

Glastonbury Abbey Excavations, 1927

BY THEODORE FYFE, M.A., F.R.I.B.A.

THE excavations at Glastonbury Abbey carried out in 1927 under the auspices of the Somersetshire Archæological and Natural History Society have clearly proved the existence of an early Saxon church at the western end of the nave of the late twelfth-century and early thirteenth-century church, of which remains are now standing above ground. Previous excavations, conducted in 1926, had disclosed slight traces of a red plaster floor which might have belonged to such a church, but so uncertainly that they were not mentioned in the brief report of those excavations.¹ In 1927, however, a systematic clearance of a central area at the w. end had most fortunate results. About 5 inches below an obvious floor level of blue lias paving stones 6 ft. 3½ in. below the floor level of the thirteenth-century church were considerable unbroken remains of a red plaster floor. These remains were also associated quite clearly with lines of wall foundation, 20 ft. apart, running E. and W. : they were also associated with a cross strip of paving—probably of a central opening—running N. and S.

The plan that has been prepared shows the relationship of the remains to the established facts about the ' sleeper ' walls of the nave piers in the thirteenth-century or ' great ' church. It also shows that remains were found of additional walls running E. and W., clearly part of the Saxon church system and defining its width. The further plan of this church, both in an eastward and westward direction, is at present undecided : it can, however, be stated with certainty that the foundation walls continue eastwards.

¹ *Proc. Som. Arch. Soc.* lxxii, ii, 20-22.

The evidence of building style, and the fact that there is nothing but blue clay below the foundation walls and the underlay of the plaster floor, are in themselves sufficient to date the building to which they belong with tolerable certainty as very late seventh century or early eighth century; but there is additional evidence which confirms this. A little to the E. of the blue lias pavement previously mentioned as overlaying the plaster floor were found fragments in position of another paved floor at a still higher level. These fragments were not only very much blackened by fire but had many pieces of molten lead embedded in their joints. Moreover, there was no evidence of any floor above this level except that of the 'great' church, 5 ft. 3 in. higher up. It is a matter of historic fact that the great church replaced the second Norman church of Abbot Herlewin which was destroyed by fire in 1184. It therefore follows that the burnt paving belonged to Herlewin's church. It is quite reasonable to suppose that the paving below it belonged to the church of his predecessor, Abbot Thurstin. The only historic church before that of Thurstin (the first Norman abbot) is the church of King Ine, whose historic record corresponds to the early date which has been assigned to the church with the red plaster floor. Though St. Dunstan was known to have carried out building work at Glastonbury, and is even credited with increasing the size of Ine's church, there is no evidence that he laid down the plan of a new church. Therefore, the proofs that the church with the red plaster floor were—(a) of early Saxon date and (b) of the time of King Ine, are remarkably complete.

One additional fact of interest is the discovery of fragments of large, thick red tiles in position, on a level with the paving which has been ascribed to Abbot Thurstin. These tiles have traces of incised decoration in white, and evidently formed a central tiled strip about 6 ft. wide in the nave of his church.

Another additional fact of interest is the high probability that the floor of Herlewin's church extended N. and S., to the limits of the great church.

The continuance of the excavation of the Saxon church will be a matter of much interest.