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**The Architectural History of Avening Church, Gloucestershire**

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THE ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF AVENING  
CHURCH, GLOUCESTERSHIRE.

*An extract from the Report submitted to the Rector and Church-wardens, September 1st, 1888.*

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THERE is not, so far as we know, any documentary evidence connected with the history of the church in this place earlier than the time of the Norman Conquest; soon after which the land called "Avening" was given by Queen Matilda who granted this and other manors in Gloucester to the nuns of "La Trinite" or the "Abbaye aux Dames," founded at Caen, in Normandy, by her.

Previous to the Norman Conquest the Manor of Avening formed parcel of the vast possessions of Brictric, the son of Alnod, of the whole of which he was deprived by the Conqueror, who conferred the greater portion upon his Queen.

The abbey had estates both in Gloucestershire and Dorsetshire, and it is on record that the Abbess occasionally crossed the sea to visit her English possessions.

There was in all probability a Saxon church at Avening, indeed the arches and lower windows of the tower are of such an architectural character that they might well have formed part of a building erected during the last period of the Saxon rule. But after a careful consideration and comparison of the various details, we are of opinion that the earliest portions of the church were probably erected *after* the land came into possession of the Nuns.

The Drawing (*Plate I. fig. 1*) shews the plan of the church as it probably appeared until the end of the Norman period.

Whether the actual termination of the east end was circular or square is uncertain, an apse, no doubt, was a very general

feature of this period, more particularly in Normandy, but in this district of England the Normans frequently built square east ends, as at Devizes, Elkstone, Iffley, and Oxford.

The chief entrance is on the north side of the nave; it is a very fine round-headed doorway, with twisted ornamental shafts and carved capitals, of which latter, that on the left, has the frequently found treatment of two horse-like animals, with a human head common to both bodies: the other, or right-hand capital, has very rich conventional foliage. The tympanum enclosed by the moulded and chevron ornamented arch is, however, now quite plain, instead of being filled with sculptures or figures from the "Bestiarium," as are so many of those described by Mr. Romilly Allen in his "Christian Symbolism."

On the internal jamb is a curious sculptured stone, and it has been suggested by Fosbroke that the subject represented on it is Adam and Eve, symbolical of the Sacrament of Marriage, but on careful examination it is evident the stone is not in its original place, and that it has been cut at each end and used as a jamb stone for the inside of a doorway inserted in the 15th century. The portion of the stone which has been cut off from the east end can be seen in the rough stone filling-in between the outside jambs of the earlier and later doorways. The figures are arranged in pairs, in three divisions, under rudely-cut arches with pillars between each division, the figures are too mutilated to be identified, but as two of them hold something like an apple, they have been mistaken for Adam and Eve; the figures are, however, draped, so Fosbroke's suggestion falls to the ground. This doorway should be compared with the south door at Wotton Church, which much resembles it, and also with the very singular south door at Beckford. The door in the south wall of the nave was much more simply treated. It is now blocked up, but a part of it is still visible externally; its cill is about 28 inches above the level of the floor inside, this was in order to suit the ground outside, and is not uncommon in churches of this date.

The windows of this first church are very plain and round-headed, with a wide internal splay; three of them still remain,

two above the north and south arches of the tower, and one on the north side of the chancel. They are all very high up, and are at about the same level, and probably traces of others may yet exist on the south side beneath the wall plastering. The fine eastern arch of the tower, the tower groining, and part of that in the western bay of the chancel are of this date, and of simple and massive character.

The eastern arch is not a true semi-circle, but depressed and flattened at the crown, as in the case of the western arch of Sherborne Abbey tower (this is a not uncommon treatment in Norman times, the object aimed at was probably a better relative proportion of the arch to its piers, when these latter were low and the arch wide). It may be remarked that the inclination southwards of the southern pier is too slight to account altogether for the depression.

We may here observe that inside the chancel at the western end of the south wall there is a square-headed doorway, now blocked up, but formerly communicating with the circular stairs leading to the upper stages of the tower; from its position inside the chancel it is not likely that this door was intended for bell ringers only, and we suggest there was at Avening, as at Elkstone and Leckhampton, and probably at S. Mary's, Wareham, a room over the chancel used by the priest. At the east end of the nave, on the south side, is a recessed segmental arch very richly moulded, it has the characteristic chevron, and corresponds in detail with the north doorway. The lower part of it is now blocked up by pews, formerly, it is probable, there was an altar here. It is worthy of note, that during the recent works at Minchinhampton, indications of a similar altar were discovered, with a recess above it to receive a piece of sculpture, and Sir Henry Dryden informs us that at the church of Langford, he found in a corresponding position evidences both of an altar and of a sculptured retable above it.

We have now to describe, and if possible account for, the remains of a very curious ancient arrangement. On the western jamb of the north-west tower piers there can still be traced the

lines of an opening now filled up ; this, on the transept side, was 2ft. 6in., but on the tower side much narrower, its cill was about 3ft. 6in. above the floor, and close to it, on the angle of the great tower buttress, and in the transept, is the chamfered jamb of a doorway opening inwards to the west, the chamfer has a moulded stop under the end of the former flat lintel head, and thus resembles the blocked-up doorway in the west wall of the transept. Now in point of date we consider this work is Norman, and thus earlier than the north transept, and the position of the doorway seems to preclude the idea of its having been the entrance to a chapel. How, then, are these two openings to be accounted for ? It is suggested that they may have belonged to a "recluse's cell" attached to the church. We admit, of course, that these cells are very uncommon, but we know at least of one such at Aldrington in Sussex, where we restored and partially rebuilt the church.<sup>1</sup> Here there was documentary evidence, not only of the existence of the cell (which was attached to the chancel), but also of the "establishment" of the recluse by the Bishop of Chichester. (There are also some remains of a cell at Walpole, St. Andrew's, Norfolk, built against the western tower.) We may fairly believe, therefore, that a somewhat similar arrangement existed at Avening, and that the chamfered jamb was part of the outside door of the cell of a recluse, and that the opening through the pier was to enable him, or her, to join in the services of the church. Subsequently when the cell was removed and the transept built, the opening was blocked up for the sake of security before the arch in the tower was constructed.

On the north side of the nave there is an arcade, much mutilated, of two round arches opening into a short narrow aisle or chapel. There is some evidence that this chapel was groined probably with a plastered stone vault, without ribs, as over the ambulatories of St. Bartholomew, Smithfield, but the alteration of the chapel into an aisle in the 14th century necessitated the removal of the vault. Possibly the blocked-up Norman doorway now in the transept wall formerly belonged to the chapel.

<sup>1</sup> At Quinton, in this county, there is evidence of a similar cell (alluded to by Sir John Maclean, F.S.A., Trans., Vol. XIII. p. 168).

## + AVENING + CHURCH :

Fig 1

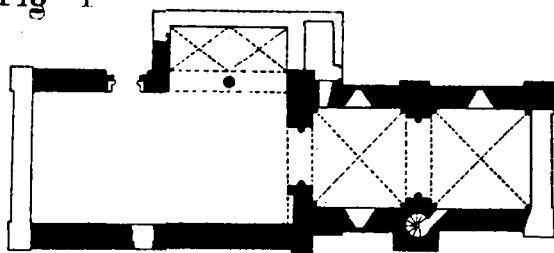


Fig 2

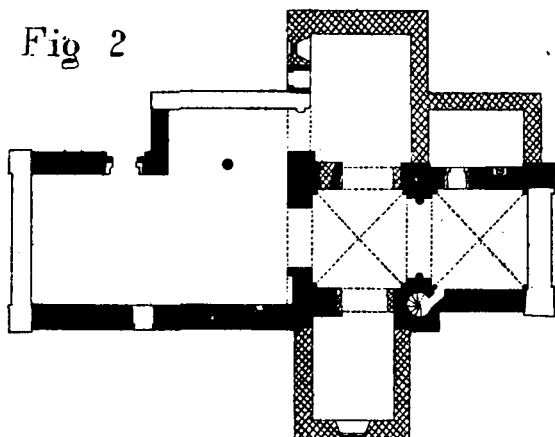
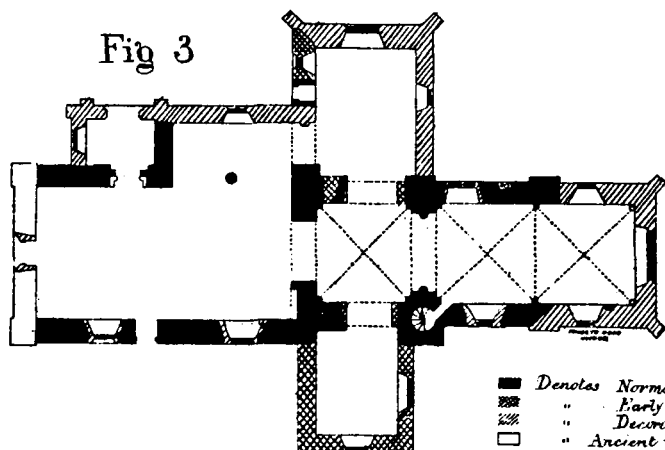


Fig 3



- Denotes Norman.  
 ▨ " Early English.  
 ▩ " Decorated.  
 □ " Ancient walls now removed.



There is one other feature which calls for remark ; it is high up in the eastern wall of the porch, and is therefore only visible in the parvise or room over. It is a low, square opening with jambs, chamfered and stopped, and a flat lintel, resting on moulded corbel stones. It is impossible to say positively either what it was, or whether it is still in its original position, but as its cill is nearly on the level, which would correspond with the top of the groining (which there is reason to believe formerly existed over the aisle), while its head is at about the same level as the collars of the Norman rafters might have been, it may be in its original position, and may have been used for access into the space above the Norman vaulting. This opening may also have been made use of when the parvise was erected, and possibly an upper story in connection with it over the aisle.

The ancient Norman roofs of the nave and chancel were lower in pitch than the present, so that their ridges would come below the string-course under the still remaining belfry windows of that period. These windows were doubtless repeated on the other faces of the belfry stage, and the tower was probably surmounted by a low lead-covered timber spire, such as still exists at Canterbury Cathedral, and at the old parish church of Dover. We may here note that through the timbers of the later roof the doorway (now blocked up) can still be seen by which access was gained from the tower to the space above the flat-boarded ceiling of the roof over the nave.

The next stages in the history of the fabric are shewn on plan (*Plate I. fig. 2*), which gives the church as it may have appeared about the end of the 13th century. The first addition made was a chapel on the north side of the chancel, opening into it by a doorway, the jambs of which still remain. This building was most likely a Lady Chapel ; it was probably destroyed by fire ; its eastern foundations can still be traced, and its piscina (partly formed out of a Norman window-head) still exists in the north wall of the chancel, some ancient tiles, a piece of melted gold, and other relics have been found within its area.

The porch, and the south and part of the north transept, also belong to this period ; the latter were built as chapels, and to

connect them with the church arches were pierced in the tower walls, that on the north being specially skilful in construction.

The porch of this period was doubtless only a one-storied building, the roof being kept high enough to clear the beautiful arch of the north doorway.

The plan (*Plate I. fig. 3*) shows the next important change in the fabric.

This was the addition of the eastern bay of the chancel, a work of much artistic merit; it is groined in stone, and the vaulting ribs are so arranged as to harmonize with the lines and proportions of the earlier vault, the piscina still remains, and though mutilated, it is evident that originally it was a feature of great beauty.

The object of this eastward extension is not absolutely certain, but it seems probable that it was to provide a Lady Chapel in place of that on the north side, which had been burnt down. The east window is low and wide in its proportions; it has now completely lost its tracery, but we know that its centre light was wider than the side lights, for the original cill remains with the "stools" of the first mullions worked on it. These stools do not, however, fit the mullions now standing on them, while the insertion of a narrow piece of stone in the cill shows that the window was widened soon after its erection, and it is possible that some of the discarded tracery was put into the northern window of the chancel, which last was itself an insertion after the removal of the earlier Lady Chapel. The other side windows differ in their details from either of these two, and they are remarkably small and narrow in their lights. A similar one, now blocked up by the vestry, existed in the western bay.

In the south wall of the Lady Chapel are some remains of the jamb of the ancient doorway, used possibly by the owners of the Lady Chapel and chancel as their private entrance. This doorway existed as recently as 1829, and is shewn on a plan of that date in possession of the Incorporated Church Building Society.

Two of the southern windows of the nave, and the west doorway, were inserted in the 14th century, as well as the beautiful

northern and eastern windows of the north transept. [The ancient tracery and mullions of the former window were removed and replaced with new in 1888, when the stained glass was put up.] No doubt there was a west window of this period destroyed when the wall was rebuilt in its present form. The fine roof of the nave is in very good condition, and, excepting the loss of the carved bosses at the intersection of the ribs, it has suffered but little change. It is considerably higher in pitch than the roof which it replaced, and consequently blocks the lower part of the Norman belfry windows before referred to.

The transept roofs were altered in the 17th century, anciently they were of what is termed the "trussed rafter type," but the old cross ties or braces have been taken away; these, however, could easily be replaced, as the mortices still remain to show where they were framed in.

The roof over the chancel was also reconstructed in the 17th century, and is lower in pitch than the ancient one of the 14th century, as is shewn by the old stone water-table of that date, on the then rebuilt eastern face of the tower.

The northern chapel of the nave was rebuilt, and an arch was cut through into the transepts, and of this date a mutilated two-light window still exists, there is also a richly-moulded wall plate carried on corbels, which were let into the irregular face of the nave wall after the removal of the groining. The construction of this roof is now hidden under plaster, but it probably continued down the slope of that of the nave.

In the 15th century the two buttresses on the southern side of the nave were built to strengthen the inclining wall, and the window between them was inserted; this alteration involved the blocking-up of the old south doorway.

At about the same time new stonework was inserted within the Norman north doorway, and another story or "parvise" was added to the porch; this story was probably a priest's chamber; the floor was formed by beams and joists, now removed; there is nothing to show how the stairs to this room were arranged, but certain peculiarities in the walls give reason to think that there

may have been at this time an upper story over the north aisle ; and that from this story the parvise may have been entered by means of the ancient opening described before, while the upper story itself was reached by stairs or by a ladder, arranged perhaps in connection with those to the rood-loft hereafter described.

It is also possible that steps were contrived inside the porch on the west side (as at S. Martin's, Wareham), leading up into the parvise. With regard to the suggested upper story to the aisle, it is not a little remarkable that there is an example of one at Bishop's Cleeve, near Cheltenham, and that here too it is connected with the parvise of the porch.

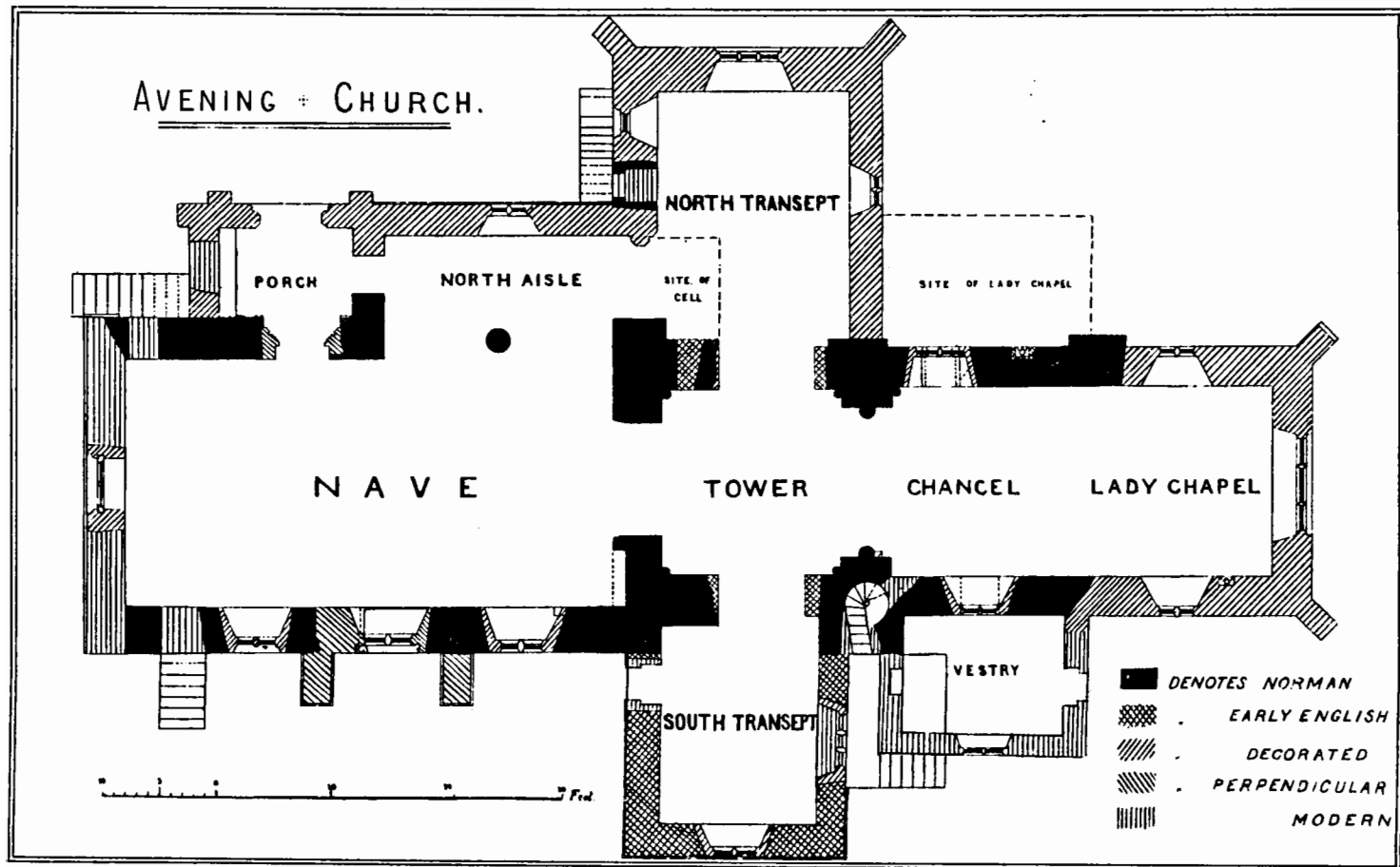
It would be very interesting to find out whether there are traces of a similar arrangement in any other of the Gloucestershire churches (at Laycock, Wilts, there is an annexe to the south porch of two or three stories).

The belfry stage of the tower was considerably altered, and the *two* upper battlemented stages were added, the general proportion and effect of this work are good, but the detail is somewhat inferior.

It may be noted that inside the belfry there are large holes, apparently for beams, as if these stories had been originally divided by a floor. The work of this period was probably executed by the great Convent of Sion, to whom the property, forfeited to the Crown as that of a foreign convent, had been granted by Henry V.

With these last works the mediæval history of the fabric may be said to have closed, and we pass to the consideration of the ancient ritual arrangements, so far as they can be discerned or reasonably conjectured.

In the first place it is obvious that there must formerly have been a rood-screen and loft across the east end of the nave, for the door leading to the latter still exists in its north wall just above the arcade of the side aisle. The cutting away and mutilation of the pillars, capitals, and arch-mould of the western tower arch were no doubt occasioned by its construction ; but these defects would, of course, be hidden by the woodwork of the



screen and its projecting gallery. It is not possible at present to determine how the stairs were contrived, although what may have been a portion of them still exists, formed of solid oak, but further investigation may throw light on this difficult and interesting question.

With regard to the altars, there was one, as already observed, at the east end of the nave on the south side, but we have as yet found no traces of any ancient steps or levels to guide us as to the position of the high altar. If, however, the eastern bay of the present chancel was at one time a Lady Chapel, there would be some form of screen separating it from the chancel of the parish church, and against this screen or retable on its western side the high altar would stand, while doors in the screen would give access to the Lady Chapel, which could also be entered, without first going through the church, by means of the ancient door on the south side.

The level of the footpace of the Lady Chapel altar may be inferred from the height of the ancient piscina.

The General Plan of the Church as it now exists, and indications of the alterations made from time to time, are shewn in in Plate II.

<sup>1</sup> See Mr. R. Paul's paper "Notes in Gloucestershire."

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