



MILBORNE PORT CHURCH

General view of the Church from the S.E.

From a Photograph by Mr. H. St. George Gray, F.S.A.

The Problematic Early Work at Milborne Port Church¹

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WITH THE COLLABORATION OF REV. PREB. G. W. SAUNDERS, M.A.

MILBORNE Port Church has a small remnant of pilaster ornament very like that of the Saxon church at Bradford-on-Avon, and opinion is divided as to whether this work is of the Saxon period or not.

Prof. Baldwin Brown, as the result of a short visit to the church, formed the opinion that 'The chancel here is undoubtedly Norman and has blocked Norman windows in the north and south walls, but the west part of the exterior wall on south is treated in its upper section with what looks like an attempt to enrich with pilaster strips a casually selected piece of walling. There seems no sense or fitness in the arrangement and it must be regarded as in the nature of a freak'² See note by G. W. S. in *Notes and Queries for Somerset and Dorset*, vol. xviii, p. 169. In answer to this, F. J. A. in the next issue of *Notes and Queries*, p. 211, pointed out that Prof. Baldwin Brown's description seemed to indicate imperfect acquaintance with the building, and that a more correct description was as follows :

'(1) That the chancel is of the tall narrow form so frequent in Anglo-Saxon buildings.

'(2) That both the north and south walls were originally covered with pilaster work.

¹ See paper on this church by C. E. Ponting, F.S.A., in *Proceedings*, lx, ii, 46. Also a reference to it in Vol. xvi, i, 38.

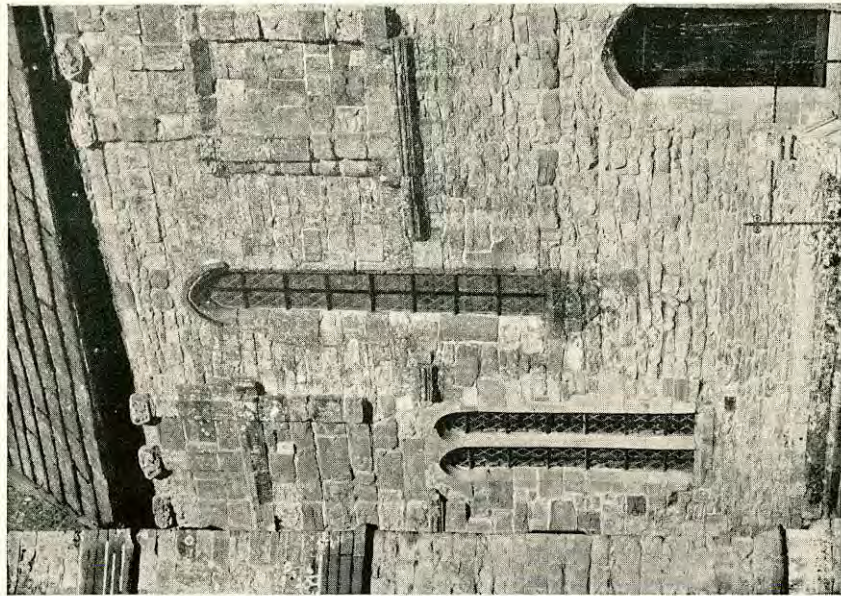
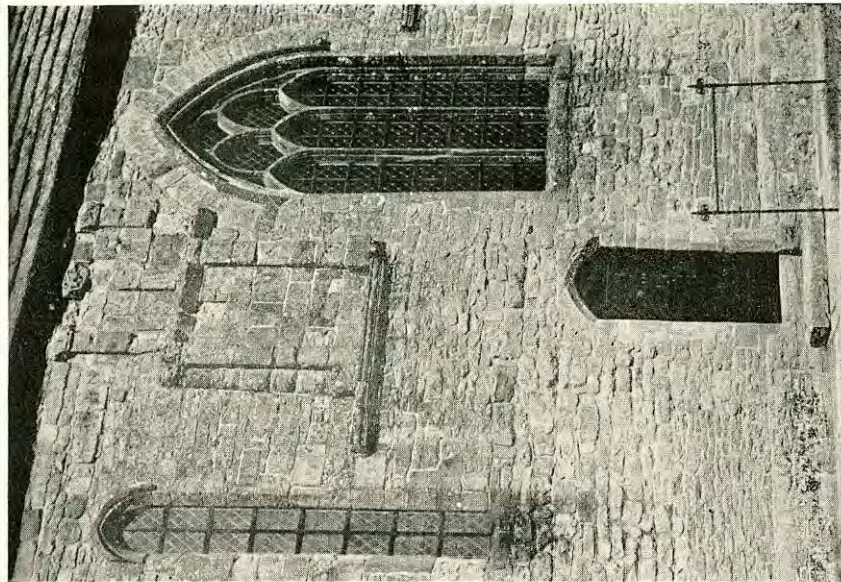
² Prof. Baldwin Brown, *Arts in Early England*, vol. ii, new edition, pp. 241, 428, 470.

' (3) That on the south side some later windows have been inserted, with rebuilding of the wall around them.

' (4) That on the north side a later building (vestry ?) has been erected against the wall, but the pilaster work is still visible on the wall within the vestry.'

It is rash to dispute the opinion of so eminent an authority as Prof. Baldwin Brown ; but believing as we do that, if he had been fully acquainted with the building, he would have modified his opinion, we venture to put forward the following attempt to interpret the work.

The work in question is that of the walls of the chancel. The form of the chancel resembles that of many known Anglo-Saxon buildings : it is tall and narrow like the nave at Bradford-on-Avon or Escomb. The north and south walls are apparently original in substance, though their surface has been largely replaced with new work, and windows and doorways cut through them. The most characteristic work is seen on the outside of the south wall. On referring to this (Plates VI, VII) it will be seen that a string-course runs (or ran) just above the middle from east to west ; but it has been destroyed in three places for the insertion of windows. Below this string-course the masonry has been much disturbed and mostly renewed, the newer work being of smaller stones. A similar string-course runs without interruption along the top of the wall, and between these two string-courses two patches of the original ornament remain—one above the priest's door, and the other in the corner next the tower. The ornament is in the form of pilaster work closely resembling that of the Saxon church at Bradford-on-Avon. As at Bradford, the pilasters are in two stages separated by a horizontal band or plain string-course, and those of the upper stage are more numerous than those of the lower, and are not symmetrically arranged with regard to them. The little capitals of the pilasters, both at Bradford and at Milborne Port, were cut to a trapezoid outline, broader above than below. At Bradford they were left plain ; but at Milborne Port their fronts were carved *intaglio*, i.e. their ornament is incised in such a way as to leave a margin all round, which is level (or nearly so) with the most prominent part of the ornament. The margin though decayed is still



MILBORNE PORT CHURCH
South Wall of Chancel

From Photographs by Dr. F. J. Allen



(a)



(b)



MILBORNE PORT CHURCH
Pilaster Work

ABOVE: (a) String-course, Milborne Port;
(b) Early cornice, Shepton Mallet.

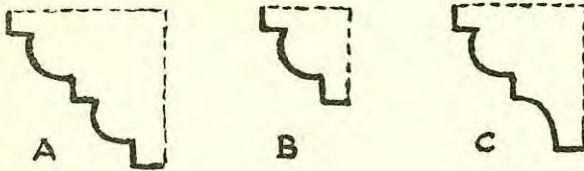
From Photographs by Dr. F. J. Allen

evident, and was more so in 1896 when the photograph (Plate VII) was taken.¹

With one small exception, all trace of the original windows in this wall has been obliterated. The exception is a *round* pilaster adjacent to the west side of the western *square* pilaster above the priest's door: this is apparently the jamb of a window. Inside the church there is one jamb and part of the arch of a round-headed window opening, corresponding in position to this; but the opening looks too large for an early date, larger in fact than the window of later character in the adjoining transept. It is possible that this window in the chancel was first enlarged, and afterwards disused and replaced by the tall lancet close by.

The round-headed window-arch mentioned above has, it is true, moulding of unusual character suggesting an early date. Nearly opposite this window-arch, but perhaps a trifle more eastward, on the inner face of the north wall, is the upper part of a blocked round-headed window of more conventional Norman character.

The string-courses on the outside, previously referred to, may be compared with the cornice in the nave at Shepton Mallet, which is of very early date and apparently carved with blunt tools (*see* Plate VII and the accompanying illustration).



SECTIONS OF MOULDINGS.

A and B, lower and upper string-courses at Milborne Port.
C, early cornice at Shepton Mallet.

The outside of the north wall was similarly ornamented, but only small remnants of the ornament are extant. They are now enclosed by added buildings, and consist of the upper string-course visible in the aisle and sacristy, and the lower one

¹ It is sad to relate that since 1896 decay has much extended, so that now the details are almost beyond recognition.

visible only in the sacristy. I (F.J.A.) have a remembrance of seeing distinct evidence of some pilasters on this wall in 1896 : they may have been removed in the course of later alterations.

Along with this work, which seems so problematical, the adjoining work should be considered, namely that of the tower arches and central tower, the transepts, and the destroyed nave.

All the four original piers of the tower arches are now standing, together with the north and south Romanesque tower arches (Plate VIII), but the east and west arches above the capitals were rebuilt in the Perpendicular period, and are of pointed form. The Romanesque work is of very peculiar character, as is shown in the illustrations (Plates VIII, IX). The columns are grouped cylinders, separated by narrow rectangular projections. The capitals are sections of inverted cones, incised with shallow conventional leaf ornament (acanthus?). The mouldings of the round arches are nearly a continuation of those of the columns, but are slightly less bulky. The bases of the west arch (Plate IX, c) are somewhat bulbous, and have spurs, some of which are restorations and not necessarily true to the original form. The bases of the other arches show signs of later alteration. Some of the capitals appear to have been restored in plaster.

The Rev. G. M. Evans (formerly vicar) and I carefully examined these capitals with the aid of a ladder, and we found as follows :

West arch, capitals all stone.

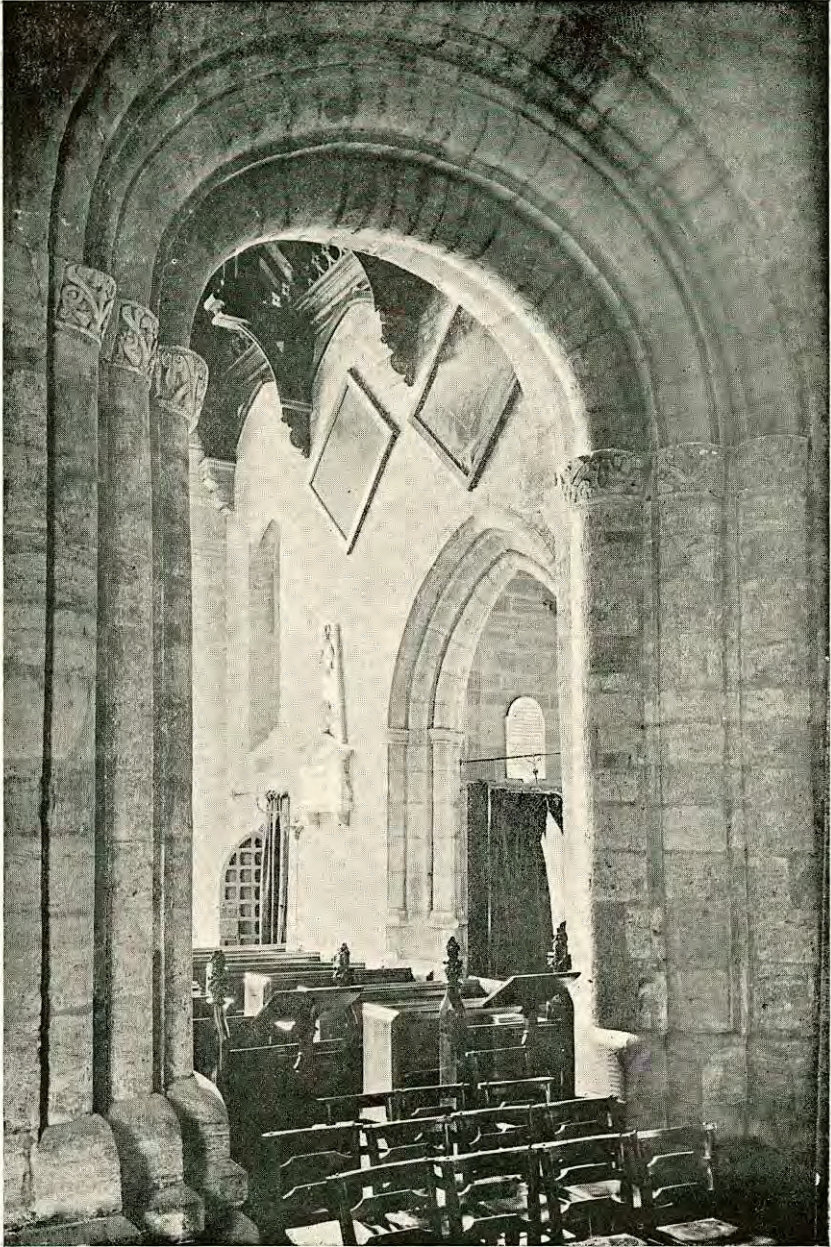
North arch, west capital stone, east capital plaster.

East arch, part of capitals just above the screen is stone, the rest plaster.

South arch, capitals entirely plaster.

Some of the stone capitals have *small* repairs in plaster.

This plaster work is so good that it looks like original work rather than restoration. If it is really restoration it is most cunningly executed, and must have required great skill and patience : the architect seems to have aimed at accuracy, real or specious. Very early plaster work is rare in England ; but there are fine examples on the Continent, for instance at Hildesheim.



MILBORNE PORT CHURCH

North tower arch

From a Photograph by Dr. F. J. Allen

PLATE IX



a.



b.



c.

MILBORNE PORT CHURCH

- a. Plaster capitals of south tower arch
- b. Stone capitals of west tower arch
- c. Bases of west tower arch

From Photographs by Dr. F. J. Allen

The two round arches that remain (north and south) are of depressed shape, as if they had yielded under the weight of the tower; and yet their masonry hardly shows disturbance: is it possible that they were reconstructed with the same stones when the east and west arches were replaced by Perpendicular ones? The first stage of the tower above the roof is of Romanesque or Norman character, and retains some relics of a round-arch arcade on its north side. This arcade has peculiar features akin to some of the early work below. The top stage of the tower is of Perpendicular date.

The south transept is a plain building of the tall and narrow Saxon form. Its surface masonry has been mostly renewed; but it retains one or two early features, such as a very narrow round-headed window on the west side, with simple cylindrical moulding and obconical capitals; also remains of the moulded string-course just above its middle and continuous with and similar to that on the chancel wall. This string-course exists only on the east and west walls, and is a restoration on the west side, except a small portion adjoining the stair-turret.

This turret is a polygonal structure in the angle between the south transept and the nave (Plate X) and encloses the newel stair to the tower. The masonry of this structure is not continuous with that of the transept, and thus suggests that it is a later addition. The surface stones are set diagonally as far as the roof level, and horizontally above. There are three string-courses, the lowest with billet ornament, the upper two plain, not moulded like those of the transept with which they are continuous.

The north transept has been much altered or rebuilt, and retains little of early character.

The nave was rebuilt and enlarged in 1869. Some idea of the destroyed nave may be obtained from a photograph taken just before the demolition, and from drawings by Buckler in the Smyth-Pigott collection (1839-43), copies of which, together with drawings by Turner of Trent (1850) and Alfred A. Clarke (1859) are kept in the church. From these it appears that it was very small and without aisles. It had not the tall gaunt form of the eastern arms of the church, and may therefore have been of ordinary Norman type. The south wall was

mostly concealed by ivy, but in it may be seen a round-headed doorway, which is now restored and reinstated in the present nave. The west front had an ornate Perpendicular doorway, with a square hood and carved spandrels. There was a good niche on each side of it. Above the door was a large debased window, of Gothic form but not moulded, and having bad tracery of Perpendicular type. There are features of doubtful date on this front, namely rather large pilasters at the corners of the front and on each side of the door; and some marks in the wall on each side of the window, as of triangular-headed ornament; both of which suggest Saxon work. It is to be regretted that this interesting nave was cleared away, and that so little record was kept of it.

Thus the pilaster work under consideration is adjacent to work of peculiar early character; and it is a question whether the whole work is of one period, or the pilaster work of an earlier date. This pilaster ornament is so similar to that of Bradford-on-Avon that there can hardly be a great difference in their date: it might be guessed at about fifty years. Whatever the date of either of the buildings, the other must be not far from it. Mr. A. W. Clapham attributes the Bradford church to the early tenth century, and we might place the Milborne Port pilaster work at the end of that century. But is the rest of the work contemporary? The south transept may be; but the tower arches seem later. They are approximately of Norman form, but we know no other Norman arches with mouldings, capitals, or bases like these, and we suggest that they may be an instance of late pre-conquest work influenced by continental Romanesque. The columns and arch mouldings are akin to those of the chancel arch at Bosham (Sussex). The bulbous bases are comparable with the bases at Bosham and with the capitals at Great Paxton (Hunts.) and several other churches. The capitals seem to be quite exceptional, and we know no others like them, either of Saxon or of Norman date.

If we are correct in our conclusion, then Milborne Port is one of the few remaining larger churches of the Anglo-Saxon period having a cruciform plan with central tower.



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Junction of Nave and South Transept

From a Photograph by Dr. F. J. Allen

[There are some peculiar seal-like medallions high up on the walls in the sanctuary, which are probably not in any way related to this early work. They seem to be parget work ; that is, they were made by casting plaster in shallow moulds, after the manner of a seal, and applying the cast to the wall while the surfaces were still wet and adhesive. Such work is frequent in late buildings in the eastern counties, but rare in this part of the country.]