

Excavations at Priory Farm, Stogursey, Somerset, May-Sept. 1941

BY OLIVER T. LEIGHTON

SINCE June 1940 the writer has resided at Stogursey and has interested himself in the work of the restoration of the Church conducted by the Vicar, the Rev. B. R. Tucker, under the general direction of Dr. Francis C. Eeles, O.B.E., Secretary of the Central Council for the Care of Churches.¹

While assisting in the above-mentioned operations mention was constantly made by numerous villagers of a secret passage from the Castle to the Church or to the Priory. Two photographs are shown in the Church, taken by the Vicar in 1935, when he and Mr. Harold Warner, of Priory Farm, investigated a subsidence in the rickyard of the farm, caused by a traction engine; they found what appeared to be a passage with well constructed stone walls and stone floor. Few records were made of measurements and constructional details, and very few shards of pottery were collected; after clearing a portion, it was filled in again.

In May 1941 the writer obtained Mr. Warner's consent to re-open the passage, he being much interested in the legend of the secret tunnel.

Digging started at a point about 18 ft. south of the southern wall of the churchyard towards Priory Farm barn, and 84 ft. east of the wall of the stream. The material excavated, extending 13 ft. 6 in. southwards, consisted of earth, rubble and large stones, to a depth of 2 ft. This loose material gave place to a hard compressed mass of stones, blue lias chippings, pebbles and heavy marl which had not been disturbed; work was then concentrated on clearing all loose material throughout the length of this cutting (the main cutting).

¹ These restorations and excavations were briefly reported upon in *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.*, lxxxvii, 10.

At a depth of 6 ft. 9 in. the stone floor previously mentioned was reached, and was cleared from north to south ; it was found to be 3 ft. wide and to be constructed of blue lias slabs irregular in shape, about 2 in. thick, laid level on a bed of clay, with close joints, the whole resembling a good crazy pavement.

Throughout the length of the floor, the roof has collapsed, but the retaining walls remain, about 3 ft. thick, well built with fairly regular courses of blue lias blocks and slips bedded in lime mortar, surmounted by a string-course or cornice with an overlap of 2 in. from which the roof-arch was sprung ; in some places the first four courses of the arch remain ; three laid in lime mortar, the fourth with heavy clay joint ; they are shown in the photographs (Plate VI). Owing to the collapse of the roof, it has not been possible to obtain the height of the passage, but assuming the spring of the arch to be 6 in. the maximum height would have been 4 ft.

Great care was taken in the examination of all excavated material, which consisted of earth, clay, stones, large roof slabs, and some key-stones, similar to those seen in the photographs ; a few pieces of late medieval pottery occurred, but nothing of interest for dating purposes was found ; much of the filling was of recent date, and a great portion had been disturbed by the previous digging.

At a point 2 ft. 6 in. south of the north end of the cutting the west wall finished with a straight and upright face returning towards the west, and a filling of loose stones and slate occurred between this point and the north end of the cutting ; when cleared, a passage was revealed with retaining walls 2 ft. 6 in. in width, pointing west towards the stream. The upper courses had been disturbed, but two overhanging worked stones with projection of 3 in. at about 1 ft. above the floor suggested the position of a sluice gate.

The passage continued from the north end of the main cutting towards the Church, and was traced under the wall and 6 ft. into the churchyard to a total length of 24 ft. Here, a roof collapse blocked it and it was not possible to investigate beyond this point owing to the proximity of burials. Roof collapse between the north end of the main cutting and the churchyard wall made it possible to clear the filling of this

length of 24 ft. ; it consisted of 6 in. of black slime, then 20 in. of brown silt, the consistency of thick puddled lime, the clear space between the filling and roof being 9 in.

Working south towards the barn from the south end of the main cutting as far as possible, similar filling was encountered. The slime and silt was examined carefully ; it was undisturbed and void of stones, gritty matter or any object of interest. The floor in each case is of clay, with cobbles roughly bedded in an irregular manner, patches of clay intervening.

The retaining walls of these extensions north and south from the main cutting differ greatly from the paved portion (main cutting), being irregular, the face of the work rougher and the footings not being carried below floor level ; a string-course from which to spring the roof is not provided, the height in centre being 2 ft. 11 in. against approximately 4 ft. through the main cutting : the roofs are intact except in the digging just south of the churchyard wall : the construction is plainly seen in the photographs.

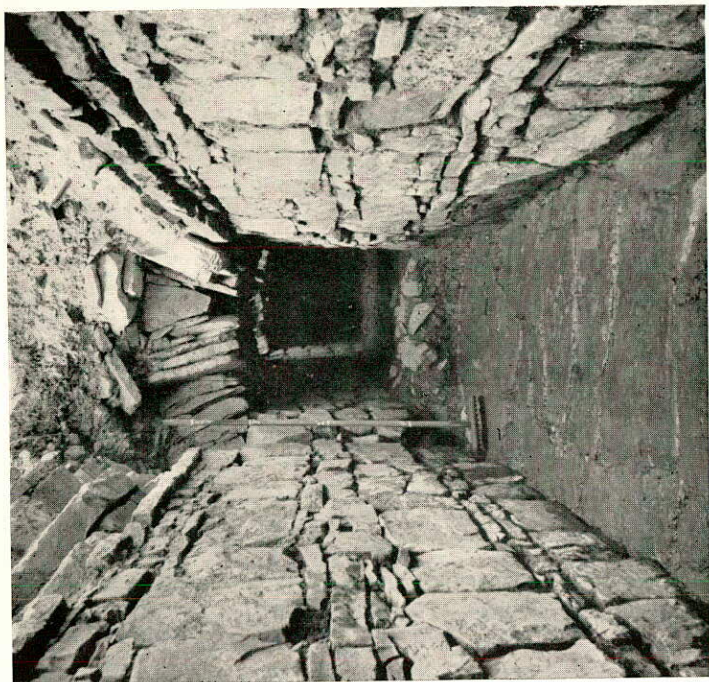
At a point 23 ft. north of the barn on the same line as the main cutting considerable remains of stonework occur, but no definite walling could be traced, the work being constructed of blue lias blocks with lime mortar joints ; here the roof of the passage was found intact at a depth of 1 ft. 9 in.

The result of these excavations suggests that the legend of the secret passage can be dismissed for the following reasons :

(1) The extension of the passage in each direction is only 2 ft. 11 in. in height with a floor of clay and stones. This height is not sufficient for anyone to traverse the passage except on all fours. The clay floor would make this method of progression impossible, taking into consideration the dampness of the site, and the low-lying position in relation to the stream.

(2) The passage when cleared of all debris accumulated water rapidly. Measurements taken in September 1941 were : in 18 hours, 7 in. ; in 7 days 22 in. ; in 3 weeks 27 in.

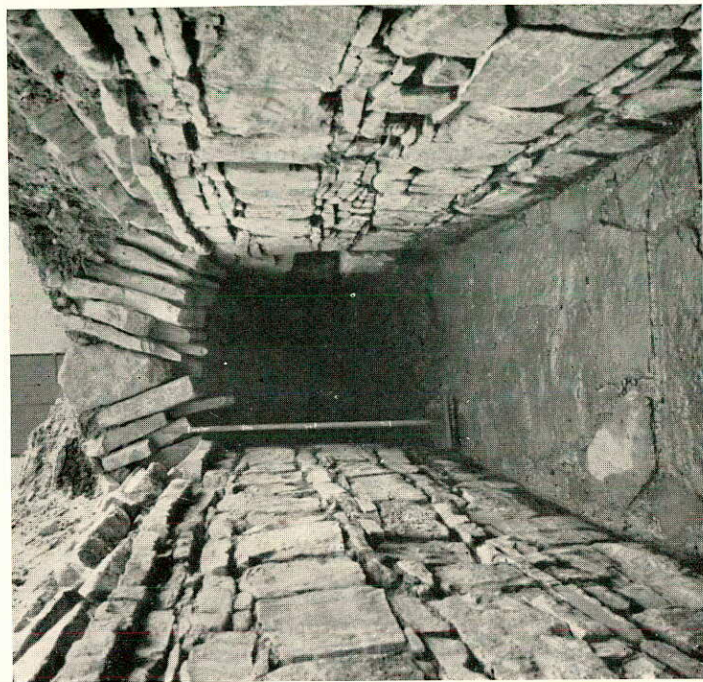
After pumping out all water a careful watch was kept for points of percolation. These occurred through the joints in the floor ; such percolation would make the passage unusable as such. The writer has submitted this report to Dr. Eeles, and his opinion is that the work is the remains of a medieval



LOOKING NORTH

LARGE DRAIN, PRIORY FARM, STOGURSEY, SOMERSET

From Photographs by Mr. O. T. Leighton.



LOOKING SOUTH

system of drainage ; the portion leading from the churchyard to the north end of the main cutting being the drain from the Priory lavatories, the one from the south end of the main cutting extending northwards, that from the Guest House or Infirmary ; the centre paved portion, in the middle of the main cutting, the collecting basin or sump ; the duct at the north end of the main cutting towards the stream the outlet controlled by a sluice gate.

The writer wishes to acknowledge the great assistance given by Mr. C. H. Hallett of Monkton Farm, Stogursey, who undertook the major portion of the work of digging and clearing the tunnels of silt, also in taking measurements for plan and sections ; without his help this excavation could not have been undertaken. It was hoped that it would be possible to leave the work open, but the depth of water accumulating made it most dangerous for children and farm stock, and it was necessary, therefore, to fill it in.