



[GLASTONBURY ABBEY

Trench through the centre of the Presbytery, showing what may be
the tomb of King Arthur

(see quotation from Leland)

From a Photograph by the Very Rev. Dom E. Horne, F.S.A.

Glastonbury Abbey Excavations, 1930-31

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THE special object of each year's excavation is settled at a meeting of the Excavation Committee held annually in May.

For 1930 it was arranged that as the position of the Saxon church of Ina and Dunstan had been made clear by the work done in the two previous years, an effort should be made to locate the Saxon cloister which probably lay to the south and connected the monastery with the church. Accordingly in May of that year the excavation of the previous year was extended south at the s.e. corner of the nave for a distance of 36 ft. A second trench at right angles to this one, also starting from the s.e. corner, 6 ft. in width, ran west as far as the s. door of the Lady Chapel. At its end a cross-trench was cut, extending 10 ft. to north and the same to south. The average depth of these trenches was 5 ft., but towards the e. end of the longer trench the depth was from 6 to 7 ft. It was thought that any cloister wall there may have been would have been cut by one or other of these trenches, but no walls were encountered.

No trace of the Saxon cloister was therefore found, and the excavations for this year, while yielding nothing positive, at least gave the negative evidence that there are no remains, as at St. Augustine's, Canterbury, of this part of the monastic buildings. It is quite probable that the early cloisters were entirely of wood, and if they outlived the construction of the great Norman church, they would have perished in the fire of 1184.

The evidence for the Saxon period of churches and monastic

buildings at Glastonbury to be gathered by excavation being exhausted, the Committee that met in May 1931 arranged that the digging this year should be undertaken with a view to finding any remains of the Norman church which succeeded to St. Dunstan's. We know that the building begun by Abbot Terstin (1082-1101) was pulled down by his successor Abbot Herlewin (1101-1120) who built a new Norman church,—the dimensions of which are quite unknown—and that this church lasted until the fire of 1184 when it was entirely destroyed. We learn that a new church was begun at once, the ruins of which are those we now see. It was thought that the part of the Norman church that should be sought for first would be its apse or E. end. Accordingly a trench of an average depth of 5 ft. was driven up the centre of the present nave, through the crossing under the central tower, and continuously through the choir up to the foot of the high altar. This trench was 160 ft. in length. At one place, a few feet east of the N.E. central pier, the depth was 13 ft. before the undisturbed clay was reached.

No trace of Norman walling was met with, but where the trench passed between the four great central piers that supported the tower, the footings of these piers ran out some distance, as would be expected, except where they had been robbed since the destruction of the Abbey. There was evidence of this robbing in all directions, and how far what remained of Norman walls may have been cleared out under this influence it is of course impossible to say. One feature of interest met with as the trench approached the high altar were the remains of a thoroughly well-built tomb. It was constructed of blocks of ashlar stone, carefully laid. In length it was 6 ft. 6 in. and was about 4 ft. below the present floor level (Plate XVI). Only a person of some importance would be buried out in the centre of the presbytery in a line with the high altar, and there seems to be great probability that this was the tomb of King Arthur, as Leland's description, when he saw it a year or two before the destruction of the church, shows it to have been in such a position. *In Presbyterio Arcturus in medio*. With the exception of this tomb and some blocks of ashlar that appeared to have been removed from elsewhere and thrown in where they were found, nothing whatever was met with in this trench.

It was then suggested that as no apse wall could be found, by going south through the present transept, the end wall of the Norman transept might be cut as it was presumably shorter than that of the later church. A trench was therefore carried at right angles to the central trench, due south through the existing transept but no Norman wall was uncovered. What was found, is probably the explanation of the disappearance of all Norman remains. The great sleeper-wall, 15 ft. in width and from 4 ft. to 7 ft. in depth, was uncovered at this place, and was found to be built with stones from the Norman church. They were known by their red colour, having been in the great fire, and pieces of Norman carving and other fragments of worked stone of that date had all been used up in the construction of this huge wall. When we reckon that the arcade of the nave was 191 ft. in length, and that this sleeper-wall was to form the foundation on which the nine pillars of the nave were to stand, it can be seen at once what an immense amount of material was required for its construction. The ruins of the burnt out church were ready to hand, its foundations in some places probably in the way of the newer church, and so all that was left of Herlewin's building after the fire went into this pair of sleeper-walls which have thus swallowed up nearly every trace of the Norman church. Working in the opposite direction and cutting through the north transept produced no better result; a patch of rough stone pavement being all that came to light, and this seemed scarcely deep enough down to be of the Norman period.

While the excavation of the Saxon church that stood at the west end of the present church was eminently successful, and its plan has been laid bare, the search for the Norman church that succeeded to it has failed, and the Directors regret that what would have been such an interesting item in the story of the development of the buildings at Glastonbury, seems lost beyond recall. The excavations within the Abbey Church itself have therefore now served their purpose and may be considered to be finished. But there is much else at Glastonbury to be brought to light, and as time goes on, it is hoped we may get to know much more about the monastery itself and its surrounding buildings.