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**The Crypt of the Priory Church of St. John, at Clerkenwell**

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## THE CRYPT OF THE PRIORY CHURCH OF ST. JOHN AT CLERKENWELL.

By CHAS. R. BAKER KING.

THE Knights of the Order of St. John are said to have settled at Clerkenwell about the year 1100. As the earliest portion of the present chapel, now forming the crypt, was erected at the end of the 11th century, the Knights, if they did not themselves build it, must have acquired it very shortly after its erection.

The plan of the chapel at present consists of a nave of five bays, with side aisles or chapels to the eastern part; that on the north side of one bay only, and that on the south of three bays. There are chambers of minor importance on the north side, westward of the aisle.

The original plan consisted of a nave of three bays, with perhaps a semi-circular apse projecting from its eastern wall. The entrance was by a doorway in the western wall. In each bay of the side walls was a narrow window with wide splays, placed somewhat high above the floor. The whole chapel was vaulted with stone. The outer roof was probably of the usual Norman pitch, making an angle about 90 degrees at the apex, the level of the eaves being a little above that of the top of the groining.

At a period not much later than that of the first erection, a chamber was added on the north side. This addition seems to have covered at least two of the windows on the north side. How far the chamber extended westward cannot be determined, owing to alterations having been made in the 18th century.

In the latter part of the 12th century, about the year 1180, during what is called the "Transitional" period of

English mediæval architecture, the erection of a grand priory church having been determined on, the original chapel, with the extension then made to the eastward, became a crypt under the choir of the new church. This church, as we know by documentary evidence, was consecrated by the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Heraclius, in the year 1185.

This great scheme led to the removal of the eastern wall of the Norman chapel, and the lengthening of its nave eastward by two bays, with side chapels at the eastern end, as we now see them. The eastern bay only of the side chapels opens directly into the nave.

It will be noticed that the first or western bay of this extension of the nave has no window on either side, the walls here not having been external. The roughly shaped opening between the nave and the south chapel is modern.

The space on the north side of the nave, westward of the side chapel, formed a chamber of similar character to that of the older chamber on which it abutted. The access was by a doorway in the western wall of the north chapel. This doorway was widened to the northward in very early times.

The eastern wall of the present crypt marks the line of the eastern end of the priory church. The crypt and present church represent the length of the choir, the destroyed nave having extended some distance westward. In the upper church the bases of the responds or half pillars against the eastern wall, of the same date as the crypt, are preserved under the floor, and can be examined.

When originally built the chapel was mainly above the ground level, though there may have been a descent of a few steps into the building.

The interior of the western or Norman portion of the chapel has a stone bench or seat next each side wall, on which stand the projecting stone pilasters, from which the vaulting arches and ribs spring. The abacus moulding of the piers continues as a string along the intermediate spaces of the wall. The pilasters support plain transverse arches

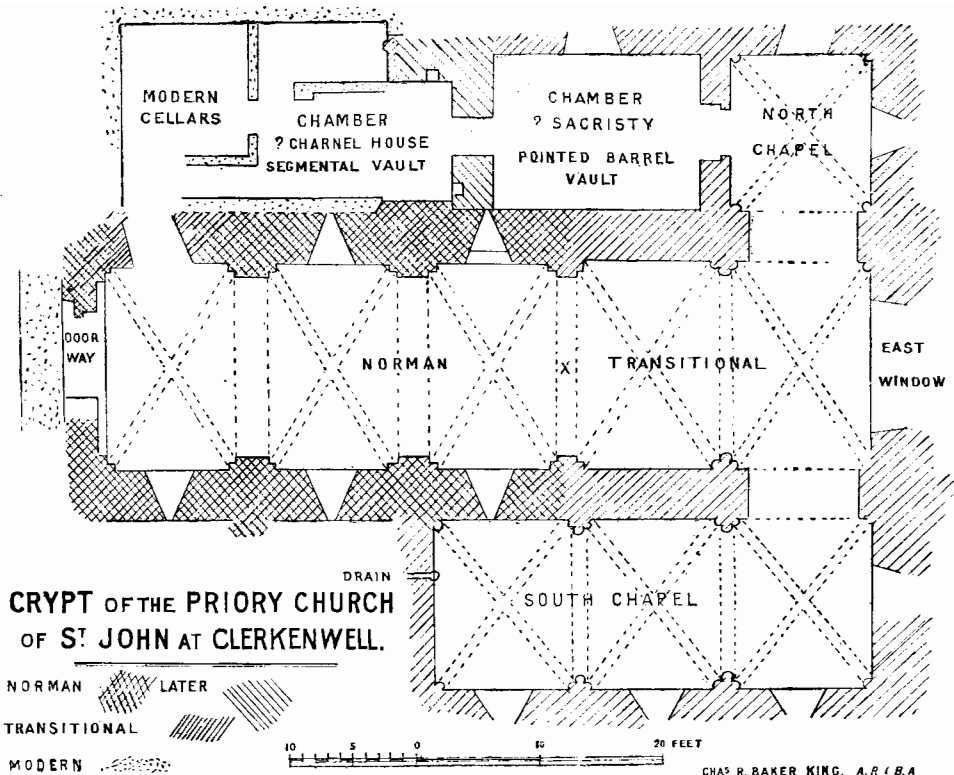
of semi-circular form which divide the groining into bays. Each bay has moulded diagonal ribs, but there are no walls ribs. The intermediate spaces of the vaulting are constructed of rubble stone, plastered over. A thin coating of plaster was also applied to the sides of the vaulting ribs, and to the sides and soffits of the cross arches, the edges of the plaster being cut to scalloped and chevron forms. There are traces of ancient colouring on the stonework, finishing to the outline of the ornamental edges of the plaster. The windows retain their original iron bars.

The eastern or Transitional portion of the chapel has the divisions of the bays marked by groups of shafts, instead of by plain pilaster projections as in the Norman part. The groups consist of a bowtel, or pointed shaft in the middle, flanked by a small circular shaft on each side; they have good moulded bases. The capitals have square moulded abaci, the bells being plain curves easing off from the circular to the square form.

The junction of the Norman with the Transitional work is clearly seen in the pilasters, the jointing of the stonework and the moulding of the string varying in the work of the two dates. The pilasters at the junction are narrower than the intermediate pilasters, the original width of these angle features having no doubt been the same as those next the western wall.

In the year 1894, when the floor was being concreted under the order of the Home Secretary, search was made for the foundations of the original Norman eastern end of the chapel; but unfortunately no traces of them could be met with. A portion of the raised floor of the sanctuary of the extended chapel was discovered, which has been reproduced in the present concrete paving. A few paving tiles and pieces of inserted stonework were found next the bases of the piers on the western side of the arches opening into the side chapels; these remain as they were found.

The exterior of the eastern-most window in the south wall of the Norman nave shows in the south chapel, but has



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NORMAN LATER

TRANSITIONAL

MODERN



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been shortened, and its head altered to a horizontal form to keep it within the line of the groining of the side chapel.

The vaulting of the Transitional part of the building is richer than that of the earlier portion. All the arches are pointed, and are moulded or chamfered, and the vaulting ribs are richly moulded. The ornamental plastering is not found on the later work, this being peculiar to the work of the Norman period. The straight edges of the plastering of the later date are still perfect in many places, after the lapse of seven centuries.

The vaulting of the eastern half of the east bay of the nave of the chapel rises above the general level. This was designed to allow of the east window having greater height.

The inner splays of the east window remain, but the group of lancets which formerly existed has been removed in modern times to form access to the chapel at this end.

The inner splays only remain to the windows in the side chapels. Those of the north window of the north chapel both incline eastwards, as though some building on the outside obliged the placing of the actual opening eastward of its natural position. A corbel for a figure or light occurs in the east wall of the south chapel; but this is an insertion of later date.

The western end of the south chapel has no window; but in the lower part of the wall are the remains of a projecting bowl or stoup, having a channelled stone as a drain through the wall westward.

The earlier chamber to the north of the nave has a plain segmental barrel vault without ribs, constructed of rubble stonework. A small window was formed in the upper part of the eastern wall, which was originally external. A modern opening has been cut in this wall below the window to connect this chamber with the later chamber beyond. If the earlier chamber extended as far as the western end of the nave of the chapel, its entrance might have been from the north side of the western bay, where there is now a doorway of later date. There are remains of a doorway in the north

wall of the chamber belonging to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, but this may replace a doorway of earlier date.

In the east wall, near the south-east angle of the chamber, is a recess like an aumbry rebated for a door, although no door seems to have been fitted to it. In the north wall, near the north-east angle, is a similar recess.

From the plain character of the chamber, its purpose cannot have been an important one, and it has been suggested that it may have been intended for a charnel house.

The interior of the adjoining chamber, of Transitional date, is treated very simply. It has around its walls a string course corresponding with that of the aisle from which it was entered, and is covered with a rubble barrel vault of pointed form. There was a window in the north wall, its inner arch intersecting with the vault of the chamber. This apartment may have served as a sacristy.

It would be interesting to know how the crypt was entered after the construction of the upper church; but, without having the opportunity of removing some of the modern walling, it is impossible to speak with any degree of certainty on the point.

The original entrance in the western wall was no doubt central; but there are irregularities in the masonry of the northern jamb of the doorway which may indicate an alteration in the position of the entrance.

A doorway with a segmental head, apparently of "Transitional" or "Early English" date, was inserted in the northern wall of the western bay of the nave, the original window being removed. This doorway may have been substituted for the western entrance, a flight of steps being formed in the north aisle of the choir.

The building has undergone but little change since mediæval times, excepting at the western end. The original groining of the western bay has been removed, and a common brick vault, like that of an ordinary cellar, substituted. Several stones of the original vaulting remain in each angle.

The quoins of the south window of this bay remain, though the recess is now walled up.

The ancient work to the north of the western bay has been destroyed, or is so much concealed by modern brickwork that the original arrangement of the staircase and of the western end of the charnel-house cannot be ascertained.

Of the design of the exterior of the chapel little is known. When the church was being refloored and reseated a small amount of earth was removed forming a cavity outside the middle window on the south side of the crypt, and a stone slab put over the space. By inserting the head through this window, a small portion of the outside of the wall, with a deep string course, can be seen.

The building has suffered a little from the ravages of time and from the base uses to which it has been put; but it is, on the whole, in good structural condition. The stone used for the dressings is firestone from the Surrey hills, a material which lasts well in protected positions.

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