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Deerhurst Priory Church

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DEERHURST PRIORY CHURCH

by E. C. GILBERT

THE interest of this monument is testified by the fact that it is one of the three most visited Saxon Churches. It is also of great historical importance, the significance of which only became apparent through a survey made by Mr W. H. Knowles, F.S.A., in 1926.¹ As is well known it is one of only a few Saxon remains with an apsidal east end. Twelve such certainly remain, e.g. Hexham, Worth, Reculver, Lyminge, Brixworth, Rochester, Bradwell, Wing, Deerhurst and the three Canterbury churches of St. Pancras, St. Mary and St. Augustine.

Of these all except Worth, Wing and Deerhurst are certainly early, and Wing could be. The date of the last two really hangs together, and arguing from the other evidence, then *a priori* should be early. For excluding the dates in question we have nine certainly early apses, against one—namely Worth (Fig. 3)—presumed late. Nor is there anything immediately to upset this *a priori* early date. On the contrary the next major fact as to these apses, that they are polygonal, only reinforces the *a priori* likelihood of an early date. For the polygonal apse in England certainly occurs early, but no trace exists at a late Saxon date.

Still more cogent is Mr Knowles's demonstration that Wing, Brixworth and Deerhurst are closely akin in the details of the apse. All three are semi-dodecagonal apses equal-sided, but not equal-angled and the irregular angles nearly correspond at all three.² This surely places their contemporaneity beyond all reasonable doubt, and I

¹ W. H. Knowles, 'Deerhurst Priory Church: including the result of the excavation conducted during 1926'. *Archaeologia*, 1927, LXXVII, 141-64, plan and illus.

² West angles 166 degrees; central, 144; east, 140.

would say their early date also were it not that an attempt has been made to infer Brixworth apse eleventh century.³ This was not accepted by Mr A. W. Clapham⁴ and it is doubtful whether it can be supported. This question, however, I hope to discuss at greater length elsewhere. In this paper it is the date of the rest of the church with which I am concerned, and I propose to argue that we have here an early church as an early apse. It is not of course the first time that this has been argued, but since the view in the past has not obtained acceptance,

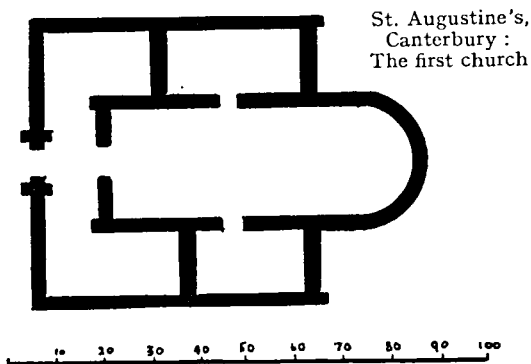


Fig. 1

and since I am convinced it is correct, I propose to marshal again the arguments for it.

It is a very important fact that at Deerhurst there were solid walls between the nave and aisles. Aisles extended here at least from the line of the sanctuary arch down the choir, and by part of the nave, and the only openings from the central part of the church were two doorways. In the history of English architecture this is a very early feature antedating the late 7th century arcades at Brixworth, and representing Kentish work at St. Augustine's (598) and

³ *Archaeological Journal*, 1912, LXIX, 505, 510.

⁴ A. W. Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture*, vol. I, 1930, p. 35.

Reculver (670).⁵ Thus in the nave, as in the apse, Kentish influence is apparent, and very early Kentish influence at that. Not less early Kentish is the historical evolution of the aisles at Deerhurst. Beginning with a simple transeptal porticus the aisles were extended westwards, and possibly eastwards. According to Mr Knowles one chapel only was added to the west. I suspect however that in reality Deerhurst was fully aisled in very early Saxon days, and for the following reasons. The present south aisle wall shows a straight joint, which Mr Knowles takes to mark the angle of the extended chapel to the west. There is however another straight joint further west again, and this argues against a homogeneous build in the 12th century. The walling is minus the herring-bone of the earliest parts, but otherwise similar to it, and until the medieval windows interrupt it has a square string. Moreover, internally the foundations of a return wall from aisle to nave, making a continuation of the west wall of the nave, were noticed by Mr Butterworth at the restoration. These facts are at any rate compatible with early aisles, and what convinces me that such really existed are the triangular-headed openings in the nave walls. These, as Mr Micklethwaite noted,⁶ are incredible as external windows whether placed in the 10th or in the 7th century. Insufficient weight has been placed on this incredibility, since it demands the upsetting of all the normal laws of architectural development. On the other hand they are easily paralleled as, and obviously are, squints, occurring as such not only at Bosham but at Deerhurst itself in the tower. But if they are squints then surely the conclusion follows that they were from an upper storey to an aisle. But, however far the aisles extended, in either case their historical

⁵ Sir Charles Peers, 'St. Augustine's Abbey Church, Canterbury, before the Norman Conquest', *Archaeologia*, 1927, LXXVII, 204.

⁶ J. T. Micklethwaite, 'About Saxon Church Building', *Archaeological Journal*, 1896, LIII, 293-351, illus. (see p. 311).

development reflects only Reculver. No other such case exists in Saxon history.

The resemblances of Deerhurst to Reculver are very striking and should be noted. Both have a seven-sided apse; in both the apse passes to a circle at ground level;

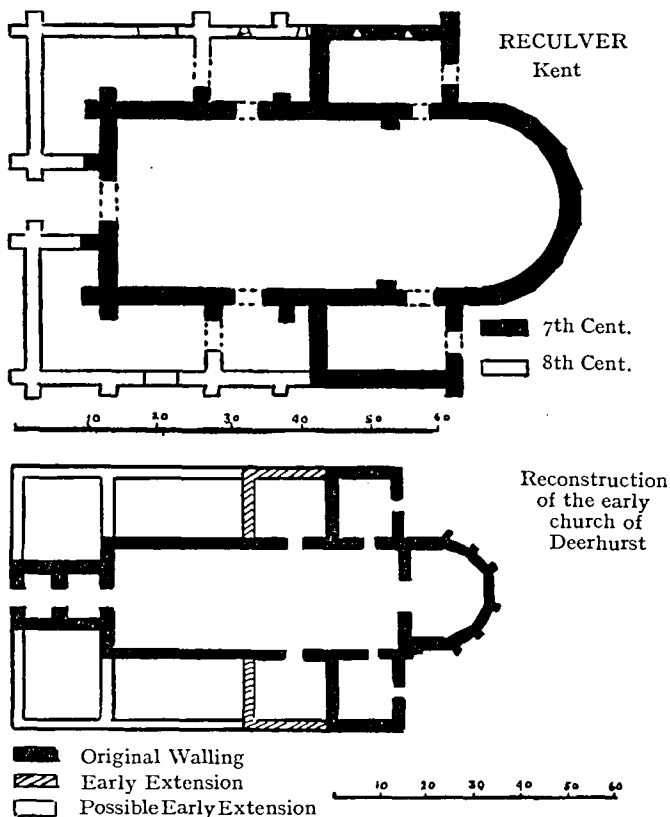


Fig. 2

both had the original porticus wholly west of the sanctuary arch, whereas the normal practice was to overlap it. Both had the doorway entrances to the porticus nearly opposite each other, again unusual since usually one door

was to the east and one to the west of the sanctuary arch. Both have the first portions extended westwards. Both have the consequent aisles divided from the main part of the church by a solid wall. This is a formidable list, especially when it is remembered that each comparison is unique, or almost so, in England.

Why then was Deerhurst ever placed late? This was done by Micklethwaite⁷ on the grounds that it is a cross church, and this has been generally accepted. Nevertheless I dispute that it was ever a cross church. The later extensions of the first porticus into aisles totally destroyed any cross appearance either inside or out, and this is illogical were the cross appearance a new and valued innovation. I give the ground plan after these extensions, assuming full aisles or not, but in neither case is the cross appearance apparent (see Fig. 3). What is apparent is the resemblance to Reculver (Fig. 2), and St. Augustine (Fig. 1).

The conception of the cross church is further discredited by the nature of the openings to the choir. These are mere doorways, and should be compared with the openings of the genuine late cross churches. There are such openings at Repton, Stow, Worth, Great Paxton, Hadstock, Norton and Wootton Wawen, some of which at least must be 10th century and they are of a very different type to the Deerhurst doorways (Fig. 4). The Stow arches are truly enormous. What is to be said about this? Either that Deerhurst cannot be a cross church, or that the type antedates the 10th century, and this is not the case. I give a comparison of the Deerhurst openings and the Worth ones, which are by no means the largest.

Plenty more evidence exists that Deerhurst is not a church of the 10th century and hence almost certainly not a cross church. There is the fact for instance that the quoins are untreated. This interesting analogy with Brixworth, and no other church, short of the 11th century, is in itself decisive against 10th century, for no other

⁷ Micklethwaite, *op. cit.* p. 328.

feature is more characteristic of that period than the care lavished in elaboration of quoins, whether in the form of long and short or megalithic. Again, both the existing remains and the literary evidence concur in denying

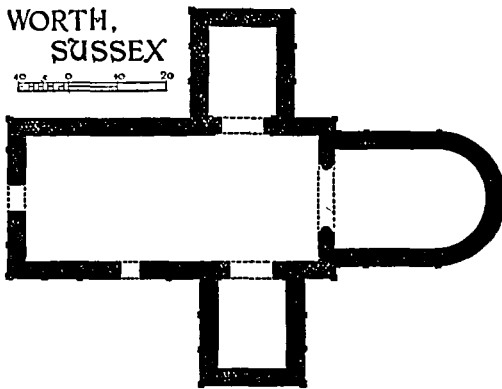


Fig. 3. Worth Church.

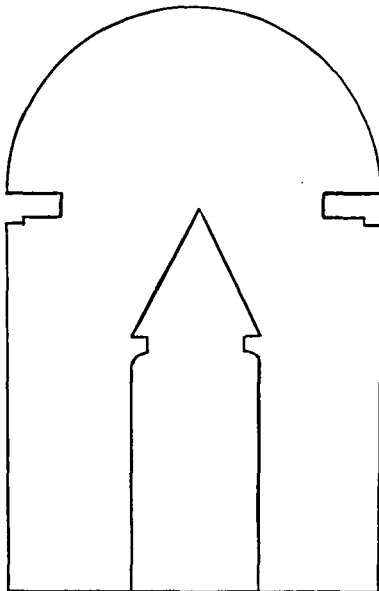


Fig. 4. Comparative elevation of transept arch at Worth (outer) with arch at Deerhurst (inner)

aisles to the typical 10th century church, and against 10 also is the tower porch, for a full fledged belfry would be expected. Against the 10th century also there are the single cordons of herring-bone work, not only because these are paralleled at Brixworth in the early work, but because we seem here to have a Merovingian influence,⁸ different from the later fashion or presenting a facade of herring-bone.

It is an interesting fact that it is impossible to discuss Deerhurst without mentioning Brixworth. Some of the well-known analogies have already been mentioned—the quoin form, the apse, the herring-bone work—and to these may be added the porch towers and elaborate mysterious windows in the west wall of the nave, which occur nowhere else. The flat-headed openings with which it is so plentifully endowed find parallels at St. Martin's and Bradwell on Sea.

Again in favour of the early date, and strongly it seems to me, are the arrangements of the church with upper stories to the transepts and aisles; aisles separated by walls into compartments and communicating by doors as on the upper floor and with first-floor openings from the transepts to the choir. Such arrangements find no parallels in later Saxon churches. On the other hand they seem to correspond to the description of Wilfred's church at Hexham by Eddius.

Once more in favour of the early date, and against 10, is the existence of a primitive door in the east wall of the north porticus. On the face of it this replaces an original altar as there are aumbries on each side of it. Sir Charles Peers⁹ doubts this on the analogies of Reculver. Possibly there were altars and tombs on each side of the door. This would account for the unusual projection of the porch. Whatever the truth, such doors occur at

⁸ Savinières, and S. Pierre de Vienne, both Merovingian. C. Enlart, *Manuel d'Archéologie Française*, (1902) 1, pp. 180 and 160.

⁹ Peers, *op. cit.*

Reculver, Brixworth, Wing. This suggests an external ambulatory to the apse, which would be a purely basilican arrangement.

Against all this and in favour of 10, is only that the first porticus had the length at right angles to the church. But the character of the opening of the choir, and not this, is decisive between porticus and transept, and in any case the feature, though unusual, is not unknown in the Kentish porticus, occurring at St. Pancras.

When we consider therefore the strong affinities with Reculver, Brixworth and other early work, and the equally strong arguments against a late date such as 10, it is surely difficult to deny Deerhurst the early date, and I think there is no reasonable doubt that in plan, fabric, and some openings we have here an early church and the one by far the most complete in all England; one of unparalleled interest, and the only one to give us any real idea of the minor details of a 7th century basilica. The apse I place *c.* 740. The rest of the church seems to demand a date *c.* 675.

The significance of an early date for Deerhurst to the history of Saxon architecture is very great, though much of it derives from the pilasters on the apse, which I am not at liberty to discuss here. It gives us further evidence of the general distribution of the Kentish culture in the 7th century south of the Trent, and east of the Celtic areas. Until the excavation of Ine's church at Glastonbury it was doubtful whether this type extended to Wessex and southwestern Mercia. Apparently however this was the case, and this has a bearing on the still doubtful date of the chapel at Bradford on Avon.

The great height of the walls is a Northumbrian feature and it is not the only one, for the flat-headed doorways with a pseudo-arch cut out of the lintel also come from the Northumbrian complex.¹⁰ Hence here, on the fringes of the Kentish area, we may see the beginnings of the

¹⁰ Hexham, Heysham, Bardsey, Monkwearmouth.

introduction of northern influence with its strong tendency to barbarism. The wall-height is a specially important feature, as it has been attributed to fear of the Danes, and the early date of Monkwearmouth is questioned on this ground. The Deerhurst evidence would entirely dispel the former theory, and remove the most powerful argument against the early date for Monkwearmouth. It appears that this feature is either a native invention, or more likely represents a lost Anglo-Saxon architecture. It is not British or Irish.

The heavy string on the outside wall is a feature which appears to represent neither Kentish classic nor Northumbrian barbaric influence, and to be the product of the local architect. The absence of definite quoin treatment again seems to be purely Mercian. The Kentish churches have tile-quoins,¹¹ though where the fabric is already in tiles these could not have been very apparent. The Northumbrian churches have definite quoin treatment.¹² Interesting also is the character of the western porch, which was originally, or early, built up to a height of 36 feet, a veritable little tower, though still less than the wall-height. It would not be difficult for the conception of the western belfry to grow out of this, though of course there is nothing of the belfry yet since the top stage openings consist of a western entrance door, an eastern window, and two windows on the north and south. The existence of a porch-tower such as this is an argument in favour of an independent and comparatively early development of the western belfry in England.

It might be argued that the placing of the transeptal porticus with length at right angles to the church indicated a transition from porticus to transept. I think for reasons noted above that any such effect was purely accidental and that the intentional Latin cross did not materialize for 200 years and more. The general significance

¹¹ As at Reculver.

¹² Monkwearmouth, Escomb, Jarrow, etc.

therefore is that while the Kentish type was widespread, it did not maintain itself substantially unchanged for 200 years in the south. On the contrary the transformation of Classic into Barbaric, in details, began before the 7th century was out, and more than a hint is given that there is no reason to suppose that the normal history of continuous change and development in architecture was suspended during the Saxon period. It shows also that even at the end of the 7th century, or the beginning of the eighth Mercia was not by any means static artistically, but that the architectural leadership was passing to her and marked by barbaric experimenting.

The date of the many Saxon openings on the ground and other floors is at the moment speculative. It is an extraordinary fact, indicating work with which we are not familiar, that at Deerhurst there are 11 or 12 Saxon openings on the ground floor, and about 27 in all. There are 16 or 17 Saxon doorways alone. This by itself would practically invalidate the 10th century date with its sober number. Worth has 2; Dover has 2; Boarhunt had 2; and very few had more, though the great long and short towers begin to show the love of many doorways sometimes without apparent reason.¹³

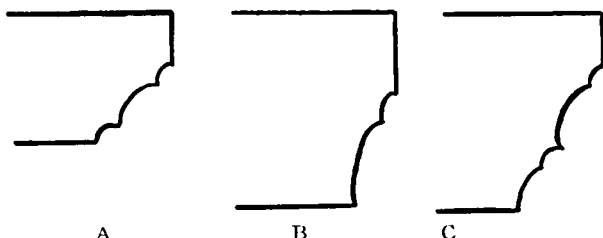


Fig. 5. Advanced Mouldings, Deerhurst

- A. Northwest bracket, upper transept arches
- B. West door of nave, southwest bracket base of sanctuary arch
- C. Northeast bracket

¹³ Earl's Barton tower has eight doorways.

The following remarks are offered on the understanding of their speculative nature. Some of the openings, i.e. c and H on the ground floor, and B and c on the first floor (see Fig. 6) have 'advanced' mouldings, which are presumed late. That at H, which is on a base, is merely that

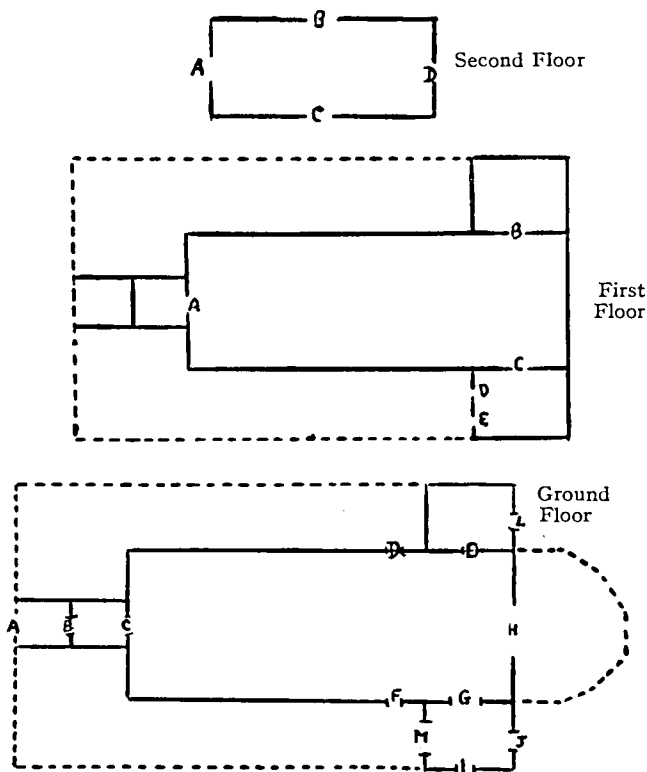


Fig. 6. Key to openings, Deerhurst Church

on the impost at c upside down. These are characterized by giving something of the effect of a quirk and hollow moulding. I will call this type the advanced moulding type (Fig. 5). The same type of moulding appears on all the four internal brackets, or portions of string, as Mr Knowles

thinks them. Other openings have the square thick hood with animal-headed decoration. These occur at A, B, and I on the ground floor, and at A on the second. This type coincided with the advanced mouldings only at H and here not in close connexion.

A third feature is the thin ribbed hoods without animal-decoration. These occur at C and M on the ground floor, and B and C on the second. Thus three times out of four they correspond to the advanced moulding type. More work of this simple hood-type might exist under the plaster. It is a curiosity of this work that it occurs only on those sides of the arches remote from what is now the main body of the church, and hence within the various porticus and chambers.

Fourthly there are two openings, at E on the ground floor and D on the second floor, which have perfectly plain hollow chamfers. No doubt C on the ground floor was similar.

Fifthly there is a group of openings characterized by flat heads, no impost, and no mouldings. This includes all the rest.

Of these five groups we may say this. The fifth is certainly early, and we have proof of this, for the arch M of the third type inconveniences two openings of the fifth type. Moreover, of these two openings E on the first floor, which is a window, is in a piece of walling external only for the short period between the first building and the extension of the porticus. Hence the window is original or nearly so.

The second or animal-decorated type is certainly late and either 10th or 11th century. The former date is favoured by three considerations—

- (1) the sculpture of the corbels is said to accord better with 10 ;
- (2) when completed the basilican arrangements were left intact, which is more probable in the 10th than the 11th ;

- (3) the form of the caps at II is certainly not 11th century, and this opening has the animal-decoration; but it may be inserted.

Against 10 is the fact that the architectural conception is advanced even for 11, and on purely architectural grounds the date of the alienation to St. Denis (1056) seems best.

The third or simple-hood type is late from its place in architectural development, its association with the late mouldings, and its relation to the fifth type, mentioned above. It could be 10 or 11.

The really great problem is the fourth type, that is the enriched window and the porticus opening from the choir. The existence of a hood of thick type but without the animal-decoration at the former appears to place this late. In that case the latter opening, lacking the hood, is a late rebuild retaining the early size owing to the pre-existence of the opening above. Such a late date creates more difficulties than it solves however.

A triangular headed-doorway of any importance in 10 is unknown except in the familiar context of the long and short technique,¹⁴ and it is difficult to see why, when every other late opening has it, a hood should be omitted here. Still greater are the difficulties for the enriched double-headed, triangular-headed window. This has stepped imposts, a typical feature of the early work,¹⁵ and one which disappeared completely from later Mercian work. So also the habit of enriching jambs of openings is a well-known early feature not occurring later than late 8th century at Britford, and springing from 7th century at Monkwearmouth. This window also is noticeably like one in the palace of Charlemagne at Aachen, a similarity which evidently impressed Baldwin Brown. Moreover, experience suggests that were the hood original it would

¹⁴ As at Barton on Humber.

¹⁵ Brixworth.

have continued to the sill-level analogous to the old chancel arch at Upleadon across the water, and all the hooded openings of the type in the east of England.¹⁶

It is worth while therefore considering the theory of an insertion of the hood into work of the early building. We may here revert to a remark made above, that the animal-decoration does not correspond with the advanced mouldings or the simple hoods. Can it be that the animal-decoration was added at the latest date to openings which lacked hoods, and hence seemed insufficiently decorated? The animal-hoods all occur on conspicuous openings which might be thought worthy of such embellishment. In one case this is almost certainly what happened. This is the external doorway entrance to the important second floor room of the tower at A. Here we have an opening which, in every other respect, corresponds to the fifth flat-headed early type, with head cut from a lintel in the Northumbrian manner. Such a doorway is difficult of credence in the 10th century when important openings were round or occasionally triangular-headed. I decline to believe still more in the reality of an original square-headed hood which would be an eccentricity without parallel at any time or place in Saxon England. What happened here is clear. The restorers found a flat-headed door and embellished it with a flat-headed hood.

The removal of the plaster at the various opening would greatly assist in the solution of these problems, and it is much to be hoped that when opportunity offers this will be done.

¹⁶ Bessingham, Colchester (Holy Trinity), etc.