THE CHURCH OF ST. MARY THE VIRGIN, STONE-IN-OXNEY, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO RECENT EXCAVATION OF THE NORTH CHAPEL AND TO THE FIRE OF 1464

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THE CHURCH

The church of St. Mary the Virgin, Stone-in-Oxney, is situated approximately 100 ft. above sea level on the south-eastern slope of the Isle of Oxney. In this position it is easily visible from areas of the marsh below. The patrons of the benefice from the earliest known appointment (1287) until 1539 were the Abbot and Convent of St. Augustine, Canterbury. A series of Papal bulls, the first of which was dated All Souls' Day 1327, made provision for the appropriation of the rectory by St. Augustine's, but it was not until May 2nd, 1360, that the first vicar succeeded the last rector. At the Reformation the advowson passed to the Dean and Chapter of Canterbury and, since the union of the parish, first with Appledore and Ebony, and subsequently with Wittersham the patronage has passed to the archbishop, the Dean and Chapter remaining as lay rector.

It is not known when the first church was built on this site. The oldest identifiable part of the existing building is in the south wall of the South Chapel where there is the remains of a window jamb of Caen stone bearing traces of thirteenth- and possibly twelfth-century work.

It is now clear that the present church is a partial, though major, re-build after a fire which had been thought to have destroyed the earlier building on 4th May, 1464. *The Chronicle of John Stone*, a monk of Christ Church, Canterbury, records '*Item hoc anno iiij die mensis Maii combusta erat ecclesia parochialis de Stone in Insula de Oxne, una cum rectoria abbatis Sancti Augustine, cum vicaria et cum duabus dominibus prope ecclesiam . . .*'

This report has usually been interpreted as recording the total destruction of the church. W.H. Yeandle, in *Historical Notes on the Church of Stone-in-Oxney* (1934) writes of 'an authentic account of the manner in which it perished', and goes on to translate 'combusta erat' as 'was burnt *down*', the implication being that after 1464 the entire church was rebuilt. This was quite clearly not the case and, even when Yeandle wrote, there was evidence that substantial portions of the building had survived the fire and been incorporated into the restored structure.

The church (Fig. 1) consists of a nave with north and south aisles, and a porch to the south door. It has a chancel flanked by chapels of roughly equal dimensions, and an impressive early fifteenth-century tower, separated from the nave by a wide and lofty arch. This arch shows signs of fire damage, although this is not as serious as that at the east end, suggesting that the fire did not cause radical damage to the tower above. The nave arcading is Perpendicular, late fifteenth-century, but the arches from aisles to chapels are Early English, and show fire damage. The inner orders to these arches, of which there is surviving evidence, are now entirely missing.

The Chancel arch is a restoration dating from the 1870s, replacing an earlier one said to have been smaller. The reason for its replacement may have been that it, like its flanking aisle arches, was damaged in the fire, and in such condition not considered worthy of so prominent a position. It is difficult to see that it would have been in need of restoration, if it had been contemporary with the nave arcades, since these are particularly well preserved. The fifteenth-century restorers may not have considered it a priority as it would have been, to a large extent, concealed by the rood screen and loft. Above and to either side of the chancel arch are two small lights which now appear somewhat curiously placed, being partially blocked by the subsequently raised chancel roof, which divides each obliquely into two. Their original function was probably to give light to the rood loft, and they too show signs of fire damage, although partly restored. There is a similar pair of windows in the nearby church of St. Mildred, Tenterden, where the openings are now entirely closed.

Other features are the late fifteenth-century blocked doorway to the former rood loft in the south-west corner of the south chapel, and openings in both north and south arcades which gave access across its width. Of these latter, Francis Grayling in *The Churches of Kent*, and quoted by Yeandle comments, 'The rood loft difficulty was overcome at Stone, as it might often have been elsewhere, by cutting recesses behind and above the responds of the arches, to all appearance without dislocation, though very near the "quick".'

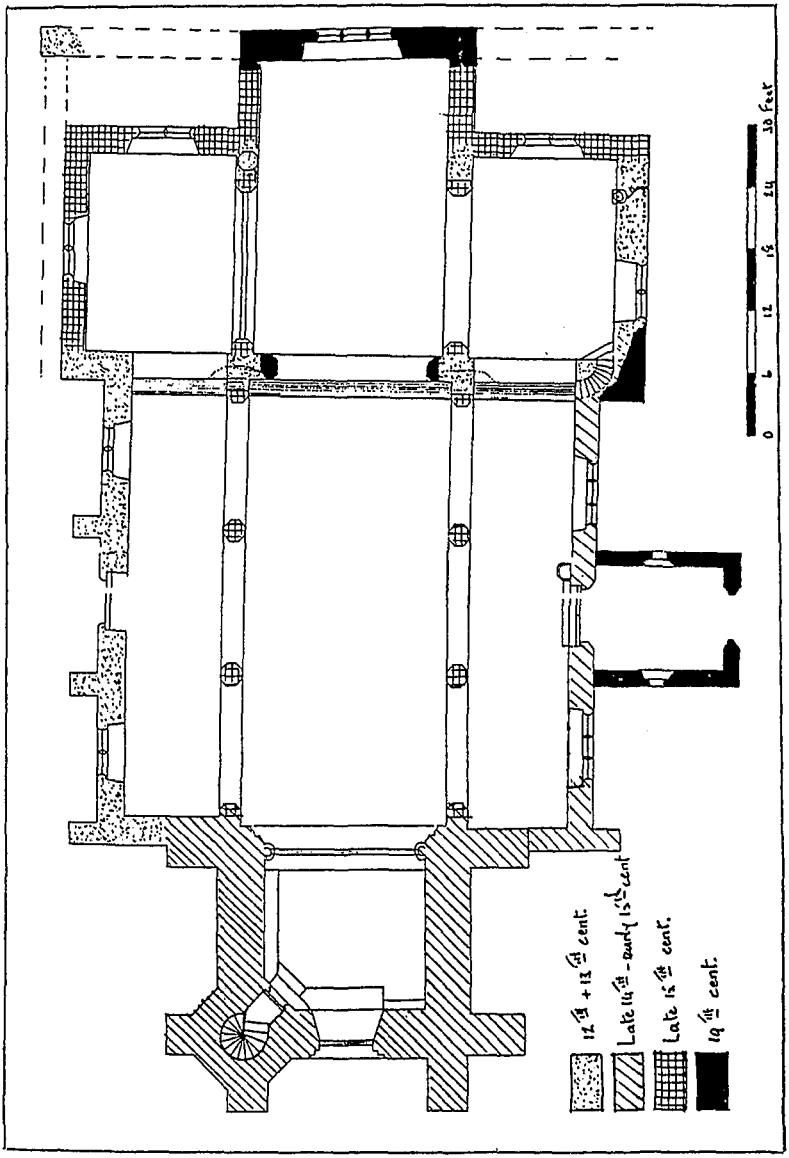


Fig. 1. Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Stone-in-Oxney: Ground Plan.

These all evidently date from after the fire, the particular arrangements having been necessitated by the raised arches in the new arcade. The screen between north aisle and chapel may be the only surviving part of the Rood screen and there is also a medieval parclose screen dividing the chancel from the north chapel.

An item of antiquarian interest, which brings many visitors to the church, is the Roman altar, now sited beneath the tower. This has been described as Mithraic, but although a bull can be clearly seen in relief on one face there is great doubt about this ascription. Its provenance is obscure, but one tradition states that it was found under the floor of the North Chapel at some uncertain date in the past. There are rumours of other Roman evidence found in Stone, including what appears to be a landing stage at the foot of Stone Cliff, but nothing which certainly proves Roman occupation here, and little that can be substantiated.

In 1988, the P.C.C., as part of a restoration programme, decided to relay the floor in the North Chapel, which had subsided due to the collapse of graves, and to redecorate the remainder of the church. This presented an opportunity that was not likely to recur for limited excavation in the area of the chapel which, with other new information, might throw some light on the origins of the altar.

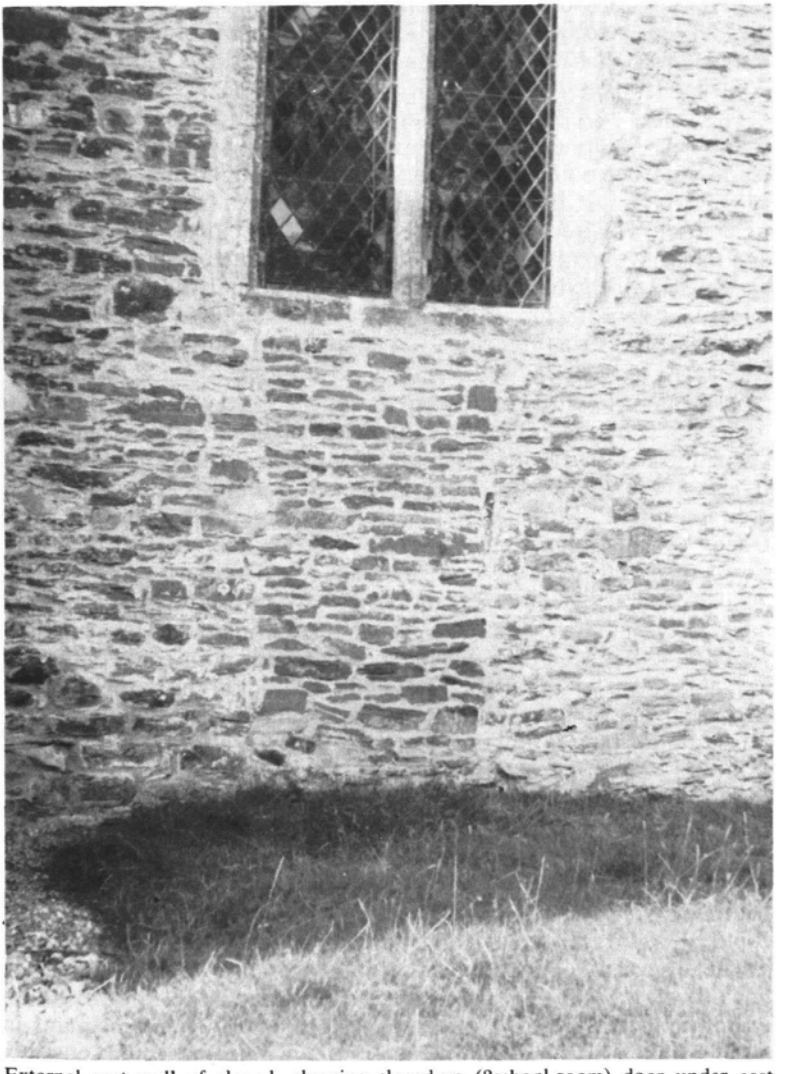
THE NORTH CHAPEL

The chapel, thought to have been dedicated to St. Katherine of Alexandria has, since the Reformation, been used for a variety of purposes. In about 1820 it was divided from the church by a plaster partition and became the village schoolroom. Probably during this period the doorway, the outline of which is clearly visible under the east window, was made in order to give direct access from outside (Plate I). This use ceased in 1872 when a new school was built opposite the church. The chapel then became a vestry room. It may have been at this time that the doorway was walled up again. During the incumbency of the Revd. Ralph Davies (1938–48) the chapel was re-dedicated to St. Katherine and St. Nicholas.

The floor of the chapel was, for the most part, of red brick, with some re-used red quarry tiles. Near the north-west corner was a large tomb-sized slab which had for many years given rise to speculation. Was it a medieval altar, a tomb, or the entrance to a vault?

The bricks and tiles were found to be set in sand laid on beach. This in turn covered the compacted chalk foundation of the late fifteenth- to early sixteenth-century floor. Fair quantities of the red quarry tiles, measuring 148 mm. square × 27 mm. thick were found, mostly

PLATE I



External east wall of chapel, showing closed-up (?school-room) door under east window.

broken and used as filling, and also some fragments of plain medieval glazed tiles measuring approximately 113 mm. square × 26 mm. thick. Clearly subsidence had been a perennial problem, and there were signs that, from time to time, areas of flooring had been taken up, cavities filled, and the bricks relaid.

The only area of medieval flooring left intact was a small area against the wall under the East window. This consisted of alternating black and orange tiles measuring approximately 246 mm. square, and 34 mm. thick, set diagonally in a chequer pattern (Fig. 2). These tiles were found covered with a thin spread of soft mortar which must at one time have held other tiles immediately above. Why these should have survived in this position can only be speculated upon. Maybe the area was protected by the altar that once stood upon it. If so, the base of this structure must have survived until well after the Reformation period.

Since the fifteenth-century there appear to have been two major re-lays of the floor. The first involved raising it a few inches and laying the red quarry tiles. This *may* have coincided with the chapel's requisitioning as a school room. However, nothing is known of its use between the Reformation and 1820, except for burials the most recent of which ocurred in 1791. These inevitably led to recurrent subsidence and breaking up of the surface. The most recent re-lay, over several inches of beach and sand, with re-used tiles and brick is more likely to have taken place during the school period (slate pencils were found between the bricks). The quarry tile floor could date from as much as 200 years earlier. The medieval floor at the east end of the chapel lay approximately 10 in. below the modern floor-level. There was no indication of any raised area around the altar. The reason for the progressive raising of the floor-level since the late fifteenth century was probably an attempt to cure this particularly damp area.

As might be expected, many fragments of bone were found, the area having been used over and over for burials. There were also some post-medieval graves, only two of which could be identified with reasonable certainty. These burials were not disturbed, but could be clearly distinguished by spaces in the sub-floor (Fig. 2).

The large slab remains a mystery. It is worn in a way that would not have been possible where it lay. This may have destroyed an inscription. The type of wear suggests that at some time, and in another position, some two-thirds of it had been protected, possibly by an upper step, and that the passage of feet in time wore the exposed section as seen. There were no markings on the underside, and nothing to remark between it and the sub-floor except for a long deserted mouse nest with tunnels leading to it. In one of these rested a stone marble. Perhaps one day during school a child had lost this as

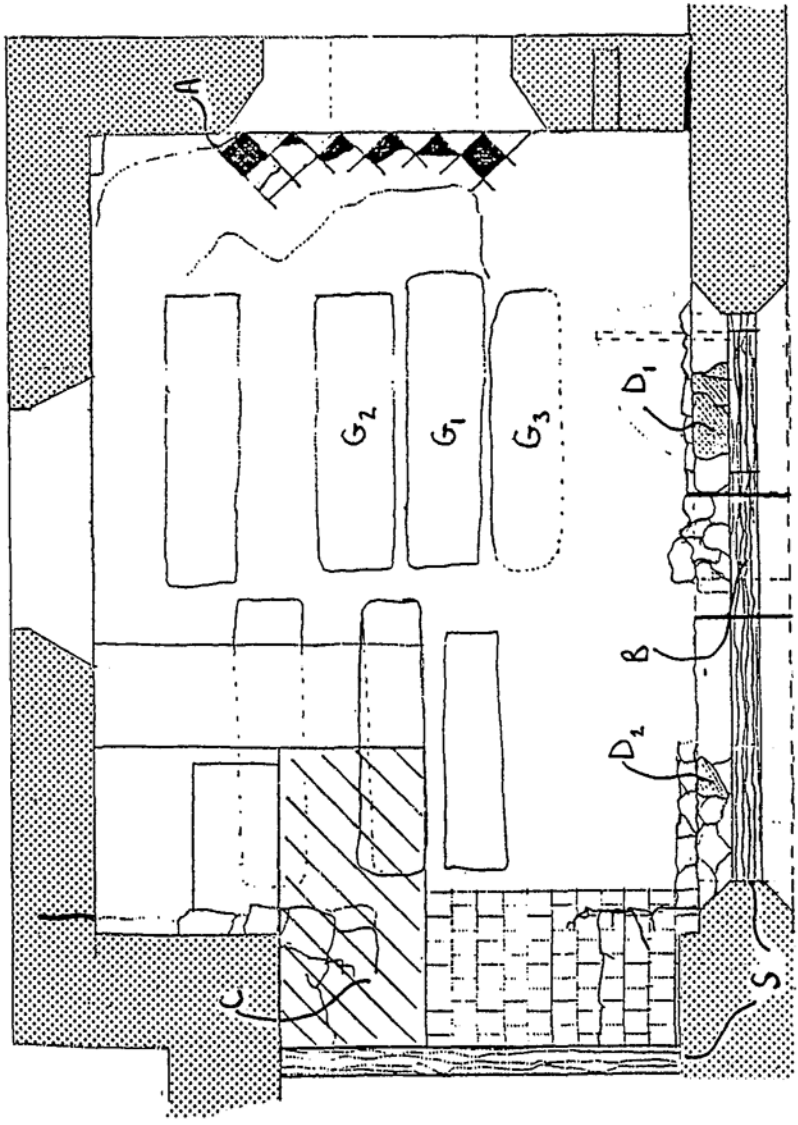


Fig. 2. North Chapel excavations. **A**. Remaining area of late medieval tiling. **B**. Position of base of missing capital. **C**. Stone slab. **D**. Areas of foot-worn stone threshold. **G1**. Grave of John Cooper (*d.* 1790). **G2** and **G3**. Presumed graves of Ann Cooper (*d.* 1771) and Hannah Cooper (*d.* 1791), wives of John Cooper. **S**. Surviving medieval screens.

it rolled down the hole, beyond possibility of retrieval. Other evidence of the school was found in the form of slate pencils and (possibly) a copper thimble.

Amongst the general rubble was found a small clay figurine. This was a representation of Virgin and Child, showing signs of scorching by fire on its front. The heads of both mother and child were missing and, as found, the figure was 4½ in. in height. In the base was a tapered hole extending 2 in. within, suggesting that it was once secured by a peg of some kind to a plinth or stand. The Victoria and Albert Museum have dated this to the mid-fifteenth century, a few years before the fire which had left its mark on the figure. These, and figures of many popular saints, were mass-produced in moulds at such centres as Cologne and Utrecht. Intended as items of personal devotion, they were too small for general use in churches. Contemporary examples suggest that the Virgin would have been crowned with a tall crown, and the figure when complete stood at about 5½ in. in height. The figure was thought to have probably originated in Utrecht.

It was found to be virtually impossible, without special equipment, to excavate much below a depth of 2 ft. as the clay became sticky, waterlogged, and difficult to handle, the excavation filling rapidly with water.

Investigation above ground within the church produced a number of significant finds.

On both north and south external walls of the chancel may be clearly seen the evidence of walled-in arches (Fig. 3). This indicates that at an earlier stage the east walls of both North and South Chapels were at least level with the present east wall of the chancel (Fig. 4). A scale drawing of the north wall of the chancel was made. The arch was drawn in and its westernmost part was extended down through the east wall of the chapel to the place where it would have sprung from the capital on its supporting column. This was found to be just inside the east end of the chapel. It was further noted that there would have been space for two further arches of the same dimensions to the west, forming a triple arcade between chancel and North Chapel (Fig. 5).

By chance there was loose plaster where the arch should have appeared inside the chapel, and on removal of this the section of arch was found to be still in position. It was traced downwards, and at its base part of a second arch was found to the west. This had been interrupted at the point where the later and larger Tudor arch was constructed. Investigation further down confirmed that an octagonal column and capital supporting the arcade were still in position within the wall, although badly fire damaged and out of perpendicular. This

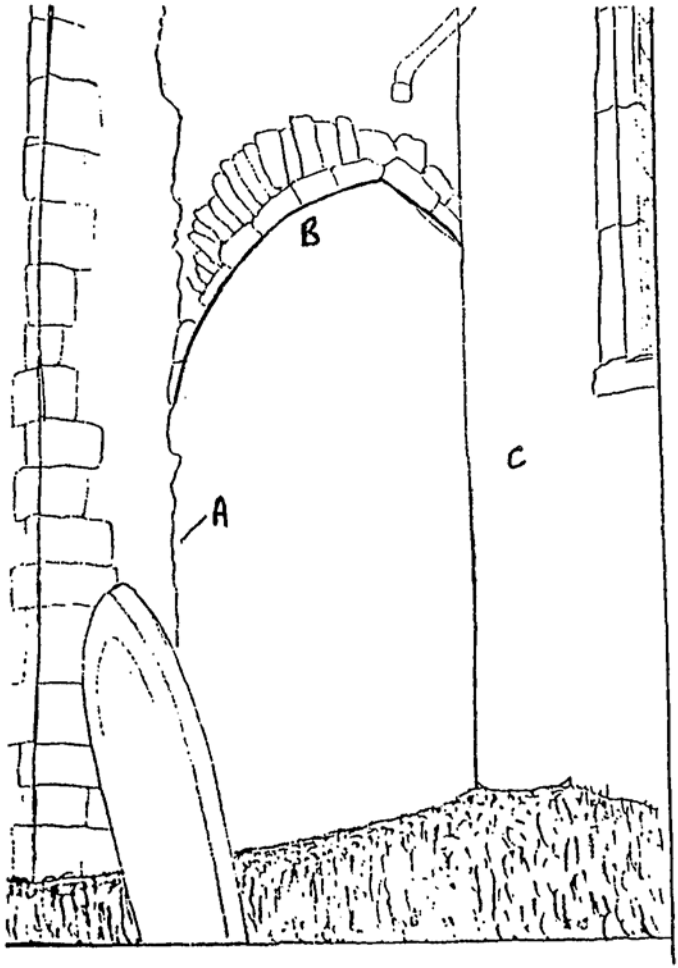


Fig. 3. Outer north wall of chancel (East of North Chapel). **A**. Line of re-built east chancel wall (19th century). **B**. Closed-in arch. **C**. Late fifteenth- early sixteenth-century east wall of North Chapel.

had been lime-washed after the fire. The only way to attempt to confirm the existence of a further pillar to the west, and hence of a third arch in the original plan, was to excavate in the expected position in the hope of finding a base. No base was found, but in its expected position was a square space of appropriate size in the stone and concrete foundation. To the east of, and forming one side of this, was an area of inset irregular and undressed stone, smoothed by the passage of feet – the threshold between chapel and chancel.

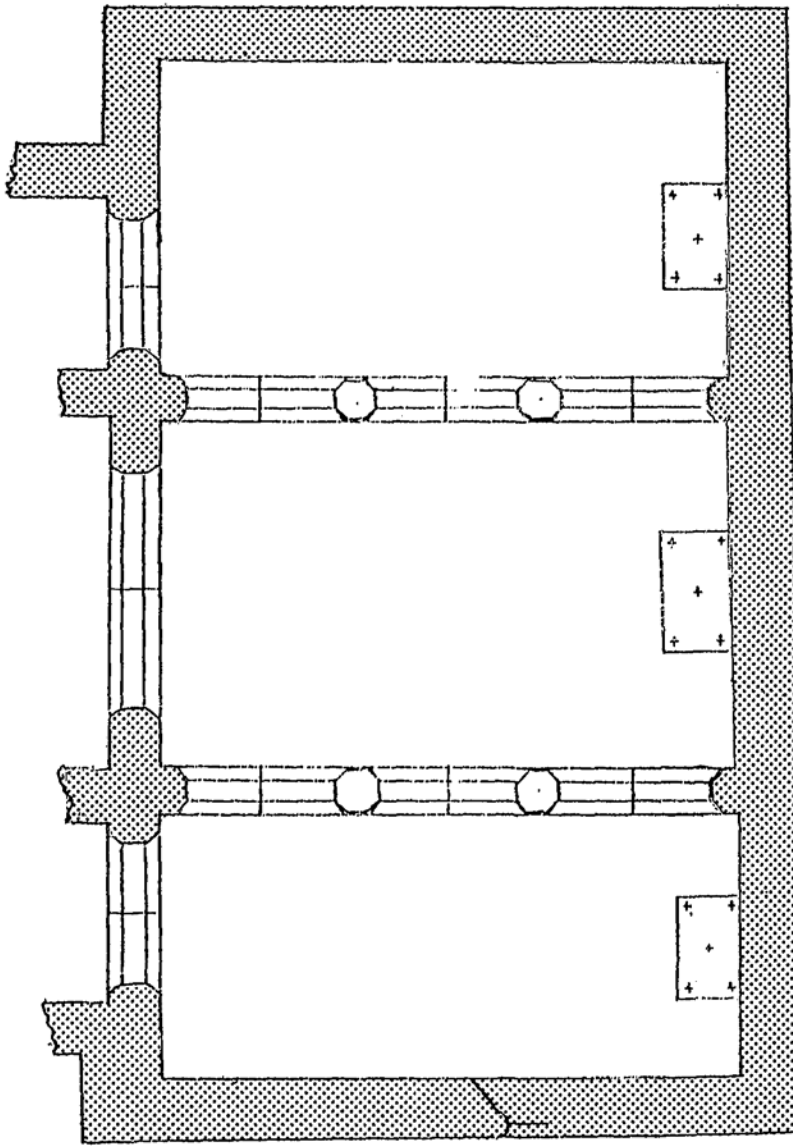


Fig. 4. Ground plan of chancel and chapels before the fire of 1464.

Internally, the remaining area to be investigated was the space under the arch between the north aisle and chapel. This entrance had clearly been somewhat narrower at an earlier stage, but since the arch itself was relatively early, there was unlikely to have been an earlier one. It was surmised that, before the fire, there may have been pillars on either side of the entrance supporting the inner order of the arch, which had once existed, and the marks of which can be clearly seen.

The external area to the east of the chapel was now investigated in order to establish the position of the original wall. The lie of the ground suggested that the footings might still be there. After probing and excavation the east wall was located, as expected, in line with the east wall of the chancel. Unexpectedly, this was found to extend further to the north than was justified by the present position of the north wall. Clearly the original chapel had been wider, as well as longer than the present one. The exact width was difficult to determine because any clear evidence of the north wall had been lost due to excavations for graves and a succession of land drains of different periods.

THE SOUTH CHAPEL

The South Chapel is thought to have been dedicated to St. Nicholas and is now a vestry and organ chamber. Yeandle, following the Revd. E.M. Muriel (*Arch. Cant.*, xiv (1882), 98–102) states that this is the oldest part of the church. Neither give reasons for this statement.

The existence of an arch on the external south wall of the chancel suggested that there was an arrangement in the South Chapel, symmetrical to that in the North. Internal excavation was not possible, but removal of a section of plaster on the inside wall of the chancel revealed the westernmost arc of the first arch, with a second springing from it, reflecting the similar arrangement on the north. Extensive excavation to the east of the South Chapel was excluded as this area is used for the burial of cremated remains, but probing and raising the turf in the expected position revealed the original east wall. On this side, however, it was noted that at the eastern end of the south wall was the remains of an earlier window, now blocked partly by the later east wall. The south wall, therefore, seems to be original. Although North and South Chapels were originally of approximately the same length, the South Chapel was rather narrower. Part of the inner jamb to this window was found *in situ* beneath the interior plaster, the masonry dating from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and so tending to confirm Muriel's assertion.

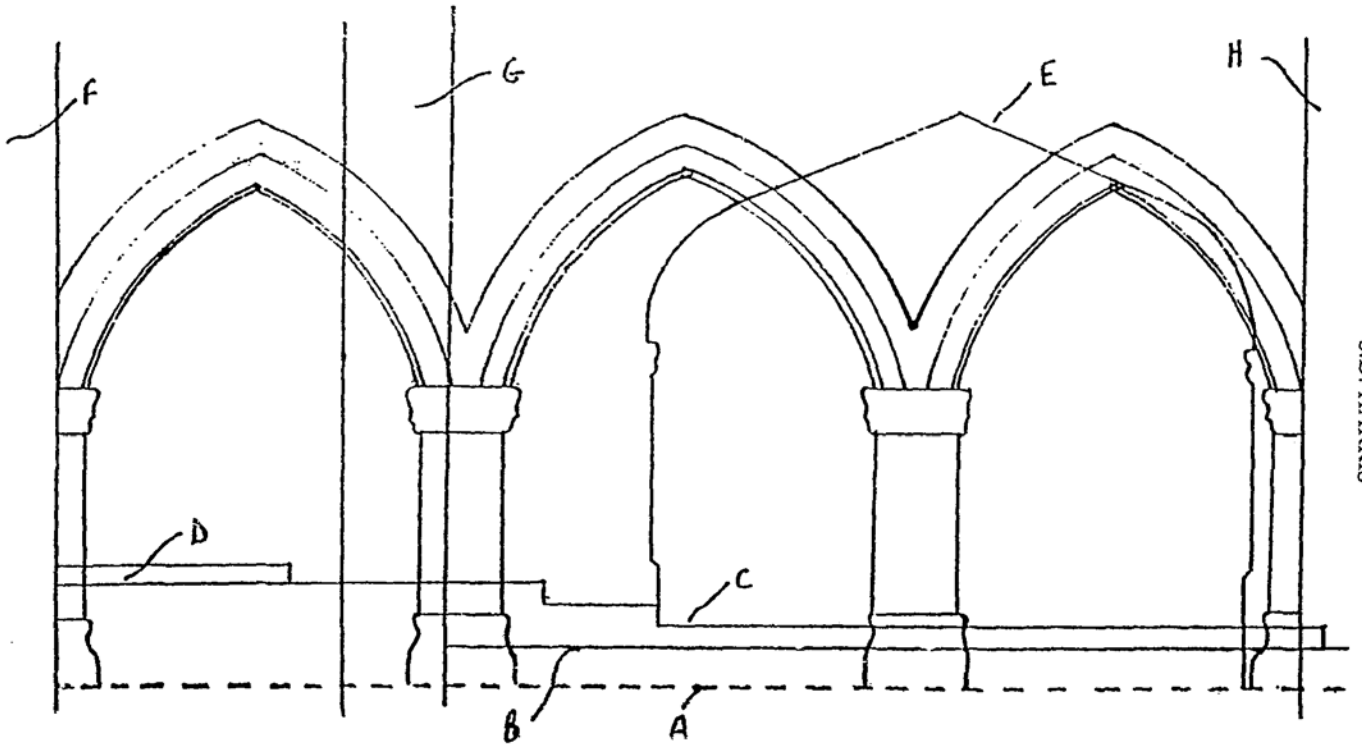


Fig. 5. Original arcade in relation to existing structures (North wall of chancel facing south). **A**. Original floor-level of chancel and chapel. **B**. Present floor-level of chapel. **C**. and **D**. Present floor-level of chancel and sanctuary (since nineteenth century). **E**. Outline of late fifteenth-century arch to chancel. **F**. East wall of chancel and, until late fifteenth century, of North Chapel. **G**. East wall of chapel (since fifteenth century). **H**. East wall of nave and aisles

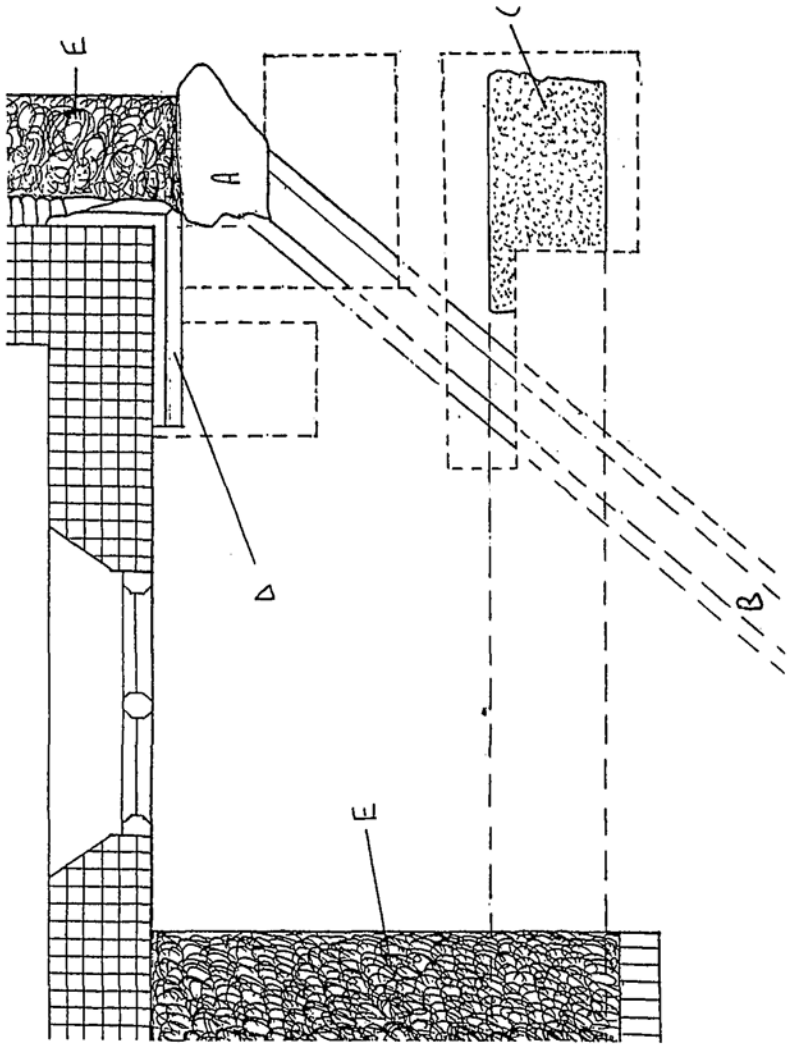


Fig. 6. Excavation to east of North Chapel. **A–D**. Land drain cutting across line of former east wall. **C**. Exposed section of east wall. **D**. Cornerstone (broken tomb or altar slab) with bevelled edge at base of present wall. **E**. Beach drainage area.

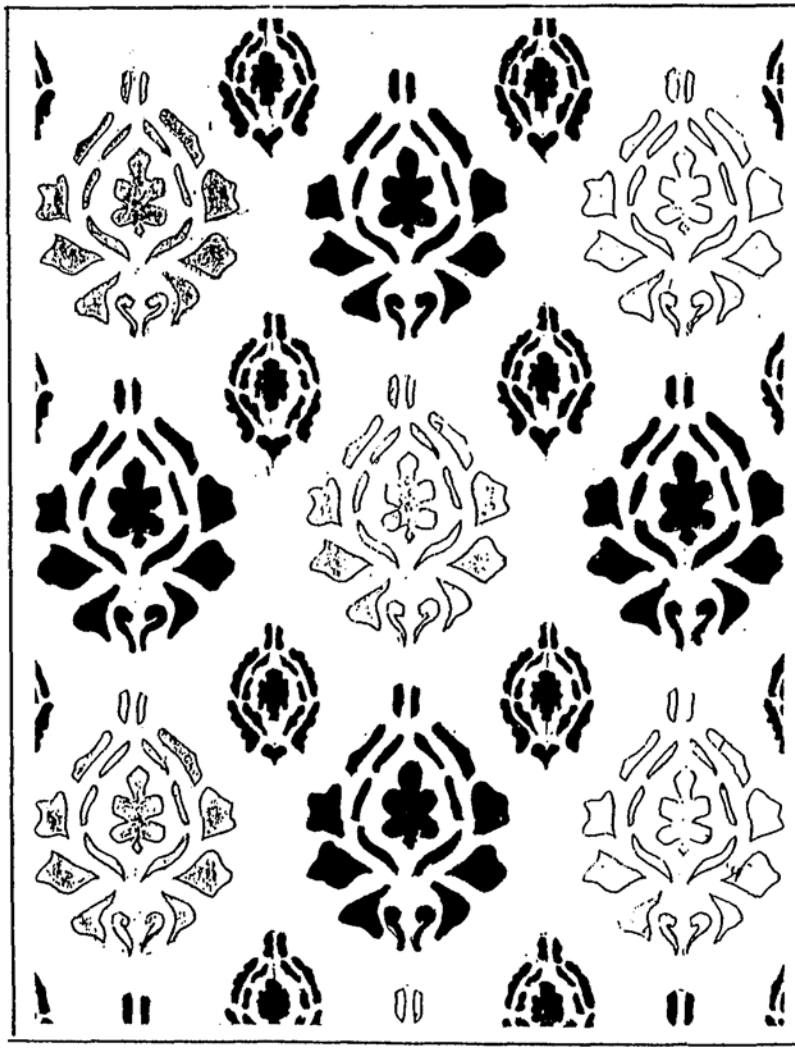


Fig. 7. Stencilled wall painting in south chapel. The larger pattern alternates an earth-red with yellow ocre. The smaller pattern, now only faintly discernible, was in a bright green. The drawing shows approximate reconstruction of the original.

Note on wall paintings. As the lime-wash was brushed down in preparation for re-decoration evidence of wall paintings was found on extensive areas, particularly over the nave arcading. Expert advice was that these were insufficiently intact to be recoverable.

In the south east of the South Chapel, however, an area of stencilled decoration was found consisting of a foliate diaper pattern in an earth red alternating with yellow ochre, interspersed with a just discernible smaller, slightly different pattern in bright green (Fig. 7). The effect, if the whole wall was decorated thus, must have been spectacular, but no evidence of it was found elsewhere, and possibly it formed the background to one of the many shrines known to have existed in the church. A slightly different foliate design is to be seen in the arch over the apse of St. Gabriel's Chapel in Canterbury Cathedral.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The project has thrown considerable new light on the structural appearance of at least the east end of the church in the mid-fifteenth century, just before the fire, and as it may have been for as long as two centuries before that.

The building had a chancel of the same dimensions as today, flanked by chapels of the same length as the chancel, the North Chapel being approximately 3 ft. wider than that to the south.

The earliest features now identifiable are the possibly twelfth-century window jamb on the south-east wall of the South Chapel; the two fire-damaged arches between aisles and chapels; the blocked arches visible externally, and now internally, on the easternmost bay of the chancel; and now also the associated column in the south-east wall of the North Chapel. These are Early English, probably late thirteenth century.

Although the chancel is itself relatively small, the symmetry of the triple arcades on either side would have given an impression of spaciousness, and allowed the best use of the light from the smaller windows characteristic of an earlier period.

This part of the church was not too badly damaged by the fire to be cleared of debris, re-roofed, and put back into use relatively soon afterwards. This is indicated by the absence of an ash layer under the floor, and the lime-washing of the small pillar in the North Chapel wall. No doubt the stonework was, like the pillar and arches remaining, badly cracked and visually unattractive to all but the modern enthusiast, but they adequately performed their structural functions until more radical repairs could be set in hand.

The excavations shed no further light on the origins of the Roman altar. It may, as some maintain, have been brought from elsewhere with a shipment of stone for the church. It may have been a feature of a pre-Christian place of worship which once stood on this prominent site facing across the shallow sea, a resort to which people still came to worship long after the original cult had been forgotten. On such established sites of devotion St. Augustine, on the advice of Pope Gregory the Great, planted Christian churches after removing any pagan objects or symbols. Certainly Stone is proud to possess its stone, considers it to be an important part of its heritage, and has resisted the past requests and financial offers of those who would take it elsewhere.

APPENDIX I

Mark Horton

NORTH CHAPEL FLOOR TILES

The tiles are all undecorated types in either green (sometimes nearly black) or yellow and originally set in a diagonal chequer pattern. All the tiles have nail-holes in their upper surfaces, which might indicate a Flemish origin. Documentary evidence suggests large scale importation of floor tiles as ballast to south-east England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The technique of cutting tiles using a nail board may have been adopted in south-east England by local tilers or migrant Flemish workers, and definitive identification is not possible. All three types date to after the fire of 1464.

Group A

Square tiles 113 mm. × 26 mm. thick. Fine pink-orange fabric, with well sorted sand, rough fracture, sand base and slight bevel. One nail-hole in each corner and either yellow slip and glaze or unslipped and green glaze.

Group B

Square tiles 148 mm. × 27 mm. thick. Pink-red fabric, very irregular fracture, ill-sorted sand and stone and grog. Slight bevel, sanded base; 4 nail-holes. Yellow slip and glaze or unslipped.

Group C

Square tiles 246 mm. × 34 mm. thick. Red-orange fabric rough, irregular fracture; ill-sorted sand and grog; very slight bevel, sanded base and 5 nail-holes (one in centre). Yellow slip and glaze or unslipped green glaze.

APPENDIX II

The School in the North Chapel

In the Returns to the Brougham Select Committee on the Education of the Poor (1818), it was reported that at Stone, with a population of 341 (50 'poor') there were no schools whatsoever, but that 'the poor are desirous of having the means of education'.

By 1833 matters had progressed. The Abstract of Educational Returns for that year reports that at Stone there were now two schools, one a day school with 6 male and 6 female pupils who were paid for by their parents. The other was a Day and Sunday School with a total of 35 male and 25 female day pupils and an additional 10 on Sundays. This was the school held in the North chapel of the parish church, and it was clearly rather crowded since it occupied a space of only 16 ft. × 24 ft. The Day School was started in 1820 and the Sunday School in 1832. They were supported by the parish, which made a weekly allowance to the master and mistress, by voluntary contributions, and by small payments from the children's parents.

In 1846/47 there was a Church School Enquiry carried out by the National Society. At Stone the school roll had reduced to a more comfortable 34 pupils, but it was noted that 'a schoolroom is much wanted for the parish, the present one being only a *plaster partition in the church*, which is a great disfigurement.'

Correspondence between the vicar of Stone and the National Society towards the end of 1849 suggests a financially precarious situation at the school in Stone. In an application for financial aid the vicar reports that the school, which in 1846/7 was certainly functioning, is being *re*-established, so that he is unable to give attendance figures for the past twelve months. There is a total of 38 pupils at the day School, and the Sunday School varies between 50 and 60. No children under 6 are admitted. The master is paid £30 per annum with a rent-free house. The parish supplies fuel, light, and other expenses. The vicar *hopes* that there will be an income from subscriptions amounting to £25, with payments from children supplying a further

£2 as '*many* of the children *must* be admitted *free*'. Whatever deficiencies, the vicar says, he must supply and he asks for a grant of £2.14.3 for materials viz.

8 doz square ruled copy books	16.0
15 inch Lignum ruler	8
Hamburgh Pinion Quills (500)	7.11
6 Black lead pencils	4.0
2½ doz unframed slates (8″×6″ ruled)	4.7
500 best Dutch short slate pencils	1.6
Tin cases for holding pencils (1 gross)	2.0
Admission Book qto.	3.8
Attendance and Absence Register qto.	4.6
Monthly Payment Book qto.	1.6
Needles sharp 5 to 10 – 100	7½
1 doz glass Ink Wells	1.4
Sponge for School Slates (½lb)	3.1½
Slate String	4
Pen Knife	1.6
	£2.14.3

[The error in addition is the vicar's!]

It appears from this list that the school is being entirely re-equipped, and this provides an interesting insight into the materials used by a village school at this time. In his covering letter, the vicar mentions an item that he has not included for fear that the Society should think he presumes too much. It is an article for which the school stands greatly in need. It is a School Clock. There is no record as to whether this was granted.

With at least the one brief interruption mentioned above, the school continued in the chapel until a new school was opened opposite the church in 1872. The disfiguring plaster partition could then be taken down and the chapel returned to church use.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mrs. Cecily Lebon, who undertook the major part of the excavation, for her collaboration in the production of this report, and also to Tim Tatton-Brown for his advice on dating.