

## Two Early English Responds

RECENTLY DISCOVERED AT SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH.

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THE two responds here described were found last year, in a coal-house belonging to the church, by Mr. G. H. Mitchell, Secretary of the Shepton Mallet Natural History Society. They had lain hidden for many years, either since 1847 when the chancel was remodelled, or since 1837 when the vandalous destruction of the aisles and transepts took place ; but no one is living who might remember when or from what part of the church they were removed. They are now kept in the church, and are safely protected from injury by meddling hands. When found they were soiled with the coal-dust of at least seventy years ; but Mr. Mitchell cleaned them with tender care, and now they are of a respectable colour and in a state of fair preservation, save that the surface of the stone is rotten owing to long subjection to damp. It is to be wished that something could be applied to the stone to harden it : but this is a risky matter, for some of the solutions which have been used elsewhere for this purpose have done more harm than good. Each respond is carved from four separate stones, forming respectively the corbel, shaft, capital, and abacus. These had been removed from their original structural position by the summary process of sawing off level with the face of the wall : therefore, in the event of their being reinstated in the structure of the church at some future time, they will have to be fixed to the wall by means of stanchions.

These responds are very like those of the existing chancel



Fig. 1. Recently discovered Respond.



Fig. 2. Corbels of recently discovered Responds.

SHEPTON MALLET CHURCH.



Fig. 3. Respond of Chancel Arch.

From Photographs by Dr. F. J. Allen.



arch. One of each pair is illustrated on Plate VIII: the second of each pair is similar but not identical. All four are so like those supporting the vaulting at the east end of Wells Cathedral nave, that there can be no doubt they were all executed by the same masons and at the same time, namely about A.D. 1190—1200. On comparing the responds of the chancel arch with those recently discovered it may be seen that the former are a little taller and narrower. The acanthus corbels of the chancel arch appear to be later than the rest of the work, and may have been added as repairs in the late 15th century, when the Rood-loft was removed from beneath the chancel arch, and a new loft constructed above it.<sup>1</sup>

The question naturally arises, where did the arch, with the two responds now brought to light, formerly stand? (1) The most obvious position would be to the east of the present chancel arch, the two similar arches supporting a central tower. But on the walls east of the chancel arch, bristling as they are with marks of many alterations, I cannot find the evidence of such a tower.<sup>2</sup> (2) Another obvious position would be in the north or south wall of the chancel, and opening into one of the chapels: but this is negated by the existence of the original arches in those positions; they are plain depressed arches of 13th century character,<sup>3</sup> inserted into a pre-existing wall, the northern arch partly reconstructed with change of form in the Perpendicular period. (3) Or it may have opened from one of the chancel chapels into the corresponding transept: it would thus be in the same plane with the chancel arch; for the transepts were west of the chancel, and opened opposite the eastern arch of the nave-arcade.<sup>4</sup> The spring of the arch from the south chapel to the transept remains as a scar on the wall,<sup>5</sup> and below it is a mark whence a respond may have been sawn off: but there is nothing in the shape of this mark to show that it belongs to either of the responds in question. (4) Lastly, it is not quite impossible

1. See *Proc.*, Vol. LIII, 1907, part ii, "Shepton Mallet Church, its Architectural History," pp. 12-13.

2, 3, and 5. *Loc. cit.*, Plate IV, fig. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, Plate I.

that the arch may have stood between the nave and an early west tower ; but it is difficult to imagine how the responds could have survived since the time in the 14th century when they were removed to give place to the present early Perpendicular tower-arch.





Fig. 1. Piscina at Downside Farm, Shepton Mallet.  
Scale 1 : 6.



Fig. 2. Part of Reredos at Downside Farm,  
Shepton Mallet.

## A Piscina and part of a Reredos at Downside Farm, Shepton Mallet.

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AN old house known as Downside Farm, on the north side of Shepton Mallet, was burnt down in 1905. The house, like many in the neighbourhood, had a four-centred door-head and mullioned windows, indicating a date of about the 16th century: but when the burnt walls were being removed in preparation for rebuilding, two carved stones of earlier date were found, as here described.

A workman who helped in the demolition states that the piscina was built in the erect position into a wall adjoining the stair-case, and that the reredos was used in the foundation, below the level of the ground; so neither of them was in its natural site. The same workman transferred them to their present positions. I was not aware of their existence until Mr. G. H. Mitchell called my attention to them last year; and I have to thank Mr. Mitchell for kindly helping me to obtain whatever information is available concerning their history and that of the house (or houses) whence they were derived.

The Piscina is now built—erect, as before—into the wall of a shed; and in front of it is fixed a great cider-press, which prevents any satisfactory view being obtained of it. The bowl is carved from a single stone measuring about 20 × 15 inches. In shape it is rather more than half of a regular octagon, having one long side of about 20 inches, and five short sides of about 8½ inches each. The interior or basin is about 3 inches deep, and in it is carved in high relief a very conventional representation of a human head, as clumsy as



an old Dutch doll. The head does not project above the level of the rim of the basin. There are five drain-holes ; namely, one against the crown of the head, one against (or rather instead of) each ear, and one above the curl of the hair on each side : these are shown as black spots in the drawing. The two holes of each side communicate with each other in the substance of the stone, with free under-cutting, leading to a single outlet for the respective side, and making (with the outlet at the crown) three outlets in all. The carving is extremely weathered : the nose is worn away, the eyes and mouth are merely shapeless depressions, and only a few lines remain on the hair and beard. Add to this the fact that the margin of the stone is in most parts invisible, being imbedded in mortar, and that no direct view of the stone can be obtained, owing to the cider-press,—and it will be understood that the drawing (Plate IX, fig. 1) is necessarily diagrammatic. But it is executed to scale, namely 1 : 6, and is probably as correct as circumstances permit, except that chips and flaws are not indicated.

So far as I can ascertain by examination of the stone in its half-imbedded state, the basin is open or incomplete at the beard end of the head : so it was probably completed by being built against a wall. The stone would then have projected in a hemi-octagonal form, and the crown of the head would have been in front, which seems odd.

The curious and inappropriate use of a head as an ornament in a piscina basin recalls the *dog gnawing a bone*, also inappropriate, in the piscina of the Undercroft at Wells Cathedral : the two works may be contemporary.

The Reredos (Plate IX, fig. 2) is now placed as a coping stone at the end of a wall by the entrance to the farm-yard. The stone is of irregular shape, seeming to have had parts broken away ; and what remains of it is (like the piscina) extremely weathered. Its dimensions are, width 26 inches, height 14 inches, thickness 13 inches. On it are carved three trefoiled canopies containing figures. The details are indistinct, but the central figure is evidently a mitred bishop with the hands in the attitude of prayer : the figure on his left holds a sword erect in the right hand ; and the other figure

appears to be drawing a sword from its sheath. Three of the spandrils contain rude masks ; the fourth spandril is broken.

The form of the arches suggests the 13th century. Even allowing for the effect of extreme weathering, it seems as if the work must have been very crude ; and in this respect it resembles the piscina. Both carvings seem to have been the work of a tiro, perhaps an amateur.

The occurrence of these carved stones may indicate the former existence, either at Downside Farm or at a neighbouring house, of a private chapel or oratory for which the carving was executed by some member of the household,—perhaps a youth who afterwards became one of the skilled craftsmen of the district. Downside was the seat of the Strode family, and their home may have formerly stood on the site of Downside Farm ; but I can find no evidence either for or against this. At the time of the Monmouth Rebellion their mansion stood on a much less eligible site nearly a half-mile to the north, now known as “ Garden Close.” The last remains of the mansion, “ the gable ends with their high windows ” (according to Farbrother’s *History of Shepton Mallet*), were pulled down at the beginning of the 19th century.

But it may be suggested that the stones were brought from Shepton Church. This however is very improbable ; for good building stone could be obtained on the site of Downside Farm, and close by are and have been quarries, whence the stone for building the church was probably obtained. To bring these carved stones from the church would be to carry them up a steep hill to the site of the quarries whence they were hewn, and that merely to use them for common structural purposes. There is another alternative, namely that the stones were carved at the quarry by some mason, perhaps for amusement ; and that after lying there exposed to weather for centuries they were at last carried away and used in building the old house at Downside Farm. Whatever their history, they must certainly have suffered a very long exposure.

It would seem appropriate if these stones, though more curious than artistic, were safely preserved in one of our museums.