



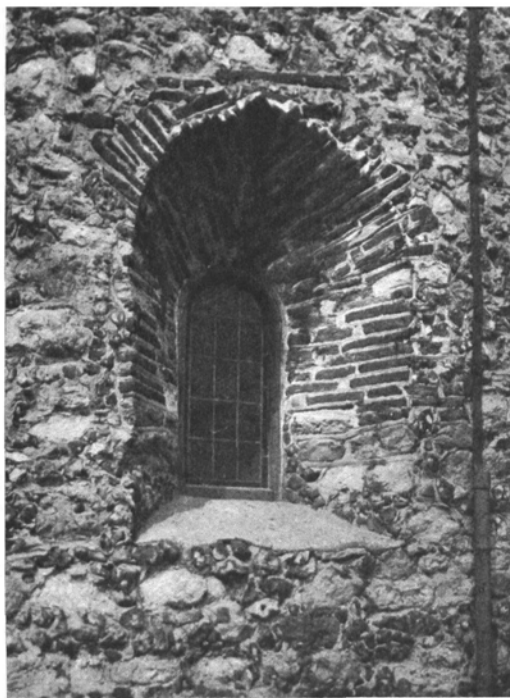
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Detail of Nave Arcade.



Pre-Conquest Window in S. wall of Tower.

SWANSCOMBE CHURCH.

ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON THE CHURCH OF SS. PETER AND PAUL, SWANSCOMBE.

F. C. ELLISTON ERWOOD, F.S.A.

SWANSCOMBE Church is a church of more than usual interest, in a district that has contributed generously to the archaeological collections of the county, and is worthy of more detailed study than this paper offers. The building consists of a nave with north and south aisles, a western tower, a north porch and an aisleless chancel, and, though it suffered severely in a disastrous fire in 1902, much of value remains.

The architectural periods represented are as follows :

- (a) *Pre-Conquest* : The lower part of the western tower, with a "double-splay" window, constructed for the greater part in Roman brick, in the south wall.
- (b) *Twelfth century* : The font ; blocked windows in the chancel with that part of the walling containing them ; and the remains of arched recesses on each side of the existing chancel arch.
- (c) *Thirteenth century* : The nave arcades, north and south, with the clerestory windows above them ; and lancet windows, blocked and open, in various parts of the church ; the middle section of the chancel is of this period also.
- (d) *Fourteenth century* : The chancel arch ; the north and south doors ; (?) porch ;¹ the eastern end of the chancel with east and other windows as shown on the plan ; the piscina and sedilia.
- (e) *Fifteenth century* : The rood loft stairs ; various windows ; and the wooden lectern.
- (f) *Later work* : The altar rails ; the candelabrum (1687) ; the pulpit (of pitch pine and probably early eighteenth century work) ; the Weldon tombs (1609 and 1613).

¹ Sparvel-Bayly, in his history of Swanscombe, says: "The porch, an addition of the 17th cent." The existing porch is not of this date and is presumably modern.

There are also fragments of ancient stained glass inserted in the S.E. window of the south aisle, an indent of a brass to a man, his wife and five children at the west end of the north aisle; while an early altar slab, with crosses, is inset in the woodwork of the modern table. The roof and practically all the woodwork are new, as is the shingled broach spire of the tower.¹

The development of the church as indicated by these remains appears to be as follows.

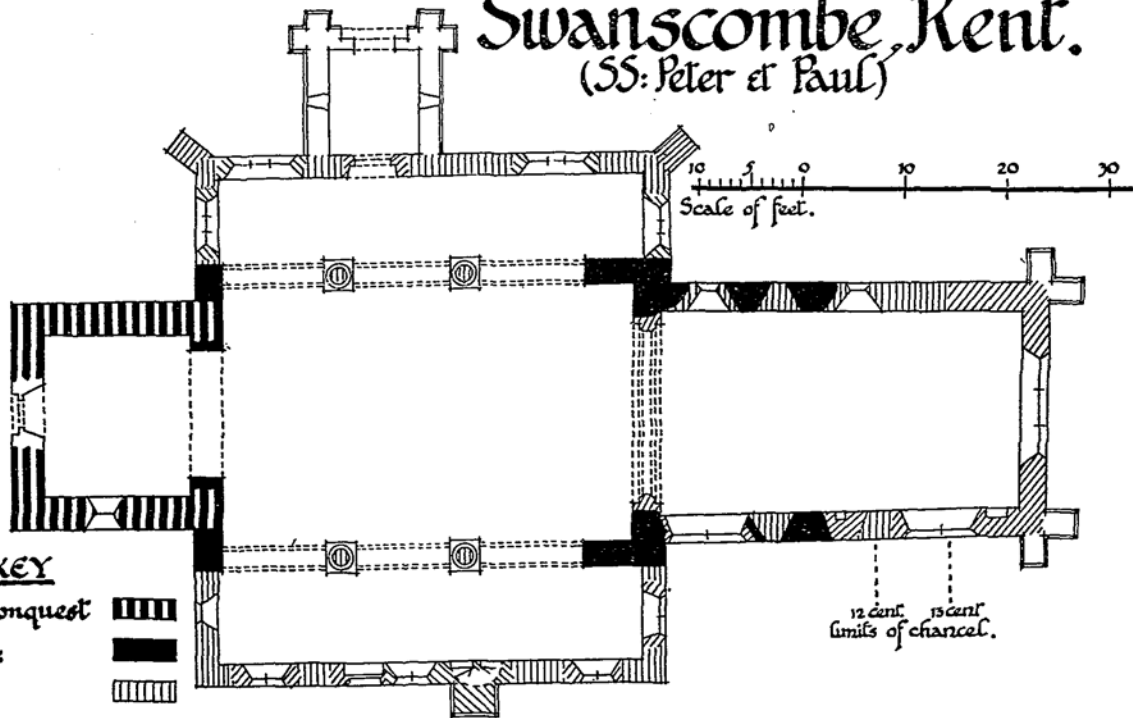
(a) A pre-Conquest church of which the tower alone remains. There are no clues to the size or shape of this early church, nor can it be said with certainty that the tower was originally western as now. It may have been central. The only grounds apparent for ascribing a pre-Conquest date to this tower are to be found in the double-splayed window, the head and splays of which are formed in Roman brick, but beyond this use of Roman material there are no other characteristics of pre-Conquest architecture whatever. From this alone the first church may be dated tenth to eleventh century. There are similar windows at Darent, one partly open and displaying part of its original wooden transenna, the other still blocked, while a window in an analogous position and of like character is to be seen at West Peckham. The use of Roman building material is not strange when it is considered that the site of Vagniacae is not far distant, and remains of the Roman occupation are fairly plentiful in the vicinity.

(b) The wave of church rebuilding in the twelfth century did not miss Swanscombe, and a new church was erected eastwards of the old tower. The extent of this Norman building can be estimated with reasonable certainty. The nave was coterminous with the present one, without aisles, and the size of the chancel may be estimated on the lines laid down by Canon G. M. Livett, F.S.A., in his paper on early Norman Churches (*Arch. Cant.*, XX-XXI). Further, in the interior, portions of the two semicircular-headed

¹ The destroyed screen is noted by Canon Scott Robertson in *Arch. Cant.* XIV, p. 371, and an Inventory of the church goods is printed in the same volume, p. 294.

Swanscombe, Kent.

(SS: Peter et Paul)



KEY

Pre-Conquest	
12 cent:	
13 "	
14 "	
15 "	
Later work	

12 cent.
limits of chancel.

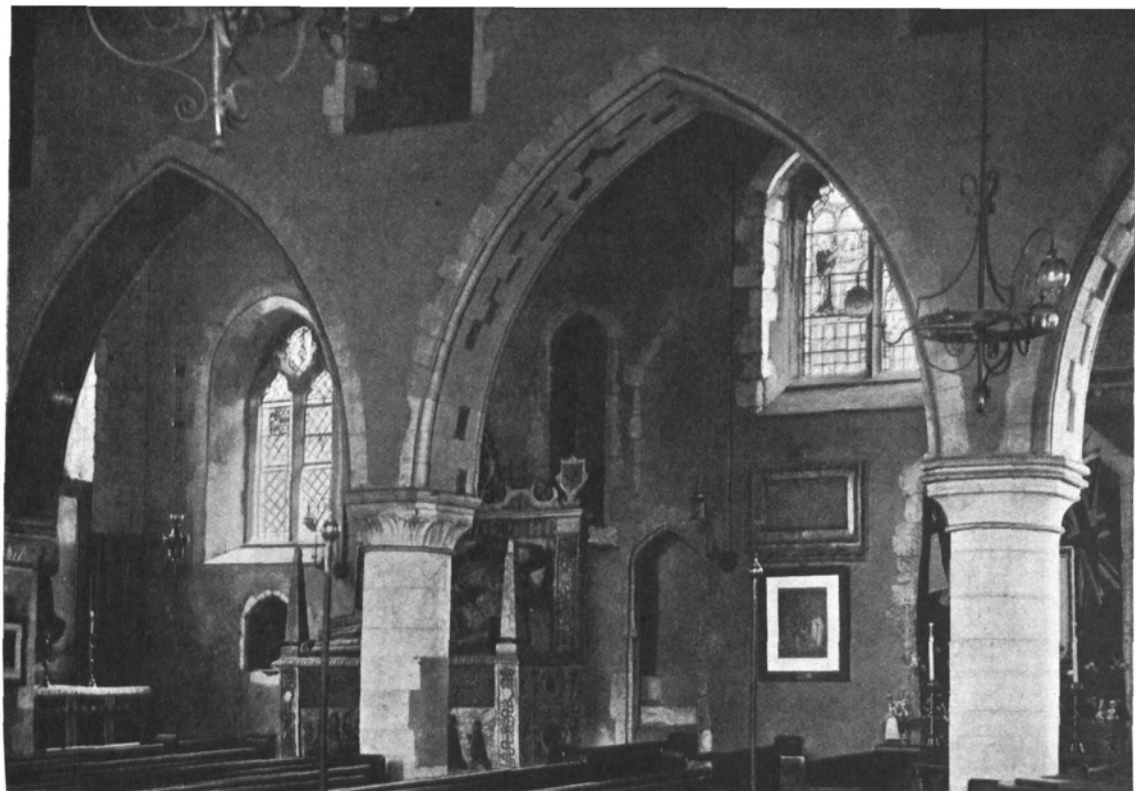
15 cent.
limits of chancel.

windows that lit this small square chancel can be clearly seen : half the head of a window on the north side, just to the west of the organ, and opposite, on the south wall, a nearly complete, though blocked, window of similar character. These can likewise be traced on the exterior walls, but in neither case are the heads preserved. Being in the middle of the N. and S. walls, these windows confirm the length of the twelfth century chancel. The twelfth century chancel arch has gone but it was obviously flanked on either side by semicircular-headed recesses, similar to those, for instance, at Dymchurch, or, though far less ornamental, at Barfreston. These would probably contain altars.

(c) The thirteenth century saw the enlargement of the church by the addition of narrow aisles north and south, necessitating the introduction of arcades in place of the solid wall. The chancel was likewise extended eastward (see plan), and lancet windows, two on each side, took the place of the single round-headed lights of Norman times. The aisles were covered by a low lean-to roof, above which was a range of clerestory windows, lighting the nave. Owing to subsequent changes in the height of the aisle roofs, these windows are now invisible from without, though remaining intact within, above the nave arcades.

The arcades are unmolded save for a heavy roll on each arris, and are carried on two free piers and two corbels. The two western columns have plain molded caps to their somewhat massive circular shafts, the caps of the other pair being further ornamented by the addition of a whorl of broad ribbed leaves whose tips end in primitive volutes.

(d) The chancel was further extended in the fourteenth century, a distinct change in the character of the walling being discernible some eight feet from the east end, but beyond this there were no further developments in the plan of the church, which has come down from the thirteenth century practically unaltered, though there were naturally structural alterations. The most important of these was the rebuilding of the chancel arch (in the fourteenth century) on a rather larger scale, and the small narrow lancets were



SWANSCOMBE CHURCH.

Interior, showing nave arcade with clerestory windows, S. aisle with Chapel of St. Hildefirth, Rood Loft entry, and Weldon tomb.

replaced by larger traceried windows. Especially was this the case in the aisles, where it is clear the exterior walls were raised for this purpose. The north and south doors and possibly the porch may also date from this time, but the last has been renewed and has lost all signs of its antiquity. The south door is blocked and inside forms a framing for the War Memorial, while on the exterior jamb is an incised dial or "mass clock." The Rood Stair is of the fifteenth century, and when it was inserted, the centre window of the south aisle was removed. Part of its interior eastern reveal remains in the plaster by the side of the upper door of the rood stair, and a perpendicular window was inserted at a somewhat higher level a foot or so westwards. The stairs went up in a little turret, which can be seen on the outside of the south wall. The east end of this aisle was probably screened off to serve as a chapel (? the shrine of S. Hildefrith, a place of resort for those mentally afflicted¹) and the way to the rood loft was therefore most likely along the top of these screens. An examination of the underside of the chancel arch will show the marks left by a now destroyed timber framing, which was covered with canvas and painted. There is a bequest in 1537, "to the payntyng of the clothe of the roode lofte", which in all likelihood refers to this. (*Test Cant.*, West Kent, p. 78.)

The font is one of the most interesting features of the church, the more so because the fire of 1902 so damaged it that it was almost beyond repair. As it is, the ornament that covers its sides is almost if not entirely illegible, but the eye of faith may discern on its circular twelfth century bowl the symbols of the evangelists, the Eagle, the Lion, the Ox and the Angel. If these are depicted they are rare and unusual in this form at this date. No early drawings of this font have come to my notice.²

¹ For St. Hildefrith and Swanscombe, see *Arch. Cant.* XI, pp. 405ff. Note also the following reference: "To be buried in the South Chapell of the parish church of Swanniscomb before the holy image of Saint Iilduert." Will of Nich Grove, 1520. Duncan: *West Kent Parish Churches*.

² "The wood casing has since been removed and the Font's outer surface, now much mutilated, seems to have been carved with the emblems of the four Evangelists." Glynn: *Churches of Kent*, p. 310, footnote. (Written c. 1877).

The two Weldon tombs, of Ralph Weldon and his wife (1609), of painted alabaster, with effigies of himself, his wife, five daughters and three sons, with a helm and sword above, and that of his eldest son Anthony (1613) in the N.E. angle of the aisle, are noteworthy, as is the fine brass candelier in the chancel, the gift of Thos. Pettet, 1687.