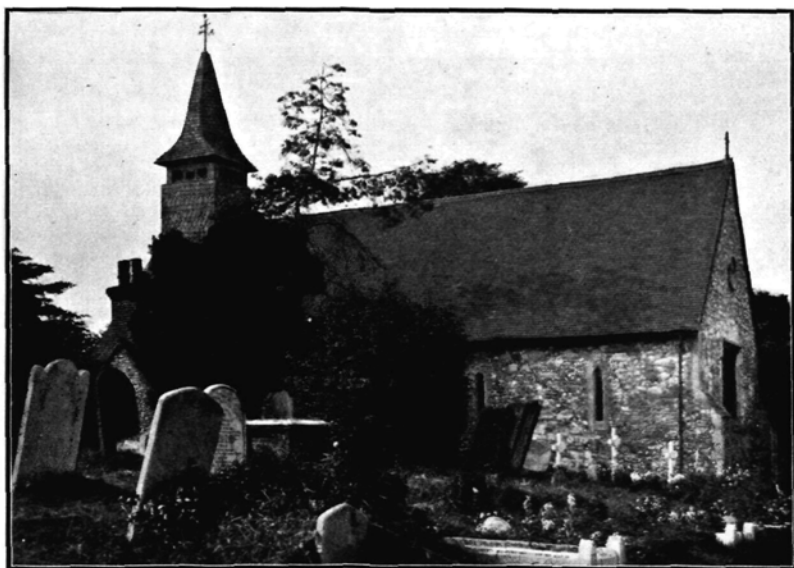
The east wall was completely covered by large mahogany panels, bearing the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments, above a panelled dado, which was in a very decayed condition. On the removal of the woodwork, the original plaster surface came to light and some interesting discoveries



were made. It should be remarked that the present east window is of the same character as the two fifteenth century windows in the nave; but, on cleaning down the plastered walls on either side, it was found that the chalk jambs of two earlier windows existed, and the later stonework was bedded up to them. Upon cutting away to expose the lines of the early work, two deep flat splays came to light, which had been plastered and painted, most probably in the thirteenth century. It is quite clear that there had been two lancet windows here, as parts of their inner arches still



[Drawn by H. Petrie, F.S.A., c. 1802.]



[Photographed by J. Edmunds.]

EAST WICKHAM CHURCH.

remain, and the tie-beam of the wall truss has been cut away slightly over each.

The mediæval painting referred to extended beyond these window jambs over the plastering on either side, and comprised a large niche, with an architectural canopy above a figure subject, the exact identity of which is not yet decided. This design is much clearer on the south, but traces can also be seen on the north side. The work is executed direct upon the plaster, and has now been cleaned and freed from the whitewash, of which many coats had accumulated. It is galling to think how little survives of this unusually rich colour treatment. It was observed and described in detail as late as 1844, when a protest was lodged by the British Archæological Association against the proposals then on foot to whitewash the whole series of paintings.¹ This protest was formally made to the Bishop, but no effective action resulted. Consequently the paintings were lost to view and in 1897, when the walls above the dado were replastered, the new plaster was applied on the top of the old surface. The paintings were thus irretrievably lost, except on the east wall, where the presence of the wooden panel work happily precluded any replastering.

On the north wall of the nave, further traces were found of painting, concealed behind a board recording various Parochial Charities. On this being removed there was

¹ See *Archæological Journal*, Vol. I. (1845), pp. 165, 274 and 400. The discoverer of the mural paintings was Mr. George Woollaston. They consisted "of a double row of Scriptural subjects in colours, extending originally (it is believed) all round the church. The lower range is within an arcade of pointed trefoil arches, each arch containing a different subject. The subjects at present made out are:—The Three Kings bringing presents to Herod; the Flight into Egypt; the Meeting of Elizabeth and Mary; the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple; and the Archangel Michael overcoming Satan." Mr. G. R. Corner, F.S.A., pronounced the paintings "exceedingly well drawn, and to be, in his opinion, as early as the thirteenth century." Mr. Woollaston, in September, 1844, exhibited to the British Archæological Association the drawings he had made of the paintings; at the same time stating that they were then "about to be destroyed in consequence of the obstinacy of a party who had paid the fees for the erection of a mural tablet over them." Urgent efforts were made on the part of experts to save the paintings; but the Bishop of Rochester, after a personal inspection, declared them not worth preserving; and the Arch-deacon of Rochester, the Vicar of the Parish and the parishioners themselves being alike indifferent to the fate of the paintings, they were inevitably doomed to obliteration.

REMAINS OF 13TH CENTURY PRIEST'S-DOOR WITH LATER LANCET WINDOW ABOVE IT

ROOF PLATE

MODERN LANCET
WITH BATH STONE
DRESSINGS, SIMILAR
TO 13TH CENTURY
LANCETS ON THE
NORTH SIDE.

LINE OF OLD
DADO CAPPING

ROUGH STONEWORK
UNPLASTERED

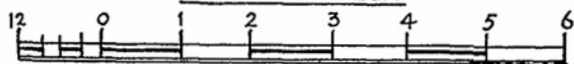
NEW OAK LINTEL

TRACES OF
OLD PLASTER
AND COLOUR

NEW
PLASTER

FLOOR

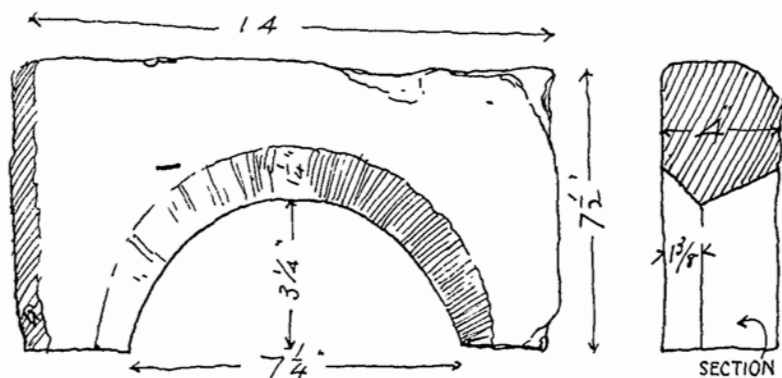
SCALE OF FEET



EAST WICKHAM CHURCH.
Details of South Wall of the Chancel.

disclosed the old plaster face with a painted figure, thought to be that of St. Michael. This painting, which is later in date than those in the chancel, is painted on a coat of white-wash, and it has been difficult therefore to clean and preserve it; but what traces remain have been left as a relic of the features the interior at one time possessed. Behind the boarded dado, a few fragments of old plastered surface were found, bearing incised lines in the form of arcading with traces of red colour.

The removal of the box pews and their platforms disclosed the earth floor of the church, on either side of a



NORMAN ARCH STONE FOUND IN NORTH WALL
EAST WICKHAM CHURCH.

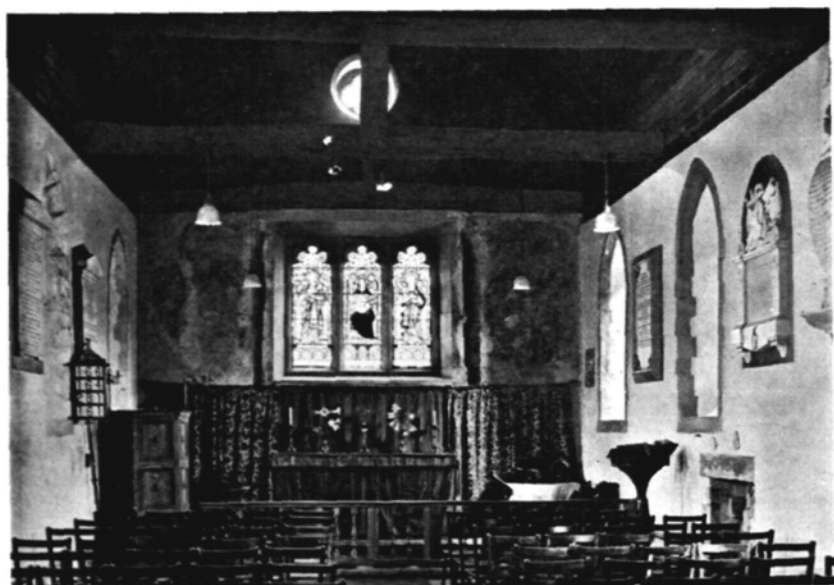
central tiled alley, which sloped upwards towards the east, to the extent of 6 inches or more. The reason for this slope became apparent when the sanctuary platform was removed, as a worn red tile floor was then found, super-imposed upon the remains of a previous brick floor. Under this, in turn, were found several mediæval tiles, which have been carefully cleaned and bedded in the new altar-pace. Below these floors, which, with their successive raising of the level, had led to the formation of the sloping alley, were traces of an older chalk floor, which could also be noted under the alley itself, and in various other places. It proved impossible to ascertain the exact line of this floor, as the fragments

differed considerably in level and the new floor was therefore laid about 6 inches higher. In this process various vaults were filled in, and many interments discovered. The whole floor has now been made sanitary by a layer of hard core and concrete.

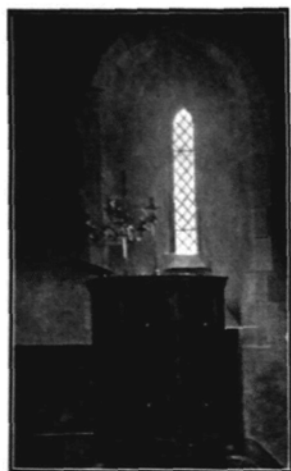
The Chancel floor has been covered again with the old red tiles, made out with Purbeck stone steps, and the alley is paved with a central strip of stone with tile margin on each side. Two large tomb slabs forming part of the central alley paving have been replaced in position. One of these stones, of dark grey veined marble, formed the original matrix of the unusual and rare foliated cross brass dated 1325, in memory of John De Bladigdone (Blendon) and his wife. This brass had been removed from its matrix in 1897, largely restored, and mounted on a new stone slab placed on the south wall near the vestry door. There it had become tarnished and was in danger of general deterioration, and it was thought fit to take it down, together with its new stone setting, and bed it in the Sanctuary floor to the south of the altar, where it will be more easily kept clean and free from corrosion.

On the north side of the altar, room was made in the floor for the brass and slab dated 1568, previously fixed in the north wall, in memory of William Payne, a Beefeater or Yeoman of the Guard, who is depicted in the uniform of the day, with his two wives, both named Joan. In removing it from the wall two pieces of timber were disclosed, which proved to be parts of a sill of a mediæval screen, with traces of colour still visible upon them. They are preserved in the church, and, although it is not possible to say definitely that they once formed part of a chancel screen in the building, the presumption is very strong.

When the laying out of the new floor was under consideration the font was moved from its place west of the vestry door, to the eastward of it, in order to secure more ample space. The original position of the font is thought to have been on the north side opposite the south entrance door, long before the vestry was added there, and the west



East End, after restoration, 1927.



Pulpit.



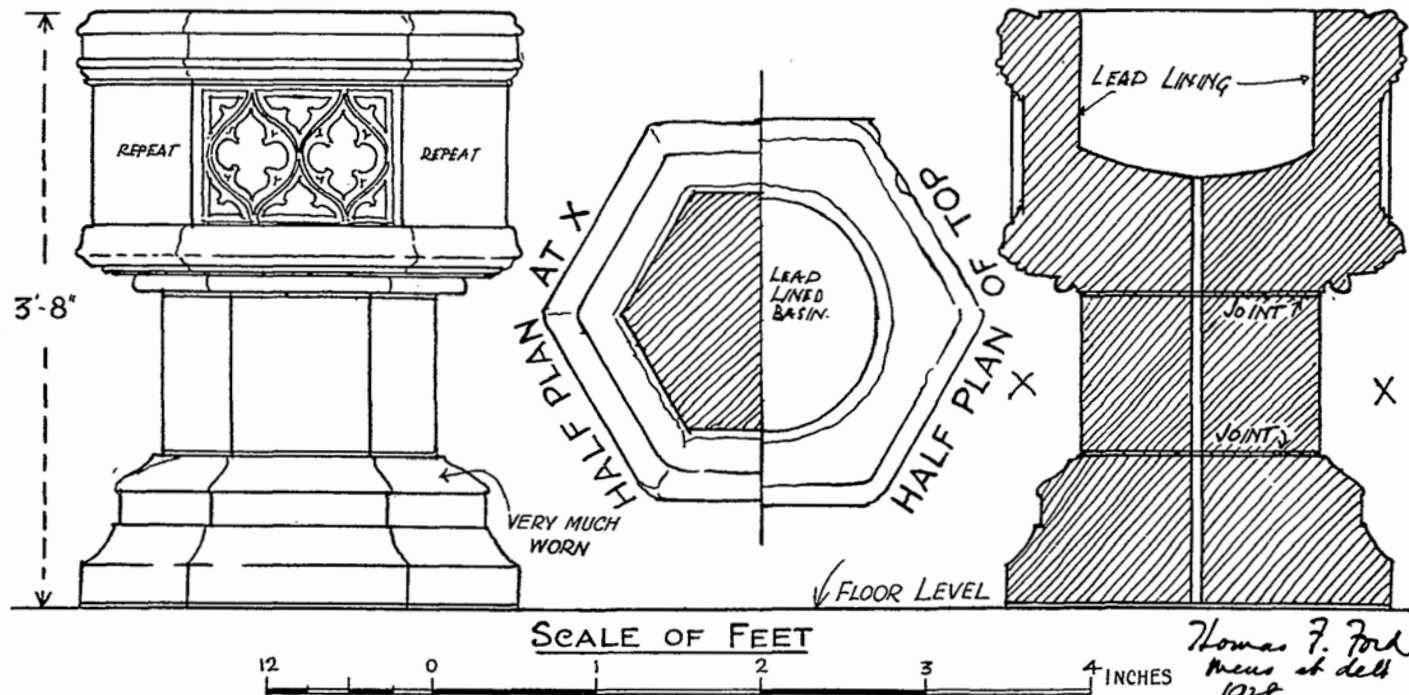
Font.

EAST WICKHAM CHURCH.
(From photographs by J. Edmunds).

FONT IN EAST WICKHAM CHURCH

ELEVATION

SECTION



door made. It was at some later period (probably when the box pews were inserted) taken to the chancel. And in 1844 it stood on the north side of the altar, from whence it was removed to the west end again in 1897 (?) but on the south side. No trace being found of its early reputed position on the north side, it was felt that there was no reason for restoring it to a conjectural site.

The Pulpit, which showed indications of a Jacobean character, had been much repaired and smothered in paint. It has been replaced in its old position on a plain boarded base, after being carefully cleaned, when its oak panels were revealed, surrounded by mahogany and later deal molding.

An altar rail was made out of some of the balustrading in the vestry, which had been retained when the west gallery was taken down in 1897. These balusters were all painted, but on being cleaned, nearly half proved to be of oak. Being of good design they were accordingly incorporated in the new altar rail.

Whilst these matters were receiving attention the roof boarding, dating from 1897, was being cleaned, and proved to be of pitch pine over the original nave, and of oak over the chancel. The old main timbers of the roof were likewise cleaned down and the varnish removed.

When the building was replastered in 1897 the work was carried out in a hard plaster finished with sanded face, all worked to a true and flat surface and cut with square edges round all stone jambs of windows and door openings. These edges producing an unpleasantly harsh effect, they were rubbed down flush with the stone work, affording a soft curved surface, greatly improving the appearance of the interior. The walls were then generally repaired and whitened, care being taken to preserve all traces of mediæval colour decoration that could be left.

NOTE.—Thanks are due to the Kent County Photographic Record and Survey for providing a photograph of Petrie's drawing for reproduction, and to Mr. J. Edmunds, of New Erith for kindly taking the other photographs to illustrate this paper.—ED.