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Avening Church

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AVENING CHURCH.

By ST. CLAIR BADDELEY.

AVENING Church is set, or rather, throned back upon a steep hill-side at the head of her beautiful valley of sequent *ingges*,¹ or water-meadows of the Avon—somewhat as a grey nun sitting apart in her high choir; while the as yet infant stream flows at the foot, past the happy old-world gardens of the cottages, and the vicarage. But as with so many of our churches, the compact unity of structure is but an apparent one: for the building is a complex of secondary developments in each of its limbs and it merely emulates a homogeneous design. It has, for that reason, rather to be analysed than described.

Though appropriately cruciform, the Church of Holy Rood was not so formed originally, nor even for more than a full century after (c) 1107,² at which date (if not rather earlier) both the Manor and Church of Avening passed by gift to the Royal Abbey of Nuns at Caens La Trinité, already made by the King and Queen, in 1082, Ladies of the Manor, and owners, likewise, of the Church of adjoining Minchinhampton; to which their name was then becoming fastened as Hampton 'Monialium,' or 'Moneken Hanton.' Nevertheless, a notification by Fromund, Abbot of Tewkesbury (1162-78), and from his entire convent there, stating that a dispute between them and the Abbey of La Trinité at Caen, relative to the Church at Avening, had been settled amicably, by the payment of

¹ From *incg*, pronounced *inch* (cf. *Inchbrook*) and equivalent to *ea*, stream.

² A Charter of Hen. I. to Bishop Sampson of Worcester (d. 1112) and Walter, the sheriff, granting to S. Martin of Troarn (Dioc. Bayeux) that the monastery and parish of Horsley, Gos. shall be free from any subjection to the church and parish of Havelinge even as that is free from Horsley. *Cartul. de Troarn*, f. 148. *Witnesses*: Roger, E. of Meulan; Robert, Chaplain of Rouen, *Docts. of France* (J. H. Round).

twenty marks to them by the Nuns to persuade them to withdraw from the suit, for peace' sake, forms sufficiently presumptive evidence that the once great Thane of Tewkesbury and of Avening, namely Beorhtric, had granted some not-extinguished right or other in Avening Church or Chapel to the monastery at Tewkesbury; either, that is, in the days of the Confessor, or certainly not later than 1075. Abbot Fromund says that his Abbey has quit-claimed to Holy Trinity at Caen, any right that his Convent owned in the Church of Avening and its appurtenances.¹ But we have further, and direct, evidences that Avening indeed possessed an 11th cent. Chapel or Church. One of these is the fragment (now set in the west wall of the north aisle) of a cap with primitive rope-moulding found in 1902-3 beneath the floor; where also was then discovered the footing of the early north wall, dating before the present (or early 12th cent.) arcade or north-aisle was formed out of it. Partly beneath a portion of this foundation, though quite possibly only forced into it, was found the large stone coffin (length 7 feet by 1 foot 5 inches—external width of 2 feet 2 inches—internal 14 inches; lid, of 5 solid inches) now placed in the S. transept. Inside this lay a skeleton declared then (by Mr. Micklethwaite, the restorer) to have been that of a lady. Appearances pointed to pressure or weight of the wall having completely broken the coffin. In any case, the Norman (rebuilt) north wall of the church in small part rested upon this great coffin, which giving way, the wall collapsed. In addition, the jambs and mutilated Norman shafts and caps of the western Tower-arch are of earlier character and workmanship than are the shaft and arches of the North aisle, or than are the vaulting-ribs of the Chancel. Again, the square-headed door to the Tower-stair in S.W. angle of Chancel is of this date; so there can be no doubt that soon

¹ Cf. J. H. Round, *Docts. of France*.

after the Church and Manor passed into the hands of these wealthy and influential ladies of Minchinhampton and Caen, the Church became enriched and somewhat enlarged ; and we should be inclined to attribute the same early 12th cent. date to the former N. and S. altars,¹ evidenced by the remains of the chevroned reredos-heads now seen flanking the western tower-arch.

The vaulting-ribs of the first Choir-bay, again, are of the advancing twelfth century : they date subsequently to the above-mentioned door to the tower-stair. The Church to-day (104 feet in length) consists of a nave equivalent to five bays, with an arch-braced roof, having a short North aisle of two bays opening into the North (14th cent.) transept (which, we shall see, it did not do originally), a central tower (Norman and 15th cent.) of three stages, with N. and S. transepts (14th and 13th cent.), and a Chancel of two bays (Norman and 14th cent.) to the first of which, upon the north side, was attached a 13th cent. Chapel, destroyed (c) 1300, and not rebuilt. The late (c) 1160 Norman north door to the nave has been converted into a N. porch in the late Decorated period ; while, still later, a room became built above that, the floor of which was removed in 1902. Before it was transformed so as to be a porch there was perhaps a stair (*timber*) giving access to the very early 13th cent. shouldered door, which alone now represents a former over-storey to the North aisle.² Of another vanished feature here, presently. The west wall is centred by a closed 14th cent. door : but none of it is Norman work ; while some of its exterior (S.W.) suggests that there may have been an intention in completely clearing away the original wall to build

¹ Such N. and S. altars are exemplified at Urrishay and Peterchurch, co. Hereford.

² In the N. aisle upper face was, until it collapsed in 1903, a door to the former Rood. Old photographs in the vestry shew it well. This is now mentioned because certain members of the R. Arch. Institute, not seeing any sign surviving in the wall, denied that there had ever been a rood-screen here, and with great difficulty became persuaded.

a western tower. The west window once over the door, is said to have been blown in and ruined by a great gale, in the early nineteenth century. No vestige survives.

The south wall has a closed Norman door ruined by the insertion of a 15th cent. window. This door may, perhaps, have been the original west-door (transferred). Earlier S. windows have given way to two Decorated ones; and externally the south wall has been strengthened by some rather clumsy late buttresses. A *piscina* remains *in situ* at its eastern end.

The open roof (restored, 1904 and carefully repaired) is of five bays springing from stone corbels carved with grotesque heads. The intersection-bosses have survived with the exception of seven. That the original roof was considerably lower is shown by the round-headed Tower-window (closed).

The problem of lighting the central tower (then the choir) when its small N. and S. windows had been darkened by added transepts evidently became desperate, and the drastic mutilations both of the Norman shafts and arch, and the two-fold insertion of pointed arches, the latest a two-centred double champfer, attest the efforts to solve it: though doubtless the rood-screen (when it came) to some extent concealed the damage done, though that again must have modified the light obtained. That the coming of the rood-beam and screen here did not improve matters except in appearance, we may be sure. The door to these situated in the upper North aisle wall, was accidentally destroyed in 1902. It had long served for an entrance to an 18th cent. gallery. The corbel to carry the beam remains in the east wall. Small portions of the rood-screen, much decayed, were found in 1902 beneath the floor. The bases of the former shafts (as of the former N. and S. Norman doors to the nave) stood at a level two feet above present floor-level, indicating another minishment of the light-diffusion. In addition, the floor

of the tower (once that of the choir), was set at a still higher level, as is evidenced by the angle-shafts to the vaulting-ribs, and by a large splay in the N.W. wall close to the pier, which by its form discovers that its secondary object was to convey strong north light to the steps and floor of the choir beneath the Tower. This hagioscope, which became closed up in the 13th century, probably received its light from the window of a Norman reclusoir or cell, attached to the eastern end of the small north aisle, the evidences of which were discovered and demonstrated by Messrs. Ingelow and Carpenter in 1888¹: and the former small Norman door to which (they had reason to conjecture), is that no longer *in situ*, but embedded (? as a sacred object), in the west wall of the adjacent transept.² It is to be regretted that a projecting rebate belonging to precisely such a doorway, which then (and long after) appeared at the angle of the transept-opening below the hagioscope, is no longer to be found there. It is shown in their Plan. This small oblong cell, therefore, was entered from the east, and it measured within (c.) 10 feet by 5 feet. Whether it could be reached from the north aisle we cannot tell: that it possessed a small north window seems likely owing to the position of the closed hagioscope. The latter will also have permitted the inmate of the cell to hear the service or mass chanted in the choir. Both cell and aisle belonged to the early years of the 12th century. In the following century the cell was done away, the hagioscope (1 foot 11 inches by 1 foot 5 inches) was filled in, and a transept with an attached eastern Chapel (entered by a door from the present chancel) was thrown out. This transept, with exception of an Early English window and a few feet of its west wall

¹ Cf. vols. xiii. and xiv. *Trans., Br. and Glos. Arch. Soc.*

² This was therefore, situated next the earlier choir as at Mas-D'azil, nr. Foix; and the recluse could thus hear the mass through the splay or hagioscope in the Tower-pier. Such cells occurred formerly at Ledbury, at Quinton, and at St. Kineburga's in Gloucester.

became entirely rebuilt (c.) 1300, probably after a fire that destroyed the Chapel eastward beyond it ; of which last only the door and Early English piscina survive. Until that date the High Altar had remained in the single Norman bay of the choir and the two chamfers to be seen on the inner angle of the N.E. pier of the Tower were evidently made for the convenience of those attending mass at the head of the North aisle so as to view the elevation of the Host.

With the extension of the choir by a new vaulted bay in the same Decorated period, the east wall became demolished, and when a fresh one arose a flood of light was at once let into the Church, both by the new triple-light east-window and by N. and S. windows of two lights. If this bay, perchance, served at first for a Lady Chapel in place of the un-rebuilt north Chapel, it was probably screened off, and the High Altar may have remained in its old position. If so, the addition of large Decorated windows also to the first, or Norman bay destroyed the original piscina as well as a priest's door. The Decorated piscina of the eastern bay, though mutilated, survives. The east window has suffered rearrangement (probably more than once) owing to settlement, which has likewise occasioned resetting of the stone vaulting overhead. The loft has a quatrefoil ventilation-opening : whereas the loft over the first choir-bay has a square-cut opening from the Tower.

As in other instances the stairway in the N.W. pier of the tower, opening into the Chancel has proved perilous to stability. Even in the later 15th century, if not earlier, the door was filled in for safety and a fresh one was opened to its stair from the south transept. But, in time, this likewise had to be closed up, and the tower had to be reached, as at present, only from an external stairway (s). In spite, however, of these and later endeavours to secure it against ' settlement ' the tower still very slightly

moves : and it is not strange that the increased number of the bells and their ringing in peals in a structure already rather overloaded by the rebuilding of its upper stages in the 15th century, should put the tower to an expensive test. Mr. J. Micklethwaite in 1902-6 did what he could to secure it : with care it may last for some time.

The South Transept (17 feet 6 inches by 14 feet) is smaller than its northern fellow ; and with exception of the insertion and re-closing of east windows (15th cent.) and a modern west door to it, the walls are of the 13th century, as is the segmental two-chamfer arch to the Tower. It is to be noticed that the corresponding arch to the North transept is significantly doubled in order to counter the weakness which thus early had made itself known. The original small Norman tower-windows (rebated for shutters) remain *in situ*, but neither of the transept arch-heads tallies with the window-centres.

In the north transept are to be seen (not *in situ*) two incised stone slabs belonging to the tombs of priests, and fragments of others are lying in the south Transept, as well as many little pieces of early memorial tiles, which were recovered from under the floor in 1902. The presence, however, of the important very early graves already referred to at the north edge of the nave and in front of a (? Trinity) altar seem to point to a special sanctity of that spot, made only the more emphatic by the throwing out there of the Norman aisle and cell (*reclusoir*) early in the 12th century. This gave rise in our day to the notion that some Prioress or important official of the Abbey at Caen (either visiting, or sent to reside in the Manor) might have died and been buried in the Church. This, though not an impossibility, nor really important, cannot be proven. That the relations between their rich possessions in the three Manors of Avening, Pinbury, and Minchinhampton and their respective Churches, and the Nuns of Caen, were far closer than usually was the case of alien monasteries

seems clear from our documentary sources; although their ordinary business-affairs, as was usual, were directed by their appointed seneschals or bailiffs, who presided for them at their local Manor-Courts.

For example, the sub-Manor of Rodborough, near Stroud, was long held of the Abbess in soccage (by paying 20s. p. a.) by a family of the same name, and after them by their heir, Richard Browning,¹ for the service of actually transporting the treasure of the Abbess of Caen from Minchinhampton to Southampton whenever she returned to France. Already, in 1205, Innocent III. had exhorted King John "not to permit the Abbess of Caen and her nuns to be brought before the secular Court of Aubrey de Vere, Earl of Oxford," in the Diocese of Norwich, who was troubling them there about their two manors of Horstead and Felstead, which William I. likewise had given them. So the Abbesses and nuns did visit their English possessions.

Within two years of this (1207),² they had trouble with the tenants at Pinbury (where the famous "Nun's Walk" seems to recall their presence); and the Abbess gave a mark to the King to have Ralph de Veyn removed from her dwelling-house there, which she had leased only to his brother Thomas for a certain term. She had further occasion against Matilda, wife of Thomas de Veyn; while in 1213, she presented the King with a good palfrey for the better hastening of her plea against Richard de Veyn, concerning her four hides of land at Pinbury (*Penebiria*) Glos., and their appurtenances, before the Justices at Westminster. She wished the case to come on within fifteen days. It further seems certain also that these Abbesses and their attendants did personally visit their beautiful Gloucestershire possessions, from their important transactions with the Abbots of Cirencester,³ who were Lords of the Hundred of Langtree in which these

¹ Cf. IPM.A. Hen. 4.

² Rot. de Finibus., p. 378.

³ Cf. MS. Registers A. and B. at Thirlestaine House, Cheltenham.

lay. C. 1240, we find Abbot Roger permits the Steward of the Abbess, with regard to pleas in the Court of the Hundred, the right to appoint his attorney by letters patent if the said Steward should happen to be absent twenty miles or more away from Cirencester: "but the Abbess shall by no means be compelled to come nor to answer in the said places (the Hundred Courts of Cirencester and Langtree) *unless she shall be present: i.e.* staying at Minchinhampton, Pinbury, or Avening Manors.¹

Minchinhampton became a town of marked importance in 1213, when the then Abbess procured for it from King John two Fairs and a weekly market.

Hence, like other Lords of manor and advowson, it is probable that the Nuns of Caen sometimes took a leading part in improving and decorating their Churches of Avening and Minchinhampton: and the quasi-magnificence of this village Church is just what one would expect from a Conventual as against a secular lord of the Manor; for, as Mr. Hamilton Thompson has printed, "Where the Monastery was lord of the Manor it would take its share in the building and upkeep of the Church." Moreover, the other parishioners there in all (in A.D. 1100) amounted to not above 70, of whom thirty were slaves and the rest of humble degree—mill-hands, bordars, and villeins,—saving the Rector and his assistant. It may be recalled that the chief part of present Nailsworth was then in Avening.

There remain to be noticed one or two remarkable details; chief among which is a sculptured fragment built into the north wall of the Church (jamb of door). According to Dr. A. C. Fryer,² this is part of a baptismal bowl of rectangular form (2 feet 2½ inches by 1 foot 1¾ inches). The chief piece consists of an arcade of tiny

¹ Many alien priors and sub-priors were wont to come over here on the business of their Monasteries, or, to produce in Court their charters of English possessions: and not a few of them died during their stay.

² Cf. *Trans.*, B. and G. Arch. Soc. xxxiv, p. 196; xxxvii, p. 117.

semi-circular arches carried upon alternate pillar and corbel. Each arch is said to have contained an Apostle (?). Five of the figures remain : and there were probably six arches upon two of the four faces of the font. It is difficult, nevertheless, to recognise or explain what the apostolic figures are represented as doing ; since they are habited as monks, are without aureoles, and they appear to be exchanging or comparing (?) loaves, or else carrying (?) stones. Some of the figures, moreover, resemble female ones, while others wear tunics.

Another fragment of decorative, late 12th cent. work is seen to be affixed to the North wall, further westward. It represents two priests (or monks) exchanging ? scrolls, under a canopy with twisted columns.