

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**The Saxon Chapel at Deerhurst**

by G. Butterworth  
1886-87, Vol. 11, 105-116

© The Society and the Author(s)

## THE SAXON CHAPEL AT DEERHURST.

BY THE REV. GEORGE BUTTERWORTH, M.A., Vicar.

This building was brought to light in August, 1885, under the following circumstances:—Up to a certain day in that month there was no visible sign of what is now evident to all eyes. Abbot's Court was a rambling picturesque farm-house at Deerhurst, with a general reputation of being very old. In consequence of a change of tenancy, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, to whom the property belongs, purposed altering the character of the building. It was to cease to be a farm-house, and was to be turned into cottages, or a cottage. Being vacant, and under ordinary repair, the building could easily be entered by the curious. Among others, the writer of this paper visited it, and noticed the great thickness of the walls of a portion of it. It belonged, evidently, to three distinct dates, the central portion being the oldest. This portion, like the rest of the house, was, upstairs and downstairs, divided into chambers, whether sitting-rooms or bed-rooms. Outside, thick plaster covered the walls, and effectually concealed all ancient vestiges. At the back of the building a keen eye was just able to trace on the plaster, 14 feet from the ground or so, a faint marking of a somewhat semi-circular shape. It struck the writer that possibly this ill-defined line betokened the existence, beneath the plaster, of a round-headed window. On removing the plaster this proved to be the case. Stimulated by the hint thus fortunately conveyed, the writer, in conjunction with Mr. Collins, of Tewkesbury, the builder engaged on the repairs of the farm-house, examined most carefully the remaining portions of the thick walls, and the result of their joint investigations was the discovery of a chapel, consisting of nave and chancel, separated from each other by a rude chancel arch.

One more word as to the discovery. Close to the walls of the farmhouse several fruit trees were standing. These were cut

down from the ground as the repairs went on ; and on the very day following the fall of one of them an inscribed stone of great apparent interest was perceived, which previously had been entirely concealed by the tree. More will have to be said about the inscription on this stone.

I now proceed to describe the chapel. It is a small building divided into nave and chancel. The extreme exterior length is 46 ft. ; the width of the inside of the nave is 16 ft., of that of the chancel 11ft. The height of the side walls of the nave is 17ft. ; the thickness of the walls close upon 2ft. 6 ins. The two portions of the building are divided by a very solid chancel arch. The material composing the walls is the blue lias stone of the locality ; all the angles of the chapel, the arches, imposts, and jambs are worked in dressed stone of an oolite description, procured no doubt from the neighbouring hills. The most noteworthy feature in the chapel is the chancel arch. The height of the opening from the ground is a little over 10 feet ; the width from jamb to jamb, 6 feet 6 inches. The massive jambs, 2 feet 3 inches in thickness, are composed of large blocks laid in irregular long and short courses, five of these being found on the north side of the arch, seven on the south. The imposts consist of four members, and are 9 inches in thickness. Their mouldings may be briefly described as the union of a chamfer, two slight hollows, and an upright face above. The arch springing from them, formed of a ring of single stones, is of a stilted and somewhat horse-shoe shape. On the west side a plain square-edged label runs round the aisle, dying into the abacus ; on the chancel side there is no label (*see the plan Plate IX., and details Plate X.*)

The chapel had two entrances opposite to each other, near the west end of the nave. That on the south side is nearly obliterated ; but on the north side half of the arch and one entire jamb remains. (*Plate IX. fig. 2*). Like the chancel arch, this one also tends to the horse-shoe shape. Its jamb consists of five ashlar blocks of irregular size. The impost is 5 inches in thickness, and consists of a simple square projection. A square rib, or label, runs round the arch. The archway is 8 feet 3 inches high ; the entrance was

only 2 feet 9 inches in width. No door appears to have been attached to it.

Of the windows of the nave, one is still perfect on the south side (*Plate IX. fig. 3*). Opposite to it, on the north, are remains of another, similar to it. The sill of the surviving window is 9 feet from the ground. It has no ashlar work about it. The opening is 4 feet 6 inches in height, 2 feet 6 inches in width. There is a splay both inwards and outwards. The head is semi-circular. Part of the inner oak framework, taking the curved form of the head, remains, and shows that the actual aperture admitting the light was very narrow.

Over the windows there was an arrangement of thin slabs, placed in converging fashion, of which traces are visible. Apart from this single pair of windows and the doorways, no original features distinguish any longer the ancient walls, which at various times have had inserted into them modern windows and door frames. Probably there were only two windows in the nave: it had no west window, neither does the chancel seem to have had an east window. The height of the gable of the nave is 29 feet. The roof is modern. Resting upon the summit of the two side walls, and reaching to the wall-plates, runs a series of oak beams, black with age. These help to form the flat ceiling of the nave, and must be of great antiquity.

The ordinary building-stones of the walls are of no great length or thickness, irregular as to size, and are bedded in very copious mortar. Inside and out, the walls were originally plastered, the plaster being carefully thinned off, where, at the angles, worked stone was met with.

The chancel has an interior length of 14 feet. Its south wall is wanting. The north and east walls have been cut down at the level of 9 feet from the pavement; and upon these massive truncated walls (supplemented by a new south wall, run out in the line of the south wall of the nave) was constructed, in the Tudor period, an upper room, forming a portion of the handsome timbered house which stands on the east side of the chapel, and into which both chancel and nave were incorporated

as domestic apartments. How daylight was admitted into this small chancel there are no means of knowing.

In the N.E. angle of the chancel a first-pointed capital and abacus are seen.<sup>1</sup> The height of the side walls of the chancel was, apparently, about 15 feet.

Inserted into a large chimney-stack of the Tudor erection adjoining the chapel, a stone might have been noticed bearing the inscription already alluded to. Recently, however, it has been placed within the chapel to ensure its preservation. Its surface was of a nearly square form, but a great part has been cut away to render it, apparently, at one time the head-stone of a lancet window. The portion which remains is inscribed with letters of an early character, proving the stone to have been originally the dedication slab of an altar. The letters preserved run as indicated (*Plate X., fig. 1*). Prior to mutilation the inscription was probably to this effect:—"In honorē S̄c̄e Trinitatis hoc altare dedicatū ē."

Now in the English Council of Celchyth, held in the year 816, one of the canons ordered that care should be taken in the erection of new churches or chapels, that the name of the Holy Person to whom they were dedicated should be inscribed on the wall, or on a tablet, or else on the altar.<sup>2</sup> Even before this injunction was issued, it is known that dedication inscriptions were sometimes made; but the practice seems soon to have become obsolete. Very few inscriptions of the kind have survived to the present day.

I go on to speak of the probable date and history of the chapel.

Its architectural features proclaim it, with sufficient clearness, to be of pre-Norman date, and at the same time evidence seems wanting which might assign it, by reason of details of a marked character, to an *early* portion of the Saxon period. It is probable that we may safely give it to the middle of the 11th century. Independent monumental evidence appears to corroborate this

<sup>1</sup> It looks as though there might have been a column under it, but there is not any actual indication of the former existence of such column.

<sup>2</sup> The locality of Celchyth, or Cealchythe (as that of Cloveshoo), is uncertain. Probably both were in Mercia.

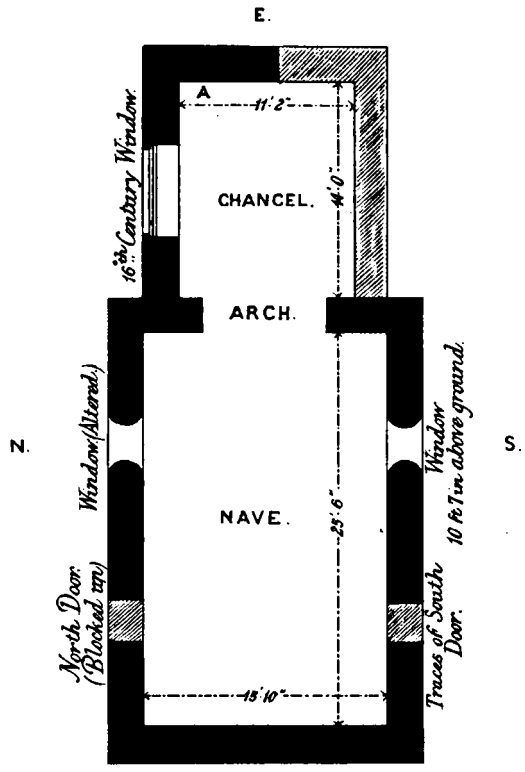


Fig. I.  
NEWLY DISCOVERED CHAPEL AT DEERHURST.

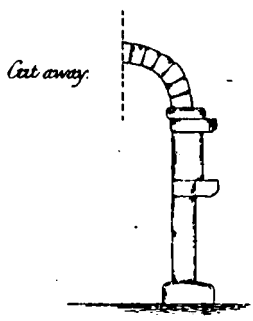
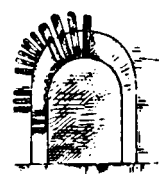


Fig. 2.



Sill 10 1/4 ft above the ground

Fig. 3.

NOTE.-At A there is on Early English Bracket.

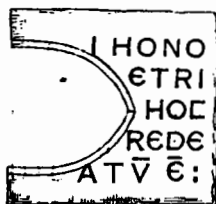


Fig 1.

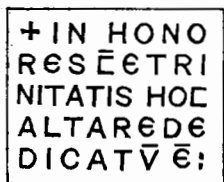


Fig 1.



Fig 2.

CHANCEL ARCH.

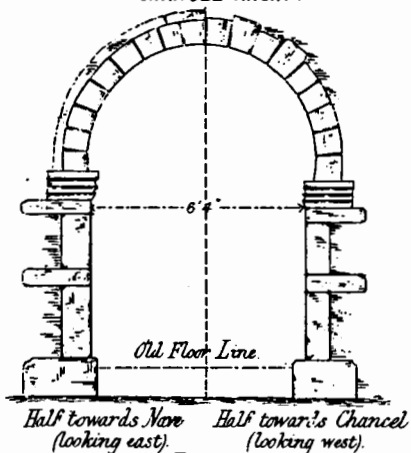


Fig 3.

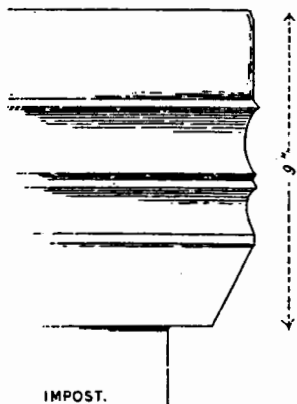


Fig 4.

assignment of date. Close to Abbot's Court, in the year 1675; its possessor, as lessee, Judge Powell, found in the adjoining orchard an inscribed stone of great archæological importance. It runs thus in Latin:—

✠ Odda Dux jussit hanc regiam aulam construi atque dedicari in honorem S. Trinitatis pro anima germani sui Elfrici que de hoc loco asūpta. Ealdredus vero Eps̄ qui eandem dedicavit II Idibus Apt̄ XIII autem annos regni Eadwardi Regis Anglorum. (*See fac-simile*).<sup>1</sup>

Now this inscription, carefully preserved at Oxford, has hitherto naturally been referred to Deerhurst Church, and is the sole authority for giving that building the received date of A.D. 1056. Documentary evidence, indeed, establishes the fact of the donation of Deerhurst Priory by Edward the Confessor to the Abbey of S. Denis, near Paris; and it is no improbable assumption that in the days of that monarch the church may have been renovated, or even, in greater or less measure, rebuilt. But be this as it may, it has now become a probability of the highest order that the Odda inscription says not a word about the church, but belongs really to the newly discovered chapel. It is matter for regret that the loss of a single letter in the mutilated altar-inscription throws just a shade of doubt over the reading "S̄ce Trinitatis." It is just possible, scarcely probable, however, that the words "S. Petri Aḡli." should be substituted. But if "Trinitatis" is the true reading, then we have the fact of two stones inscribed with the same dedication-name being found close to the small Saxon chapel. That the shorter inscription belonged to the chapel there can scarcely be a reasonable doubt. It is a curious circumstance, here to be noted, that the Chronicle, or Register, of Tewkesbury Abbey, deposited in the British Museum, and quoted by Leland and Dugdale, speaks of an inscription to be seen in the writer's days at Deerhurst, which, as given in the Chronicle, resembles greatly the existing "Odda inscription," but strangely alters some of the terms. The chronicler states that the inscription was to

<sup>1</sup> A cast (*Plate X. fig. 2*) of this inscription, together with a record of its discovery, has been placed within the chapel.

be found over the entrance of a small chapel which was opposite the gate of the Priory.<sup>1</sup>

Is this "small chapel" our recovered chapel? In spite of a considerable amount of jumble, and of the attributing of an unconscionable antiquity to the inscription he gives us, it seems almost certain that the writer is alluding to the surviving "Odda inscription." If so, however, he shows, it is true, a curious ignorance, or oversight, as to "Edward, King of the English." But what to my own mind is quite conclusive against the claim of Deerhurst Church to the appropriation of the "Odda inscription" is the impossibility of the church having been constructed in the very limited time between the consecration of the "regia aula" and the death of Ælfric, whom it commemorates. This period, as we know, from the early chronicles, and the inscription itself, was little more than two years—a space of time wholly inadequate for the erection of such a building as the stately Saxon priory church.

The chapel, then, seems to name Odda as its founder with an utterance clear and decisive. We are compelled therefore to enquire into the history of Odda, as well as into that of the manor upon which the chapel stands. The old chroniclers and various charters give us the following information:—Odda (whose name seems to be a variant of several well-known forms of the same appellation, such as Odo, Otho, Oddo) was one of two, probably three brothers, who were kinsmen as well as friends and adherents of the Confessor.

Long before Edward came to the throne, Odda, the eldest of the family, had been apparently engaged in public employments.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The original words, as given by Dugdale in his *Monasticon*, are these: "Isti præfati duces" (Oddo and Doddo, supposed to be flourishing in Mercia at the beginning of the 8th century), "habuerunt quondam fratrem nomine Almaricum, ejus corpus fuit sepultum apud Derhurst in parvâ capellâ contra portam prioratûs ibidem, quia capella ista aliquando fuit aula regia: ibi monstratur sepulchrum ejus usque in hodiernum diem, ubi scribitur in pariete supra hostium, Hanc regiam aulam Doddo dux consecrari fecit in ecclesiam ad honorem Sanctæ Mariæ Virginis ob amorem fratris sui Almarici."

A chapel connected with the church could not be opposite to the gate of the priory, being, therefore, of course, external to the precinct.—ED.

<sup>2</sup> As early as the year 1015 he subscribes a charter with the appellation "minister" (thane); in 1035 he styles himself "Miles"; in 1044 he is "nobilis."

He seems to have resembled Edward in tastes and character: pious, and devoted to ecclesiastical interests, he assumed the monastic habit before his death. We are unable to trace with certainty his place of residence during the greater portion of his life, but, when advanced in years, we find him suddenly summoned, on a crisis in Edward's reign, to the government of a large portion of the south-west of England. This crisis was the expulsion, although, as it proved, only temporary, of the powerful house of Godwin, in the year 1051. It is to be remembered that, although in theory and by title Edward was supreme lord of the whole of England, yet, practically, during his entire reign his rule over a great portion of the kingdom was little more than nominal, and indeed elsewhere the power of the earl in charge was much more of a reality than that of the sovereign. Earl Godwin, with his several sons, Harold, Sweyn, and the rest, acting almost always in opposition to the King, although, it may be, on patriotic principles, possessed a most extensive jurisdiction. South of the Wash, the whole east of England was theirs, then the south-east, then the whole of the south below (and sometimes above even) the line of the Thames, and lastly all the district to the south-west of the Bristol Avon. This unbroken territory comprises at least a dozen of our modern English counties. As opposed to the house of Godwin, and ever firm in allegiance to the King, are to be reckoned up to the time of their respective deaths, the Great Northern Earl Siward, and Leofric Earl of Mercia (husband of Godiva) who, under Edward, governed the midland counties. When Edward managed to banish Godwin and his sons, he at once found an Earldom for his relative Odda, and gave him the counties of Devon, Dorset, Somerset and Cornwall. Soon afterwards he gave to him, together with another relative of his own, the joint command of the royal fleet at Sandwich. However, we hear of no great doings on the part of Odda. In the following year the banishment came to an end, and with it the short-lived jurisdiction of Odda. At no long interval after these events we come upon traces of Odda at Deerhurst. His brother Elfric died there in December, 1053, and to his memory Odda erected what in the existing inscription is styled a "regia aula." Odda himself died also at

Deerhurst, on 31st August, 1056, only a few months after the consecration of his sacred edifice (12th April). What was the exact nature of his connection with Deerhurst, or Gloucestershire, is simply a matter of conjecture or inference.

It has been considered probable, on the evidence of signatures to charters, that subsequently to his appointment to his great earldom, he held some smaller command within the extensive dominion of the friendly Earl of Mercia, Leofric, and that this government gave him the title (which he employs) of "Dux." But we do not feel certain that he calls himself "Dux" after his resignation. No doubt by some description of tenure or another he held property at Deerhurst. He was also connected with Pershore Abbey, where he became a monk very soon after he resigned his great earldom, and where both he and Elfric were buried. Respecting Elfric, we know that, after an active life, he also became a monk. It seems highly probable that a certain Dodda, who appears in frequent connection with both Odda and Elfric, was their brother. After Odda's death he is known as "Princeps."<sup>1</sup>

Here we have to investigate, as best we are able, the nature of Odda's work at Deerhurst, and the history of the site of the building which we assume was his. The expression "regia aula" has been variously interpreted. Like "basilica," its synonym, it may mean a church: both words, standing separately, bear frequently this meaning, as is shewn by Ducange; or, it is thought, the expression may have regard to the founder, as being a royal or sub-regal personage. The purport of the builder, as solemnly declared in the inscription, forbids us to contemplate a "royal hall" in a merely secular sense. Built in view of the repose of the soul of a brother, the erection was doubtless one of a sacred character—an oratory, it may be, or chantry chapel, attached to which may have been a residence for officiating priests. We have seen that its consecration took place in the year 1056. But now little more than nine years afterwards the extensive Manor of Deerhurst, upon which stands the small chapel recently discovered, was formally conveyed to the Abbey of Westminster by the great charter

<sup>1</sup> For a portion of these details I am indebted to the kindness of Walter de Gray Birch, Esq., of the British Museum.

signed by the dying Edward on the 28th December, 1065. Indeed long before this date the Confessor had been making preparation for his grand foundation, and had accumulated on its behalf enormous treasures in money and land. A certain undated Saxon charter relating to the abbey makes it more than probable that the Manor of Deerhurst was actually bestowed on Westminster several years before the great Latin charter was signed. On the supposition, then, that Odda erected his sacred building on an estate forming part of the Deerhurst Manor, we may raise the question as to whether he was a party with the King in bestowing the manor and the "regia aula" upon the abbey, or whether it was after his death that Edward made the gift. At all events it is matter of history that what Edward gave the Conqueror confirmed, and that this manor remained in the possession of the abbey till the Dissolution, when it was conveyed to the newly-formed Capitular Body of Westminster.

It is stated indeed by Leland that when Deerhurst Manor was first bestowed upon Westminster it had been taken away from Pershore Abbey, but the great antiquary seems to have been led into error—the fact being that both the Manor of Pershore and that of Deerhurst were granted at the same time to the favoured establishment rising on the northern bank of the Thames.<sup>1</sup>

If we could receive Leland's statement as correct, we might then conjecture that possibly it was Odda who originally gave the manor to Pershore—an abbey to the interests of which he was evidently devoted. But the statement is supported by no evidence. Also I may add that Leland makes the evident mistake of attributing to the Conqueror the Confessor's act of donation to Westminster.

The Manor of Deerhurst, together with the chapel, seems to have been altogether independent of the Priory of Deerhurst, although the chapel is within a very short distance of the latter. It has been observed by the Rev. C. S. Taylor that the entire old Hundred of Deerhurst was composed of the manor of that

<sup>1</sup> Domesday does not inform us as to the right Edward possessed of conveying Deerhurst. It does mention, in the case of Pershore, that that manor was the King's.

name (belonging to Westminster), and the possessions in Gloucestershire of Deerhurst Priory. He founds upon this fact the ingenious conjecture that at an early period Deerhurst Manor, including many modern parishes, belonged to Deerhurst Priory, which subsequently was forcibly dispossessed of it.

One would be reluctant to believe that Odda, instead of building Deerhurst Church (which work has long been attributed to him on wholly insufficient grounds), had actually "persuaded" the prior and the brethren to part with a valuable possession. So let us hope that he personally was quite within his right in dealing, in any way he may have done, with the Manor of Deerhurst. At the same time, in those primitive days, even men of pious memory, as Odda undoubtedly was, appear to have had little scruple as to "robbing Peter to pay Paul," or, as to the matter of that, to enrich themselves. History is by no means favourable altogether to the Confessor himself, as to his way of dealing with monasteries and their endowments. It is to be noted that although both Elfric and Odda died at Deerhurst, they could not have been regular inmates of the priory, as they were monks of Pershore Abbey. Something must have drawn them both to Deerhurst.

Although it seems certain that the "Odda inscription" does not record the fact of the building of the church by the Earl, yet it is by no means improbable that work was done to the priory and church in the days of Edward and Odda. It is known, as has been said, that Edward gave the priory to S. Denis, and it is very possible that the monastic buildings needed restoration or reparation at the time of the donation.

Forty years earlier Cnut, in his heathen days, had ravaged the greater part of Mercia, and specially let loose his destructive propensities against churches and monasteries. In one of his expeditions he arrived at Deerhurst, where he made a peace with Edmund Ironside (A.D. 1016). Deerhurst Priory had been at his mercy, for Edmund had kept on the other side of the Severn. If the priory escaped devastation it was little less than a miracle. Still we have no direct evidence either that Edward the Confessor

rebuilt the priory, or that Odda undertook this same work. Toward the close of the 10th century the priory must have been in good condition, since we know that S. Alphege was at that time a monk there. It seems likely that at a still earlier period, as tradition says, it had been devastated by the Danes.

The discovery of the chapel, and the consequent removal of the date 1056 from the church will probably modify the general view of the age of the latter building. Till quite of late Deerhurst Church has been confidently pronounced to be a building of the middle of the 11th century. Now such certainty has disappeared. Some of our best antiquaries, among them Mr. Buckler, led by the supposed monumental date, have ascribed the main portion of the existing Saxon work to the 11th century, while they affirm that certain features must be much more ancient, and that these had doubtless been taken from some older church. I cannot but think that there is much to support the theory that these so-called "more ancient features" are actually in their original position, and that the tower and other Saxon portions of the church date from before the 11th century, although they may have received restorative treatment at that period.

One concluding word about the chapel. From the days of the Confessor onward down to the Reformation we may conceive of it as a consecrated building, having beside it, or around it, erections of a domestic character,—notably, a lodge of the Abbot of Westminster, or the "Abbot's Court." At the Dissolution it is to be presumed that it was disused as a chapel, and incorporated into the pile of a new residential building. Whether or not Odda's dedication marked the transfer of the whole manor either to Westminster or to some other religious house, is a point which cannot, with our present evidence, be determined. Were this, indeed, the actual case, we should have no difficulty in taking "aula" as describing what certainly (as stated above) was to be found on the spot in subsequent years, viz., a range of buildings of a mixed character, comprising, no doubt, a house of goodly dimensions, together with a chapel—the whole being dedicated to religious uses. However, as regards the question of a gift, in the

first instance, to a large religious establishment, it must be conceded that the actual terms of the inscription point rather to an independent foundation, and to an erection appurtenant to the manor on which it stood.

Since the foregoing remarks were set up in type, the writer has been able, we believe, to set at rest the question of the true reading of the mutilated inscription. He writes that on taking down the stone bearing the short inscription for the purpose of setting it up in the chapel on bringing it into a better light, he could distinctly see the commencement of the stroke over the letter C in the contracted word "Sancte," thus removing all doubt as to the accuracy of the reading of that word (see ante p. 109). He writes further, "it may also interest the readers of the Transactions to be assured that the soil of both parts of the old chapel has been carefully excavated to a depth of several feet, with the result of finding nothing of interest. We had no right to expect to come upon any relics of Elfric, brother of Odda, as it appears quite certain that, although dying at Deerhurst, he was interred at Pershore. The archives of Westminster Abbey have not as yet been made to yield any notices of the ancient chapel. It has been recently ascertained that the accounts of the Manor of Deerhurst are preserved there for the period between Edward I. and Henry VII."

---