

Glastonbury Abbey Excavations, 1926

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

So much could be found at Glastonbury in almost any direction that, when I had the honour of being entrusted with the excavations, I was perhaps fortunate in having no difficulty in deciding, after examining the evidence, the objective I should pursue—the elucidation of the plan of Herlewin's Norman church. In the first place, it seemed to me advisable to investigate the groundworks of non-existent buildings which were most certain of recovery. In the second place, Glastonbury, with its great open spaces and comparatively little superstructure existing, seemed a peculiarly favourable site in which to open out a complete early plan built within a later one. Thirdly, it appeared likely that in search for the Norman church plan, evidences both of still earlier foundations and of piers in the thirteenth-century nave might come to light. Lastly, judging from the quality of the carving of the blue lias fragments in the Museum, ascribed by Mr. Bligh Bond to Herlewin's church, it appeared at least probable that this was a very fine church.

The main objective being decided, the point for commencement of excavations had next to be settled. Here, the previous researches by Mr. Bond gave me a lead at once. In his excavations of 1908 he had proved the existence of the w. wall of a church or churches—probably Herlewin's and some earlier one—inside the thirteenth-century w. wall, and had also established the n.w. corner and eastward development of these churches for a length of 20 ft. I decided to begin with this w.

wall but in a southward direction, and then proceed with as much uncovering as was possible of the remainder of the fabric, working eastward in an anti-clockwise direction.

Operations were commenced on June 22nd, and were superintended by Mr. Clayton till my arrival on the afternoon of the 24th. From June 22nd excavation proceeded continuously with a working foreman excavator assisted by two (later four) other excavators, during eighteen full working days until the visit of the Society on the nineteenth day (July 13th). On one only of these days (July 13th) was work suspended on account of weather. Perfect weather obtained for the remainder of the time. On July 14th I had to leave Glastonbury, and I revisited it again on the 27th and 28th. From the 14th, excavation work continued until July 31st,¹ under the superintendence of Mr. Clayton, assisted by Mr. Chester H. Jones of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, who was with me from the commencement, and who not only gave invaluable help in continuing the journal of the work, but in completing the plans and sections which have been prepared.

Early in July, I was fortunate in receiving a visit from Mr. J. P. Bushe-Fox, of H.M. Ancient Monuments Department, and on my revisit later in the month, Mr. C. R. Peers was happily well enough to come over himself. Their suggestive advice, especially in regard to the tracing of floor levels and the places where clay had been filled in, was most valuable. To Mr. Clayton's continual help I can only refer in the most grateful terms. I also wish to thank Fr. Horne for the photographs which he took, and Mr. Bligh Bond for kindly giving me the benefit of his experience on many of the points raised.

In the present brief report, it is impossible to go with any detail into the nature of the architectural evidence traced, but it should be noted that the intended programme was carried out satisfactorily so far as circumstances permitted. A portion of the w. foundation previously referred to was exposed; also the foundation running eastwards from this, on the line of the s. piers of the nave of the great church, for the greater part of

¹ The filling-in of the excavations began on August 2nd and was completed on the 21st of the month.

a length of 120 ft. Both of these foundations were traced to their ultimate depth, which was 11 ft. 8 in. below grass level at the w. end and rose gradually to about 5 ft. 6 in. below grass level where the limit point of investigation eastwards was reached, underneath the sixth nave pier position.

The objects found, though not sensational, were of considerable interest and comprised fragments of glass, of patterned tile flooring, of worked mouldings and carving in stone (nearly all with clear traces of white paint and a few with traces of colour), all of which evidently belonged to the great church. Also some fragments of blue lias shafting and carved work which correspond with the fragments now in the Museum before referred to as belonging to Herlewin's church. Two untouched burials were also disclosed.

A word must be said on the all-important question as to whether the results obtained were commensurate with the outlay and the labour employed. In view of very important structural evidence that at two separate points the foundations discovered were incompatible with a foundation intended *only* as a continuous one for the thirteenth-century nave piers, the answer can be distinctly in the affirmative; and the excavations have proved further, to me at any rate conclusively, that future investigations should be on different lines. I am gratified that my view appears to be shared by the Trustees and the Society, and that there is a hopeful prospect of continuing the work, which will take as its starting-point the uncovering of a complete area the full width of the great church at its western end. I am convinced that only by this method will results of a really satisfactory nature be secured, and I am confident that these results will not be disappointing.