

PAPERS, &c.

Uphill Old Church.

PAPER READ BY THE REV. F. WARRE, TO THE SOCIETY,
ON THE HILL AT BURROWBRIDGE, SEPT. 27, 1849.

ON the extreme point of the Mendip Hills, where the river Axe, falling into the Bristol Channel, divides them from the promontory of Brean Down, stands—the very picture of desolation—the now deserted and ruinous church of Uphill, well known as a land-mark to ships bound up the channel. A more bleak and desolate spot can hardly be imagined. The village, of which till lately it was the parish church, is situated at the bottom of the hill; there is not a human habitation near it; and when the red sun sinks into the dark clouds which the stormy west wind hurries up from the Atlantic, and leaves the angry channel to dash its waves in darkness against the rocks of Brean, one no longer wonders at the querulous spirit which pervaded the writings of Gildas, who was once an inhabitant of this spot, or the unmeasured abuse which he heaps

upon the magnates of his unhappy country. And yet, desolate as it is, Uphill is not wanting in a stern beauty almost approaching to sublimity;—the repose of the wide extended plain on one side; the broad Severn sea on the other; the little town of Weston beneath, backed by the heights of Worle Hill, crowned with ancient and mysterious ramparts; the bold line of Mendip, along which stretches the Roman road, satisfactorily traced by Sir R. Hoare, from Uphill to old Sarum; the solitary majesty of the old church standing out so boldly against the sky: the rugged cliff and brown ridge of Brea, joined to the historic recollections attached to the place—all combine to render this desolate spot one peculiarly interesting to the antiquary, the artist, or the poet; while the caves beneath, filled as they are with relics of unknown antiquity, render it no less attractive to the geologist and comparative anatomist.

Uphill Church probably stands upon the site of the Roman Axium, the port from which the produce of their mining establishments at Wellow and elsewhere on the Mendip Hills was shipped,—mining speculation, and not mere glory, being probably the real motive of their invasion of this country; for that great nation, though not altogether advocates for the doctrines now held by Messrs. Cobden and Bright, were far too wise to engage in war without some more tangible object than mere fame.

As the antiquary ascends the path leading from the modern village to the church, the first vestige of the ancient town meets his eye in the shape of an escarpment on the naturally steep slope of the hill, now faintly marked, but evidently artificial, and without doubt intended to render the ascent more defensible—a precaution the necessity of which was fully proved in those ages when the coasts of this island were exposed to the inroads of the Danes, Uphill having more than once been destroyed by the piratical warriors of the North. The comparatively level summit of the hill is marked in all directions with the traces of ancient earth works, to the plan of which I have no clue whatever, though I think the termination of the Roman road may be perceived near the east fence of the churchyard; and on the south side of the hill, artificial escarpments are plainly to be seen, and, I think, an ancient landing place and wharf, by what I suppose to have been the Roman harbour; but being a stranger in the neighbourhood, and having no help beyond that of my own sight, having moreover the fear of Edie Ochiltree's "I mind the bigging o't" before my eyes, and fully impressed with Mr. Oldbuck's mortification when the sacrificial utensil with the inscription **A D L L** turned out to be simply Aiken Drum's Lang Ladle, I will leave these relics of ancient nations to more learned and more daring antiquaries than myself, and will confine my observations to what actually exists of the curious old

Church, which is the only other object of antiquarian interest on the hill. The ruined tower, though well placed for a light-house to the port, and not improbably occupying the site of such a building, is, I believe, the remains of a windmill of, comparatively speaking, quite modern erection.

The church, which, though of small dimensions, still from the massive character of the building, and the peculiarity of its site, must strike even the most ignorant visitor as an impressive and solemn object, consists of a nave, central tower, and chancel, without either transepts or aisles, combining of portions of almost every style, from the earliest and rudest Norman, (if, indeed, Norman it be,) to quite late perpendicular. Indeed the church appears to have been re-built almost entirely at a very early period, and subsequently to have undergone restorations and repairs to a considerable extent, at various periods; still, however, vestiges remain of very ancient date, sufficient to render it probable that the whole of the foundation, and perhaps a considerable portion of the walls, are those of the original building, though the superstructure has been so often altered and modernized as to have materially changed the character of the greater part of the fabric, particularly of the central tower, which, nevertheless, is, at least in part of the south side, the same as stood between the nave and chancel shortly after the Norman conquest.

The chief entrance to the church is on the north

side, through a porch of considerable size, in proportion to the dimensions of the rest of the church, which from this cause, and from the peculiarity of its general appearance, is one of the chief features of the edifice, and appears to me to be worthy of particular attention.

Norman porches, though not very rare, are in this part of England by no means of common occurrence, and neither their appearance or structure is familiar to me. What therefore seems to me peculiar may not be so in reality; but I must take this opportunity of observing, that the object of this hurried sketch is not to give information upon a subject on which I am much fitter to be a pupil than a teacher, but to call the attention of antiquarians to an interesting relic of ancient days, which is rapidly falling into decay, and which in the course of a few short years will probably be entirely destroyed. The present appearance of this porch is particularly striking, the sides having given way outwards, and being supported by a sort of dwarf buttress, of very rude construction. Owing to this subsidence, the crown of the arch is much depressed, which is the cause of its present very uncommon shape. It has no shafts, or external moulding whatever, with the exception of a quarter round, receding slightly from the plane of the wall, which extends round the whole doorway, without any capital or interruption. Under this is a flat surface of nearly a foot, formed of squared stones. The

archivolt was probably plain and square; but from the opening having in after times been built up, with the exception of the small door-way, by which the porch is now entered, I cannot speak confidently on this point. The bases, if ever any existed, are either destroyed, or so buried as to be quite invisible. At the height of about six feet from the present level of the ground, a plain string course of very early Norman character, which forms a cornice to the interior of the porch, passing through the later masonry forms a sort of capital to the inner face of the door-jambs; and it is probable that before the giving way of the side walls the arch above was highly stilted, and terminated in a small segment of a large circle.

The vault is plain barrel, the construction of which, owing to the roof being gone, may clearly be seen. It seems to be composed of solid masonry, like that of a bridge, the great lateral pressure of which undoubtedly was the cause of the outward sinking of the side walls, and the consequent depression of the arch. In front of this the gable, forming the pitch of the roof, must have been raised, and the roof itself, which has now entirely disappeared, constructed above. The interior door-way is Norman, of the plainest and rudest character, the tympanum of the arch filled up to all appearance with one stone, and the door itself square headed. The whole porch, with the exception of the external quarter round, and the plain cornice

before mentioned, is destitute of all moulding and ornament whatever; on each side of the interior of the porch is a low seat of plain masonry. Altogether it is unlike any Norman work I have ever seen; but, as I observed before, it may be my ignorance, and not the construction of the porch, that is peculiar. On the north side of the nave, to the east of the porch, is one very small window, of apparently Norman character, but in so dilapidated a condition that it is not easy to make out whether the splay was wholly internal or not.

The west end is perfectly plain, with the exception of one very small lancet window, in the head of which is an indistinct appearance of foliation; but from the internal splay, which though built up may clearly be seen from the interior of the church, I should suppose that it cannot be of later date than the beginning of the reign of Edward the First, even if it be not of greater antiquity. This end, from the superiority of its masonry and better state of preservation, I conclude to have been built when the original edifice, having become ruinous, underwent very considerable repair, if not almost total rebuilding.

On the south side of the nave, having passed a modern square-headed window, we again come to remains of great antiquity. The masonry is here of the most rude and irregular description; and, more than half buried in the accumulated soil of centuries, stand the jambs and arch of a very rude

Norman door-way. This door-way is now built up ; but the jambs, which appear to have been constructed of plain square ashler work, without shafts or ornament, with the exception of a very rude sort of capital, are very evident, and support one large flat stone, which fills up the tympanum of the arch. In the centre of this tympanum is a rudely described circle, containing a shallow carving of a cross of early character. On each side of this circle is a smaller one,—that on the east divided by radiating lines and probably intended for a dial ; that on the west was either plain, or its contents have been obliterated by time. Round this tympanum is a very rude drip-stone, the peculiarity of which is that it does not form the segment of a circle, but is so placed that each stone meets the next at a very obtuse angle ; but whether this was the original intention or, as seems more probable, the masonry has at some time been displaced by violence, I have no means of deciding. Beyond this, to the east, is a late perpendicular window with a semicircular head, but I see no reason to suppose that it is of earlier date than its mouldings and tracery indicate.

The interior of the nave presents but little worthy of observation, with the exception of the arrangement for combining the entrance to a stone pulpit, the supporting bracket of which only remains, with the staircase leading to the roodloft, which has also disappeared ; and a tolerable font now placed in a niche at the west end.

The tower which stands between the nave and the chancel, is a massive and striking pile of building, at the north east angle of it is a three-sided staircase-turret, ending in an octagonal pinnacle, with a finial of late date, the base of the pinnacle being ornamented with a sort of parapet of the Tudor flower. To the west of this turret are three trefoiled windows, evidently insertions, the lowest of which is of two lights, but the mullion has disappeared. Above this window may be perceived the ashler work of a large rather sharp-pointed arch, but as to whether it was intended for a contemplated transept or merely an arch of construction, I will not risk an opinion. There is on this side of the tower a good pierced parapet of perpendicular character. The east and west sides of the tower are very plain, the parapet low and unpierced, with a good cornice moulding of late date. On each of these sides there is a small trefoiled window—that on the east of two lights, that on the west of one, the ashler work of both formed of very large stones and the workmanship very rude. On the south side, the tower is supported by two massive buttresses of four stages, which correspond with each other neither in height, thickness, nor mouldings; and in the upper part is a rude foliated window, formed of very large stones. At about four feet from the ground, on this side of the tower, we again meet with a vestige of very early work, in the shape of a very small round-

headed Norman window, now built up. On the stone which forms the arch of the window is a rudely carved dial, similar to that on the tympanum of the south door.

We now come to the chancel, the north side of which is evidently Norman, the roof supported by a corbel table composed of three rounds receding under one another, the effect of which is very good. It was lighted on this side by two small windows; that to the west is a plain round-headed Norman window; that farther to the east apparently corresponds with it; but on removing a piece of plaster which, as I supposed, filled up the arch, to my great surprise I found it was square-headed. I see no reason to doubt that it is of the same date as the other, though a square-headed Norman window is what I never before observed. The south side of the chancel has been re-built at a much later period, and has been mutilated by the insertion of a large square-headed window and a door for the admission of corpses, the chancel being still used for the funerals of those whose very natural wish it is, that their ashes may mingle with those of their fathers. There is, however, a priest's door, now blocked up, the mouldings of which are good and in good preservation. The east end is quite plain, the coigns formed of good ashler work; the other masonry very rough and bad. There is no east window, and from indications of foundations extending beyond the present east wall, I think it not improbable that it originally terminated in an apse.

To the interior of the chancel and tower I was not able to obtain access, though furnished with keys by the courtesy of the incumbent, the Rev. J. Fisher, the arch between the nave and chancel being filled up, and the lock of the chancel being so out of repair that no exertion of mine was sufficient to turn the key. Speaking, however, from memory, I should say that there is little or nothing in them worthy of attention, though on this occasion I much regretted being unable to examine the interior splay of the square-headed window, which I have mentioned as existing in the north wall of the chancel.*

I have thus attempted to give a sketch of what I believe to be a most interesting relic of ancient architecture. If I should be the means of drawing the attention of more competent antiquaries to these venerable walls, my object will have been gained. These walls now totter to their fall; the house in which so many generations have offered up prayers and praises to the Most High, is now only used for funerals. Another winter or two and the roof will be gone, and then the walls will soon crumble into dust, and the only link of connection between the ancient Uphill and the living world will be, that its weather-beaten tower will still serve as a land-mark for the navigation of the Bristol Channel.

* I have since ascertained that the internal splay has a semicircular head.