DUNSTER : CHURCH : SOMERSETSHIRE :—
FROM THE SOUTH WEST.

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

SOMERSETSHIRE ARCHÆOLOGICAL AND NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY,

1855, PART II.

PAPERS, ETC.

Dunster Priory Church.

BY EDWARD A. FREEMAN, M.A.

AMONG the various papers which I have now, for some years past, annually communicated to the Somersetshire Archæological Society, there has not yet been any which has at all closely approached to the nature of a monograph. I have generally dealt rather with groups of churches, and with the characteristics of whole districts, than with detailed examinations of individual buildings. But the place of your present meeting seems to suggest a different course on the present occasion. The Priory Church of Dunster, though, as a work of architecture, immeasurably inferior to the glorious structures on which I have commented upon in other parts of the county, has nevertheless, for the ecclesiastical antiquary, an interest of a peculiar kind, and for myself more particularly so, as its more remarkable features throw

great light on an important question to which I have for a long while devoted special attention.

The subject to which I allude is that of the architectural distinction between merely parochial churches and those which were conventual or collegiate, and especially of the peculiarities of those churches in which both purposes were united. This is a subject which I have often treated elsewhere, though I do not think that I have ever before been called upon to bring it at any length before my present audience. The general question I dealt with some time ago in a paper read before the Oxford Society, which was afterwards printed in the Builder. I have also followed it up in detail in my History of Llandaff Cathedral, and in various monographs and other papers in the Archæological Journal, the Ecclesiologist, and in the excellent publication of your sister Association north of the Bristol Channel, the Archæologia Cambrensis. Any of you who may remember what I have said elsewhere of Llandaff, Monkton, Brecon, Chepstow, Ruthin, Leominster, Dorchester, and Malmesbury, will recognize what I have to say about Dunster, as naturally forming part of the same series. To others, I presume that a general recapitulation of the whole subject may not be unacceptable.

The monastic and the larger collegiate churches of England may be divided into two great classes, those which were simply and wholly designed for the use of the monastic or collegiate fraternity, and those which at the same time discharged the functions of ordinary parish churches. In the generality of these latter cases, the eastern part, or the choir, belonged to the monks; the western part, or the nave, to the people. In fact, they often formed, to all intents and purposes, two distinct churches, and the two parts were often spoken of distinctly as "the parish

church," and "the abbey" or "priory church." There was often a complete barrier between the two, and the people had what may be called their own high altar, at the east end of the nave. Now at the dissolution of monasteries, the fate of these buildings was different from that of those churches which were wholly monastic. The latter, having been the exclusive property of the monks, became the exclusive property of the King and his grantees, and the entire building was preserved, destroyed, or dismantled at their pleasure. Such were Glastonbury, Tintern, Netley, Llanthony, and generally the famous ruined abbeys throughout the country. But when only part of a church belonged to the monks, and part to the parish, the Dissolution in no way interfered with the latter. Hence it is that we find so many grand churches imperfect; the nave, as being the parish church, was left standing, while the eastern portion, which belonged to the monks or canons, was alienated by the Dissolution, and was commonly pulled down or left ruinous. This we see at Malmesbury, Waltham, Leominster, Fotheringhay, Usk, Chepstow, Ruthin, Deerhurst, and many others.* In some instances the monastic portion has been added to the parish church, as at Tewkesbury, where it was originally destined to destruction, but was purchased of the King by the parishioners; and at Dorchester, where it was the gift of an

* I could prolong this list indefinitely. But there is an exceptional class of half-preserved churches, for which I cannot so well account, where the choir is preserved as the parish church, the nave being destroyed. This is the case with Great St. Bartholomew's in London, Pershore, Worcestershire, Boxgrove and New Shoreham, Sussex, and, I may add, Bristol Cathedral. In connexion with the two Sussex examples, it is worth noting that at Winchelsea the Friary has the nave totally destroyed, while the choir exists, though in ruins, and that the old Guildhall at Chichester is a desecrated choir, whose nave is destroyed. Winchelsea parish church, and Merton Chapel, Oxford, are unfinished; at Hexham, I believe, the nave was destroyed in the Scottish wars, and never rebuilt.

individual benefactor. At Monkton, in Pembrokeshire, and at Howden, the eastern portion remains, but roofless; at Arundel, at Ewenny in Glamorganshire, and at Dunster, it remains, and retains its roof, but is otherwise in a condition than which a well-preserved ruin is incomparably less offensive.

The general effect of Dunster church I have alluded to more than once in other papers. It is a long, low, irregular cruciform building, with its external architecture wholly Perpendicular, of a plain and in no way striking kind. Even externally its very peculiar arrangement suggests itself. East of the central tower, on whose character I commented some years back, is evidently the choir, or monastic church; west of it stretches a nave of unusual length. Now, at some little distance west of the tower, you will see one of those side-turrets which are the never-failing sign of a grand Somersetshire roodscreen, stretching across the whole width of the church, both nave and aisles. On entering, you find the transept and the whole space east of the tower cut off and disused; the altar is under the western arch of the tower; and some way to the west, as was suggested by the external turret, one of the noblest roodlofts in Somersetshire stretches across both nave and aisles. That this is no modern arrangement is proved both by the turret and by the general proportion and arrangement of the whole. The fact is that Dunster church comprises, in every sense, two churches. The priory church, east of the tower, remains disused, having been most probably spared from entire destruction on account of the monuments which it contains. The parish church remains, bating pews and such like, just as it was—a distinct church, west of the tower, so thoroughly distinct as to have not only its own altar, but its own clearly-marked

choir, fenced off by its own very goodly roodscreen. Nor is this separate parish church, taken alone, a building of very insignificant extent. I roughly estimated its whole length at 101 feet, 67 to the nave, and 34 to the chancel. The lantern I reckoned at about 21, and the choir of the monks at 59, making the entire dimensions of the whole building about 180 feet, or a little more than the length of St. Asaph, the smallest English cathedral.

This secondary choir, so distinctly marked within the parochial part of the church, I do not remember to have seen elsewhere, and it is fortunate that we have an authentic record of the date and cause of its introduction at Dunster. It appears from documents quoted in Collinson's Somersetshire, that in 1499 a dispute raged in Dunster between the Prior and his monks on the one hand, and the Vicar and his parishioners on the other, touching their respective rights in the church which served both for the monastery and the parish. The matter was referred to the then Abbot of Glastonbury and two other arbitrators, who gave judgment that the Vicar and his flock should leave the monks' choir wholly to the monks themselves, and make themselves a separate choir within the nave. Here we have the explanation of the arrangement which still remains; but the evidence of the fabric shows that they did something more than merely introduce the new arrangement into an existing church; they very nearly rebuilt the whole church in such a manner as to give the new arrangement the fullest scope, and to effect the most complete separation possible between the two portions of the building. To understand this, we must go back a little to consider what Dunster church had been in earlier times.

Though I have called the present discourse a monograph,

yet I have not given it the regular form of an architectural history, partly because the church, as a mere piece of architecture, hardly merits it; partly because, when I last visited Dunster, my physical strength and consequent spirits were by no means equal to that process of examining every nook and corner, every seam and joint of masonry, which has cost me many a considerable head-ache in the eastern chapels of St. David's. I think, however, I can make out a general sketch of the history of the building, as far as is required for our immediate purpose, though I would not put it forth with the same confidence as I might under more favourable circumstances.

The Priory of Dunster was originally founded towards the close of the eleventh century, and some small portions of the church, which was doubtless built soon afterwards, still exist. A little to the west of the western arch of the present lantern a large Norman arch, spans the nave, and connected with it on each side is a portion of masonry, that to the south showing a small fragment of a Norman pillar. The Norman church then had a nave and aisles, doubtless of the same proportion in point of width as the present ones, for the nave is still extremely wide, and the aisles unusually narrow. Of its probable length I cannot undertake to speak.

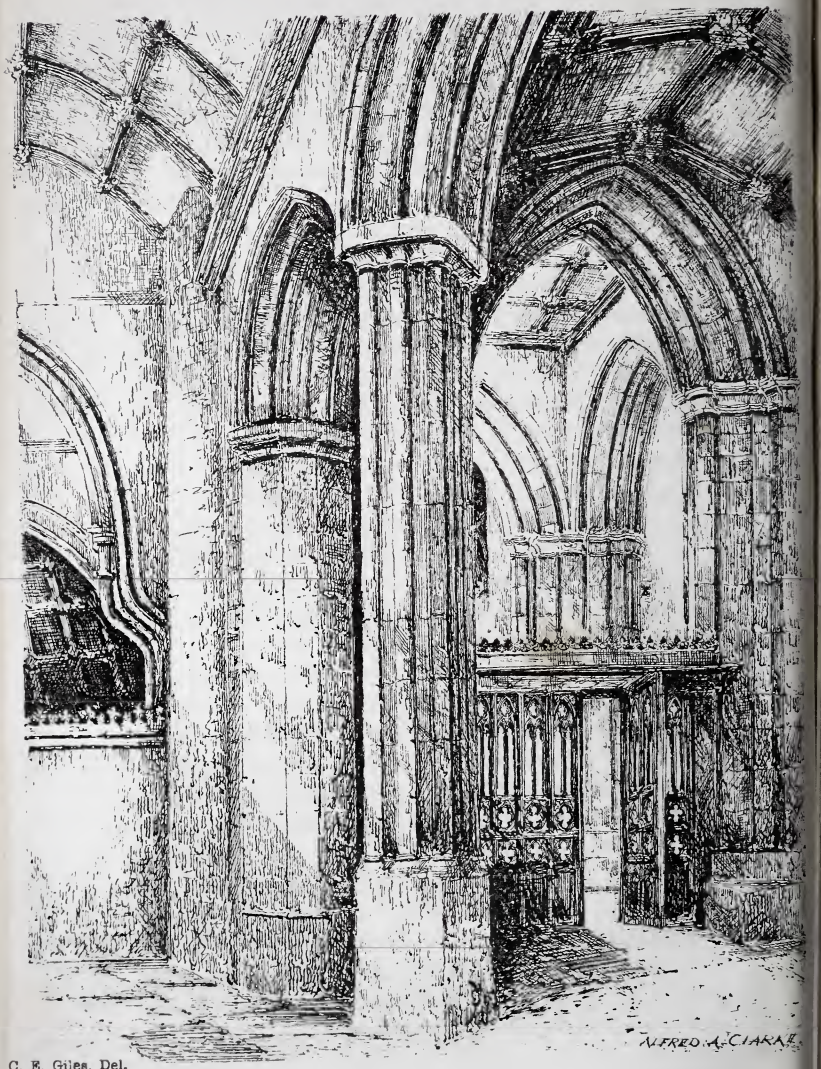
The Norman arch across the nave has clearly been tampered with, and its inner order or orders taken away; but I could see no sign of its having been removed from its original place. From its position, it might be either a mere chancel-arch, if there were no central tower, or the western arch of a lantern, if there were one. But as a Transitional arch leads from the south transept into the south aisle of the monks' choir, I think we may safely infer that the original church was cruciform,

with a lantern tower, of considerably greater massiveness than the present one. Now, from the ordinary arrangements of Norman conventual churches, we should expect to find the ritual choir, containing the stalls of the monks, under this central tower, the eastern limb—then probably of short extent—forming the presbytery. And I think we have some evidence that the stalls continued to occupy this position down to the award of 1499. In that sentence the Vicar and parishioners are directed to attach their new choir to the altar of St. James, on the south side of the door into the monks' choir. But, as we can hardly doubt that the present altar occupies nearly the same position (as far as east and west are concerned) which those arbitrators intended, it seems to follow that the roodscreen was, up to that time, placed across the western arch of the lantern, and that the monks' choir was under the central tower. The eastern limb contains some vestiges of Early English work, in a string at the east end, continued along part of the south side. It is also clear from the masonry that the Perpendicular arches on each side have been cut through an earlier and more massive wall. Hence it appears that the original presbytery or eastern limb was without aisles, strictly so called. Yet the Transitional arch leading from the south transept into one of the present aisles shows that something was attached to the east of this transept, perhaps an apse, perhaps a square chapel not opening at all into the presbytery, as at Ewenny, or opening only by a low arch, as at Brecon. Whatever it was, it was swallowed up by the Perpendicular aisle. This Transitional arch should be noticed, on account of the extraordinary shape of its shafts, which curve inwards below the capitals, so as to give the whole an approach to the trefoil form. The arch is pointed, with Early English mouldings, but the abaci are square.

We may therefore suppose that Dunster church, up to the end of the fifteenth century, consisted of a Norman nave and aisles, a massive lantern tower at the crossing, forming the ritual choir, an eastern limb without aisles, but with small chapels or apses attached to the transepts. The two portions, the parochial and the monastic, were brought into close juxtaposition, and were doubtless only separated by a screen. It was now determined to reconstruct the whole pile in such a way as to make the most marked division between them, and, in fact, to convert the building into two distinct churches.

It will here be desirable to refer to two somewhat analogous cases elsewhere, which may help to elucidate the principle on which this was effected. The one is the abbey church of Wymondham in Norfolk, which forms the subject of an admirable monograph by Mr. Petit, in the Norwich volume of the Proceedings of the Institute ; the other is the collegiate church of Ruthin in Denbighshire, illustrated by myself in a late number of the Archæologia Cambrensis. At Wymondham, as at Dunster, the monks and the people quarrelled about the possession of the church, and eventually compromised the matter by literally cutting it in two. The monks took the eastern, the parish the western portion, and the monks erected a tower between the two. This tower was not a mere central lantern, but a real western tower to their own church, having a dead wall towards the parish church, pierced only by two small doorways. The parishioners subsequently built an immense tower at *their* west end, so that, as the monastic portion is now in ruins, the parish church stands with a tower at each end.

At Ruthin, a church of the fourteenth century, the plan adopted from the beginning was somewhat analogous to



C. E. Giles, Del.

DUNSTER CHURCH: SOMERSETSHIRE:

FROM UNDER THE CENTRAL TOWER.

that subsequently introduced at Wymondham. The church is not cruciform, but the tower is interposed between the nave or parish church, and the collegiate choir to the east, since destroyed. This tower differs from that at Wymondham in not having a solid west wall, but an eastern and western arch; but it was evidently intended to act as a barrier between the choir and the nave, and not to be itself a portion of either. A screen, with signs of an altar against it, runs across the western arch, so that it was no part of the nave, while external doorways and other features of its arrangement show that it was no part of the choir. It evidently remained an insulated portion between the two.

Now it appears to me that the changes of 1499 introduced a similar arrangement into Dunster church. The old Norman tower-choir was taken down, the monks' choir was removed into the eastern limb, and the present tower was erected between the monastic and parochial portions of the church. The high altar of the parish church was placed under the western arch, the roodscreen of the priory church under the eastern arch. The lantern itself, with the transepts, formed a noble vestibule to the church of the monks, who had a private entrance in the west wall of the south transept. Even the external character of the tower suggests something of this kind; it is emphatically a tower and not a lantern, being unusually lofty, and furnished with diagonal buttresses. Perhaps, however, I ought not to insist upon this last feature, which occurs in other central towers in Somersetshire, where the same explanation cannot be given. The internal appearance of this tower and transepts is exceedingly noble. The lantern arches, though not very elaborate, are of excellent proportions, tall, bold, and somewhat

narrow; and the general effect of the *empty* transept, being neither choked with pews, like the nave, nor yet left to decay, like the choir, is striking in the extreme. One may perhaps regret that the crossing itself is not vaulted, like Ilminster; but possibly that grand finish is more in harmony with the idea of a genuine lantern, a centre of unity, than with that of a tower forming a barrier between two distinct buildings. Externally there is a pleasing effect about the south transept front; it has a pretty, simple, elevation, consisting of a tall, well-proportioned window, with a niche on each side, and a doorway below.

East and west of this neutral space, the monks and the parishioners appear to have remodelled their respective portions, without much regard to each other's proceedings. At least there is a wide difference in the details employed in the two, and we cannot hesitate in decidedly preferring those of the parochial portion. One expectation which we might fairly form is doomed to disappointment. As the Priory of Dunster was a cell to that of Bath, one might have fairly expected to find some approximation in its architecture, to the magnificent, if anomalous, reconstruction of the mother church which was going on much about the same time. But no resemblance is to be seen, unless we look for it in so vague a point as the use of the four-centred pier-arch, and in the somewhat uncouth design of the east window. Most of the windows in the church are of very much better character.

The monks, as I before said, now removed their stalls into the limb east of the tower, one undoubtedly quite spacious enough to contain both the choir and presbytery of so small a foundation. But while they thus diminished their space from east to west, they gave additional dignity to their portion by that addition of aisles which has been

already alluded to. They were added to two bays only, the third being left distinct as a presbytery. North of the high altar, a small chantry was thrown out, which still retains its altar. The pier-arches, as I have already implied, are four-centred; their execution is poor, and on neither side can the capitals be referred to the true Somersetshire type; on the north the abacus runs round the whole section; on the south we find a plain form of the Devonshire lozenge, a kind of capital which may be very satisfactory when exhibited in so splendid a shape as those at Lydeard St. Lawrence, but which certainly is poor enough in its Dunster variety. Both here and in the western limb the clerestory is absent throughout, and the roofs are all coved, except in the north aisle of the nave. Neglect has probably acted as their preserver, as "restoration" would almost infallibly have proved their destruction. The best bit of Perpendicular work in the conventual portion is the arch between the north transept and the north choir aisle, which comes nearer to the more usual and better kind of Somersetshire work.

And now for the part of the building west of the tower, namely, the parish church—a church, I may observe, most thoroughly complete in all its parts and divisions. The splendid roodloft fences off the parochial choir, according to the judgment of the arbitrators in 1499; but, more than this, the retention of the old Norman arch a little to the west of the present lantern actually forms a constructive presbytery for the parochial high altar, so that we have all the essential parts of an ancient church duly marked off in what is, architecturally, merely the nave of a larger cruciform building. And we may observe that this parish church of Dunster, like Westminster and Llandaff, and like the primitive basilicas, makes a more marked division between

the choir and the presbytery than between the nave and the choir, separating the latter only by a screen, but the former by an architectural member.

The parish church has an aisle on each side, but not only does the southern one extend much further to the west than its northern fellow, but the arcades do not correspond with each other as far as they go. The four arches on the north side are perceptibly narrower than the six on the south. Consequently the roodloft crosses the church in a singular manner, passing close to a pillar on one side, but not on the other.* The pillars approach nearer to ordinary Somersetshire forms than those of the conventual church. They are of the common Somersetshire section, with capitals to the attached shafts only, but these capitals are octagonal, and not round, which last, I need not say, is the form most distinctive of the county.

The general effect of this part of the church, though it does not altogether lack dignity either within or without, is gloomy and heavy, owing to its extreme width and lowness. Nothing can be conceived in more complete contrast to the aspiring forms of Wrington and Banwell, than this long, low, unclerestoried mass. But its greatest failure is at the west end. What a falling off is here from the splendours of Yatton and Crewkerne! The north aisle not being prolonged to the full extent westward, the west end is irregular and lopsided, and no care whatever appears to have been bestowed upon it. There is simply the broad, heavy gable of the nave, containing the west window and doorway—the former well-proportioned in itself, though hardly suiting its position—unrelieved by

* Similarly, in Dursley Church, Gloucestershire, the arcades on the two sides do not correspond, so that, as there is neither screen nor chancel-arch, it is impossible to say at what point the choir commences.

buttress, pinnacle, or niche. The west end of the south aisle, too, not reaching quite to the same level as that of the nave, increases the effect of irregularity, while it adds nothing in point of picturesque effect. Yet the general view of Dunster church, even from the south-west, is by no means unsatisfactory; its general outline, with the exception of the actual west end, is pleasing, though it has little to offer on the score of strictly architectural excellence.

The conventual buildings at Dunster lay on the north side of the church, but there is not very much to be made out, and the church is so enveloped with private houses and gardens that the enquiry is for the most part difficult, if not impossible. There appears to have been a small cloister in the angle between the nave and the north aisle, and attached to this, to the west, is a building, part probably of the Prior's lodgings, which retains a square-headed Perpendicular window. The monastic dove-cot, a very good specimen, retaining a wooden mediæval door, remains among the farm-buildings to the north of the church. The barn also struck me as the old one tampered with, though I must confess that I did not examine it quite so minutely as I ought.

The above is the best account of Dunster Priory that I have been able to put together under very unfavourable circumstances. Had I been in my usual health and spirits, I doubt not but that I might have produced something much better. I trust, however, that my general theory of the character and history of the building may be found accurate and satisfactory; on minuter points I would not be understood as dogmatizing with the same confidence as on other occasions.

Besides the Priory and the Castle, Dunster contains one

or two other architectural remains of some value. The old Market Hall can, indeed, hardly be called in strictness a work of architecture, but its picturesque effect is about as perfect as may be. But the Luttrell Arms Inn contains some portions worthy of more detailed examination. There is a good Perpendicular porch, on each side of which may be discerned some defensive preparations, which seem to imply the possibility of mine host—if hostelry it were from the beginning—being called upon to stand a siege upon his own premises. Within are some good cinquecento chimney-pieces and other ornamental work; there is also, in a rather out-of-the-way part, where the visitor will have to look for it, some effective, though rather coarse, Perpendicular wood-work, two ranges of windows namely, with intermediate panelling.

I may also mention that in going up one of the hills out of the town, nearly westward from the church, I observed what appeared to be an ancient well or conduit.

Of other churches in the neighbourhood, I have never seen many, and Minehead is the only one which I have been able to revisit on the present occasion. What I had to say about its tower, as well as St. Decumans, I said in a former paper, but the church itself may deserve a few words of notice. It is not a building of any great size or magnificence, but it possesses some remarkable features, and it derives a certain amount of attractiveness from its striking position on the slope of the bold promontory which forms one of the grandest features of this side of the Bristol Channel. The church consists of a nave and north aisle, with a small chapel north of the latter at the east end, so that there are three eastern gables, producing a picturesque effect from the south-east. This north-east chapel

is connected with the north aisle by a wooden arch, and we may notice its coved roof, with the part over the altar boarded. There is another less intelligible projection about the middle of the north side, which appears to have a stone roof, but which is altogether blocked and inaccessible within. The two principal bodies are separated by an arcade of eight arches, rising from plain octagonal pillars, which at present decline fearfully from the perpendicular. There is no architectural distinction between nave and chancel, but a magnificent roodloft screens off the three eastern bays. This terminates in the south wall in a remarkable staircase-turret, which is at once square in shape, unusually large, and lighted by a large square-headed window, of the kind usual in Somersetshire domestic work. There is also something singular in the panelled arch of the east window of the aisle. The church, like Dunster, is very wide. The roofs are coved, except under the tower, where are the remains of a rich flat ceiling. There are some monumental antiquities worth attention, and also a statue or idol, apparently of Queen Anne, standing, for no intelligible cause, at the east end of the aisle. The richly-carved Communion-table should also be noticed. I do not think there are any portions earlier than the Perpendicular æra.

St. Decumans I visited but hastily some years back, when I was chiefly studying the towers, and I cannot make very much out of my old notes. But I can perceive that it contains details which will repay examination, both of Perpendicular and earlier times. The chancel has an east window of good early Geometrical tracery, and a lancet on the north side, beautifully treated inside, with a deeply moulded trefoil rear-arch, rising from shafts with floriated capitals. Pointed coved roofs remain throughout.

Carhampton is a little double-bodied church, without a tower, which also contains some Early work. There is a small lancet at the west end, and a square-headed Decorated window on the north of the chancel, rather of a Northamptonshire pattern. But the arcade is Perpendicular, with four-centred arches, and the roodloft here also runs right across the church. This omission of the chancel-arch, and this extreme prominence given to the roodloft, is certainly a sign that we are here approaching the borders of Devon. It is quite different from what is usual in the more eastern part of Somersetshire.

This is unfortunately all I have to lay before you relating to the churches and other antiquities of the Deanry of Dunster.