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Notes on the Church and Priory of Deerhurst

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NOTES ON THE PRIORY AND CHURCH
OF DEERHURST,

BY

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At a time when we may suppose that our parish merited its Saxon name Deor-hurst, *i.e.* "Forest of wild animals," as consisting of a clearing made in the surrounding woodland which fringed both banks of the Severn, there was founded there a Priory, which seems to have existed for full 800 years, down to the time of the general suppression of monastic establishments in the first half of the 16th century. Leland, who witnessed the overthrow of the monastic system in England up to its complete extirpation, is our authority for the extreme antiquity of Deerhurst Priory. He states in his Itinerary that Bede speaks of a "notable Abbay" as existing in his time at Deerhurst. I have not been able to verify this quotation in the extant works of the venerable Bede; still I see no reason for doubting the correctness of that painstaking annalist, Leland. Apparently, then, the Priory was founded not later than the beginning of the 8th century. At the beginning of the 9th century we have proof that it was in a flourishing condition, for in the year 804 valuable estates were conveyed to it by Æthelric, ealdorman of Worcestershire, as is recorded by Dugdale (*Codex Diplomat. Ævi Saxon.*) The Priory was not destined always to retain peaceful possession of its fair domains. Those ubiquitous marauders, the Danes, are said to have visited it in their customary manner, and to have destroyed its buildings. When exactly this took place is left doubtful. Leland, centuries afterwards, merely mentions the fact. We may put it down perhaps to either the 10th, or the beginning of the 11th century. The Prior Werstan is said to have fled to Malvern, and to have founded there a cell. But at whatever time the Danes may have committed their ravages, it is certain that in the middle of the

10th century peace and plenty reigned in Deerhurst Priory, and, indeed, we find the prevalence of too good cheer. For at this period Alphege or Elphege lived here as a monk, but was so little satisfied with the state of discipline as exercised within the walls, and with the junketings of the brethren, that he left the place in sadness of heart, and retired to a stricter religious house at Bath, where some years afterwards he was appointed Abbot. This estimable man subsequently became Archbishop of Canterbury; he was cruelly slaughtered by the Danes in 1012.

In the reign of Edward the Confessor the Priory, which appears from the first to have been of the Benedictine order, was made an alien Priory, and subjected to the Abbey of St. Denis at Paris. The Conqueror confirmed his predecessor's deed of gift. The connection with the French Abbey continued, with interruptions, till the reign of Henry VI: then Deerhurst Priory was finally taken away from that monastery, and handed over successively to this and that English religious establishment, until at last it came to Tewkesbury Abbey, in the possession of which House it remained up to the time of the dissolution of the latter—a period of only about 70 years.

In the Confessor's reign, and in its 14th year (1056) the Priory appears to have been rebuilt by one of his great nobles and strong adherents, Odda, Earl of Devon. Perhaps it had continued in a ruined state since the visit of the Danes, to which reference has been made. It is probable that Odda had a residence at Deerhurst: he died there the same year as the Priory was consecrated, or re-consecrated, having assumed the monastic habit before his death: he was buried, however, not at Deerhurst, but at Pershore. We happen to have fairly good historical evidence respecting the work of Odda. Exactly 200 years ago, a stone, now to be seen at Oxford among the Arundel Marbles, was discovered not far from Deerhurst Church, having on it the following inscription in letters generally considered to be of the 12th century.

† ODDA DVX IVSSIT HANC REGIAM AVLAM
 CONSTRVI ATQVE DEDICARI IN HONORE S TRINI-
 TATIS PRO ANIMA GERMANI SVI ELFRICI QVE DE
 HOC LOCO ASSVMPTA EALDREDVS VERO EPS QVI
 EANDEM DEDICAVIT III IDIBVS APL XIII AVTEM
 ANNOS REGNI EADWARDI REGIS ANGLORVM.

Now the early chroniclers, Florence of Worcester, and the compiler of the Saxon Chronicle, give us here some useful corroborative evidence. We learn from them that both Elfric and Odda died at Deerhurst, the former in the year 1053, the latter on the last day of August 1056. The Bishop who consecrated the building erected by Odda, presided at the time over the see of Worcester. He afterwards became Archbishop of York, and in that capacity (Stigand, Archbishop of Canterbury, being then in disgrace) crowned the Conqueror.

There are two points in the above Inscription which call for notice. The less important one is concerned about the letter S which follows the word ANNO in the last line. Some have supposed that it stands for "Sancti" (making "Saint" Edward), and is improperly placed before Regni: it seems, however, more likely that it is a mere grammatical mistake, or a mason's blunder, and that "ANNOS" is written erroneously for "ANNO." It is a matter of greater interest to investigate the meaning of "hanc regiam avlam."* Strange as the monkish expression may seem in this connection, I cannot but think that it is intended to denote generally the conventual buildings. The Church, which no doubt from the earliest times formed an integral and important part of the Priory, *may* be included in the expression, but it cannot be said, I imagine, to be specified. Consequently, it would appear that Mr. Parker is scarcely justified in affirming on the mere strength of this Inscription that Deerhurst is the earliest *dated* English Church.† That we have the possibly correct date of the present structure is all that

* The ordinary technical meaning of "Aula Regia" in the time of our early history was "the King's Court of Justice," or "Council" called also Curia Regis.
 † Rickman's Architecture. Additions by J. H. Parker, 1862.

can be conceded; in fact, the inscription notwithstanding, there is much in the appearance of the ancient portions of the Church to make the date matter of controversy. I may be allowed here, in passing, just to allude to another inscription preserved only by annalists and somewhat resembling the one given above, which, on the authority of the Chronicle of Tewkesbury Abbey, has been also ascribed to Deerhurst, and which assigns the consecration of a chapel to a Duke Dodo of an age long previous to that of the genuine Odda. The Chronicle gives us to understand that a "Royal Palace" had been converted into a chapel by Dodo from love to his deceased brother. It is only natural to believe that there is a confusion here with what appears to be trustworthy history. Dodo of the 8th century, I think we may dismiss, together with his "royal palace," and keep to Odda, the friend, and (according to Florence) relative of King Edward.

From a few short statements of Leland's, (who, as Dugdale afterwards, quotes the Chronicle,) it has been inferred, but I am persuaded, incorrectly, that there was more than one religious foundation at Deerhurst. In fact it was one and the same Priory from its early foundation to its extinction; only it underwent during its long existence, re-building (more than once it may be) together with transfer to various monasteries.

Let me proceed now to speak of the ancient portions of the existing Church. We at once notice that the style throughout is not what we generally associate with the term "Norman," that we are dealing with something ruder and plainer, that, in fact, in all probability we have before our eyes a veritable instance of the architecture of the "Anglo-Saxon period." These ancient portions comprise a great part of the building—the Tower up to a certain height, the side walls of the Nave from the clorestory windows downwards, (the aisles are additions,) the present or pseudo-Chancel, and the eastern extremities of the two Aisles, forming at one time Transepts, *i.e.* the present vestry in the S., and the corresponding end of the N., Aisle. Outside the

Church there are the remains of the old Chancel, which was apsidally terminated.

An interesting feature connected with what constituted the old nave was revealed when the Church underwent repair (in 1862), but is now again obliterated. I came then upon evident traces of an ancient division of the nave, this division being made, I imagine, by a wall and arch resembling those which we now see at the E. end of the Church—the blocked up Chancel arch. Such a division of the nave is said to have been common in early Churches.

The Tower presents in its lower portion most distinctive features of great antiquity. Its upper portion, of more recent construction, is clearly marked off from the oldest part by the quoin stones at its angles, (of which there are none in the more ancient portion,) and by the absence of herring-bone work which abounds in all the old parts. It is built of rag-stone: stones of no great size form the angles. The best known peculiarity of the Tower is the double-light triangular-headed window looking into the Church. This window in certain of its details is considered unique, at all events unique so far as England is concerned. Its mouldings remind one of Roman Architecture. A thick, square, fluted shaft, having an impost square in section, divides the two lights. Other windows in the tower and its doorways deserve careful study. In the 3rd story the ashlar work of the frame of a large window 7ft. high, without splay, is of a most massive character. Its arch is cut out of one solid stone, and its jambs are formed of a very few huge stones. In the lowest story, two square or oblong windows may be noticed, splayed considerably inwards. In the 2nd story, besides the two-light window described above, three other windows, two of them nearly square, the remaining one oblong and large, demand special notice. The large window is square-headed within and circular-headed without, (just reversing the form of the still larger window in the 3rd story mentioned above,) without splay, nearly 6ft. in height. In the 2nd story are also two round-

headed recesses, 2 feet high and rather less wide. One noticeable feature of the Tower is a divisional wall, which gives us three successive archways as we pass into the Church. Its object is not very evident—it may have been to strengthen the Tower, or possibly to divide it into rooms. Another peculiarity is that the N. and S. sides of the Tower are much longer than its E. and W. Two of the entrance archways are formed by a circular arch, and round the arch runs, at least in one instance, a square-headed hood of rude workmanship. In the remaining archway the round arch is to be traced, but it has been superseded by a pointed arch of the 14th century. Over the central archway in the divisional wall a rare and most undoubted specimen of Anglo-Saxon ornamentation is to be seen. This is a sculptured figure within a niche, all the details of which are characteristic of the Saxon period.

The present Chancel, forming anciently the eastern end of the Nave, contains many features of interest. The Chancel-arch now blocked up, is semi-circular, with a square edge: the capital under it are of quite a unique character: over the arch runs a square-edged hood-moulding of great depth and breadth, terminating in heads of wild boars. High above the Chancel-arch are two great stone slabs, triangular-headed. These may be compared with a large square slab which is situated immediately over the triangular-headed window in the Tower. In the Chancel are four door-ways, two on the N. and two on the S. side. One of these is triangular-headed; the remaining three are square-headed; and the ashlar work of two of them is especially massive and rude: the lintel is composed of a single huge block. High in the N. and S. walls of the Chancel are two large round-headed arch-ways: these must have communicated, one should suppose, with rooms on the same level formed in the transepts: they may also have had possibly a gallery or loft running between them in front of the Chancel-arch.

In the present vestry (over the S. transept) is a very massive door-way with semi-cylindrical jambs and architrave: it appears to have been injured by fire at an early period, and was blocked up.

The Font is of the tub form, cylindrical above, and octagonal in its lower part. It is ornamented with a remarkable scroll-work pattern: its age is undoubtedly very great.

The following particulars may be said to characterize the ancient work: absence of buttresses, absence of an original staircase in the Tower, absence of long-and-short work. There is also entire absence of stone ribs and of string-courses often seen in early Churches. There is no *outward* splaying of windows and no quoins at the angles. Most of the windows have no inward splay, or the slightest possible. Some of the windows are very large for Saxon windows. One prevailing feature is the widening out of windows and doorways toward the base: this is very marked. The tower itself widens similarly a little. Herring-bone is to be seen everywhere in the ancient portions.

Next I would set down the division of the Nave into two parts; then the great height of the side walls—a feature eminently pre-Norman—also the presumable proportions of the Tower, which could not well have been less lofty than at present—70 feet in height. Noticeable again is the extreme solidity of certain portions of the work; and above all noticeable, as being the very type of Anglo-Saxon workmanship, is the large window looking into the church. Indeed some would date the church from this one feature, alleging that, while there is nothing in England bearing, in respect of its details, even a faint resemblance to it, there is on the Continent, at Lorsch near Worms, a line of arcading on a building thought to be of the 8th century, which presents very similar details.

Limited, as I am required to be, as to space, I must omit all further description of the ancient features of the building.

It only remains to allude briefly to the uncertain question of its exact age. Is it to be considered a structure of the middle of the 11th century, or is it likely to be older by two or three centuries? It seems to me, after careful study, impossible to draw a distinction as regards age between one and another portion of the Saxon work: a uniformity and continuity of

masonry appears to run throughout it, and exactly the same features meet us in the several parts. I see nothing to make us think that we have the work of two separate Saxon periods, and much to make us come to the opposite conclusion. I would ask:—If the Tower is very early, is the Chancel less early? Let the two be compared together, bit by bit, arch with arch. Shall we think, on account, let us say, of the excessively pristine appearance of some of the work, that the whole is to be given to an age anterior to that of the Confessor? Or shall we hold that there is absolutely nothing which might not be brought down to his time, consistently with what is known of the architecture of the middle of the 11th century?

The plain character of the Tower may be thought to point to a comparatively late date. It has none of the reticulated or ribbed work which characterizes what are considered *early* Saxon Towers, neither has it (as has been already observed) long-and-short work at the angles, nor again, any *outward* splaying of windows.*

Then, too, in point of massiveness or of clumsiness of workmanship, Deerhurst Church is probably not in excess as compared with certain churches known or believed to have been built in the first half of the 11th century.

Further, the well-known triangular-headed window in the Tower affords apparently no conclusive evidence as to exact date, although its testimony may be considered *quoad valeat* to favour the belief of a very early age. In general form it resembles a window in the tower of St. Peter's Church, Barton-on-the-Humber, but differs from it considerably in its details. Now this Tower is generally set down to a very early period, but, perhaps, on insufficient evidence. Then the far closer resemblance of the window to the arcade at Lorsch cannot by itself be taken as positive proof as to exact date. Added to which, the age of these architectural details at Lorsch is disputed, as, for instance, by Fergusson (*Handbook of Architecture*).

* On these points see the "Handbook of English Ecclesiology," published by the Ecclesiological and Cambridge Camden Society. Page 7.

When we come to historical evidence, we find a strong presumption in favour of the later date. There can be no reasonable doubt of the execution of some considerable work by Odda, Earl of Devon (1056), which was commemorated by an act of Episcopal consecration. Probably the Church was rebuilt then—and if rebuilt, it obliterated, according to present appearances, all traces of any pre-existing edifice. At all events we cannot assert of a single existing feature in the building that it *must* have been there before Odda undertook his good work.

If on the other hand, as some suppose, Odda did not rebuild the Church but confined himself to the less sacred buildings of the Priory, and we actually see at the present day a Church considerably older than anything he may have erected, it will have to be conceded that, whatever ravages the Danes committed on their recorded visit to Deerhurst, (supposing the record to be authentic) they at all events, contrary to their general line of proceeding, spared the Church.

There is no doubt that the walls of the present Priory Farm-House adjoining the Church, are part of the walls of the ancient monastic building; they are of a great thickness. In the cellar there is a single Norman column with a cushion capital.

At the dissolution, the Impropietor was directed to pay the officiating priest the sum of ten marks per annum: that sum is still paid by the present Lay Impropietor to the Vicar of the Parish.

Deerhurst was doubtless a place of more relative importance when the Priory existed and flourished than it is at the present day. Leland speaks of the “divers names of streets” belonging to it, although the houses had even then disappeared. There were two annual fairs held in his time; and even now the “Horse-market,” and the “Butter-market” &c., are spoken of as anciently existing localities.