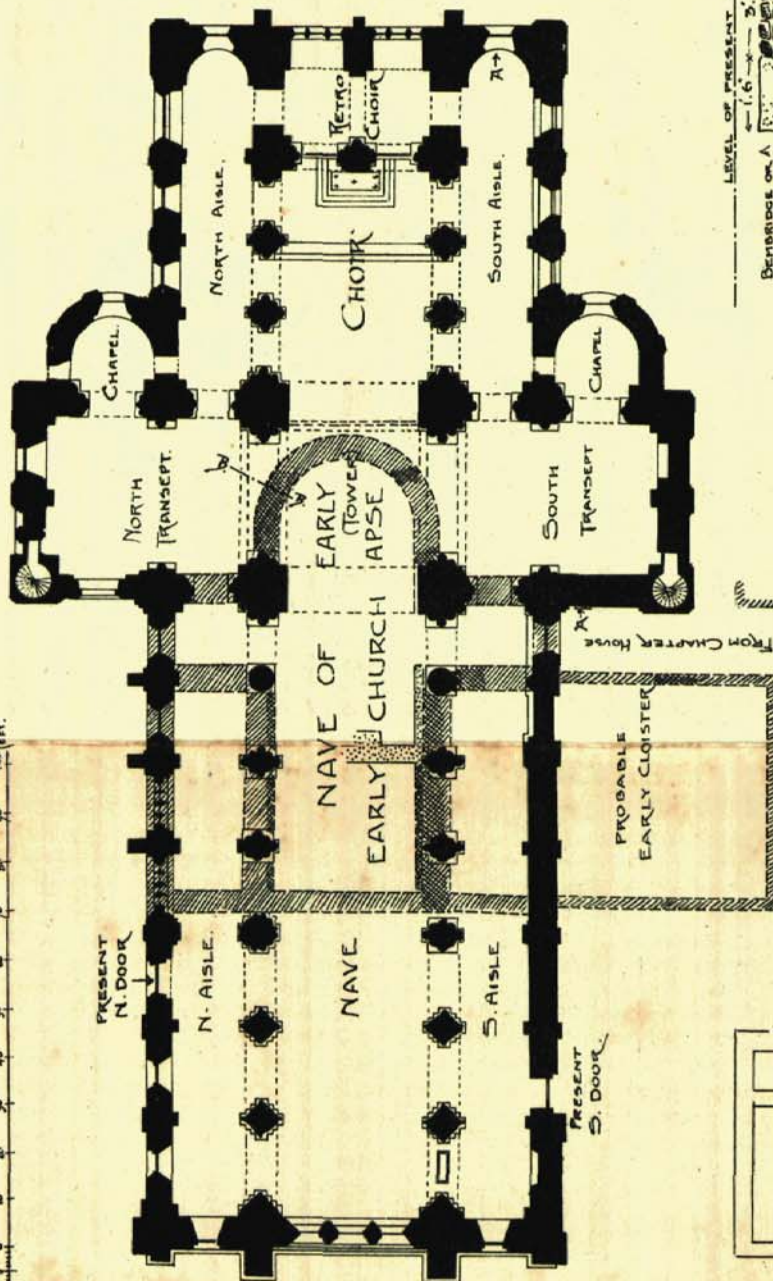
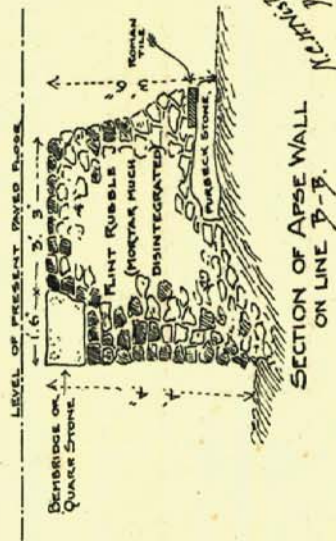
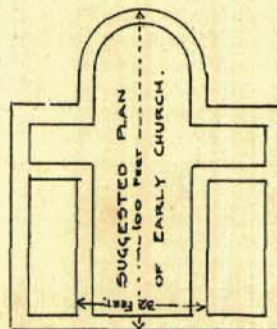


PLAN OF ROMSEY ABBEY.

SHOWING POSITION OF THE EARLY FOUNDATIONS
RECENTLY DISCOVERED.



REFERENCES.
PLAN OF PRESENT BUILDING SHOWN THUS:-
PORTIONS OF EARLY FOUNDATIONS ACTUALLY
FOUND AND EXAMINED ...
PROBABLE PLAN OF EARLY CHURCH (RESTORED)
LATER WALLS, PROBABLY THE FOUNDATIONS
OF CHOIR STALLS AND ROOD SCREEN OF
NORMAN CHURCH ...
PRE-NORMAN CRUCIFORMS AT



AN ACCOUNT OF SOME RECENT DISCOVERIES IN ROMSEY ABBEY.

BY THE REV. J. COOKE YARBOROUGH, M.A., VICAR.

Towards the end of the year 1900, some unmistakeable evidences of an earlier church built on the same site as that on which Romsey Abbey now stands were brought to light. As soon as these remains were uncovered, the writer communicated with the Society of Antiquaries of London, and in response the Society deputed Mr. C. R. Peers, of the Royal Archæological Institute, to proceed at once to Romsey and examine the spot. Mr. W. J. C. Moens, F.S.A., also visited the Abbey and drew up a report which together with a paper by Mr. Peers was read and discussed at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries, at Burlington House, on Thursday, February 7th. Mr. Peers's report was most clear and lucid and thanks are due to him for several important points in the following account of the discoveries.

Previous to these discoveries four indications of the existence of a Church at Romsey, earlier than the present Norman edifice, apart from historical notices, were believed to exist. They were:—

- (1) The discovery (in the year 1840) of a mass of concrete and masonry under the floor of the south aisle, near the Abbess's door leading into what was formerly the cloister. An account of this, and the further discovery of an extremely ancient coffin lying north and south beneath this concrete, and containing a head of auburn hair which is still preserved in the Abbey, was published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for August 1840.
- (2) The character of the masonry of the 3rd and 4th bays of the south aisle of the existing church, and the base of one of the interior columns projecting from the south wall, and also possibly the corresponding bays of the north aisle; this latter being very doubtful. These portions, being composed of smaller stones and of inferior workmanship, have generally been thought earlier than the rest of the present church.

- (3). A crucifix of nearly life size built into the west wall of the south transept. This crucifix is of a very remarkable type, of which no examples are known to exist of later date than the close of the 10th century, though there are several earlier than that period. The figure is that of the *living* Christ, not, as in mediæval crucifixes, of the *dead* Christ: the head is erect, the eyes open, there are no nails, but the wounds in the hands and feet are apparent, it is "Christ reigning from the Tree." Above the head, which is surrounded by a cruciferous nimbus, is an outspread hand (*dextra Dei*) projecting from a cloud. Some indication of the date of this crucifix may be found in the fact that during the reign of Ethelred II. (978 to 1016) many coins were struck at Winchester, bearing on the obverse a representation of this outspread hand issuing from a cloud. There is also a drawing forming the first page of the MSS. of Abp. Elfric's Sermons in the British Museum, which depicts a crucifix very like this at Romsey. The date of the MSS. is about 994.

A Saxon crucifix on the west end of the church at Headbourne Worthy has the *dextra Dei* above it. The crucifix at Romsey has evidently been in its present position for a very long period and has an ancient niche for a lamp in the wall beside it. There is every probability that it formed one of the features of an earlier church and, as Mr. Nisbett suggests, was placed in its present position on the re-building in Norman times.

- (4). A carved slab in low relief of the crucifixion with SS. Mary and John, Longinus, and another soldier with the sponge and vinegar, and two angels sitting on the arms of the cross, the eyes of one of which still retains the lead settings from which jewels have been abstracted. This is of limestone and is inserted into the eastern wall of the south chancel aisle, in the centre of the apse with which the aisle ends. This very remarkable crucifixion measures about 2 feet by 15 inches. It has a floriated cross and is pronounced by the Bishop of Bristol (Dr. G. F. Browne) to be of the time of the Danish occupation of England—the style being very similar to other remains of Canute's time, which would give it a date between 1016 and 1030.

This interesting object has not been in its present position very long as it was found by the late vicar (the Rev. E. L. Berthon) built into the wall of the retro-choir with only the back of the stone visible.

These were the only known indications of pre-Norman work at Romsey, until the discovery of earlier walls and foundations here described in the year, 1899, when it became necessary, owing to the presence of dry rot, to relay all the wooden flooring of the Abbey. This extended beneath the crossing and down the nave as far as to the end of the Norman work, which includes four out of the seven bays. The side aisle, chancel, transepts, and western portions are paved with bricks and stone.

First the northern side of the nave was uncovered and levelled, a good deal of the soil being removed, but not

enough to expose any earlier foundations. Between the columns on the north side of the nave the workmen discovered masses of very-hard concrete, lying east and west and about five feet wide. The following year the rest of the flooring was taken in hand, and on the east side of the great N.W. pier of the tower, a wall of flint concrete was found running in a line with the concrete before mentioned and passing under the base of the pier, which was built on to it. This wall on being further traced was found, at a point about six feet east of the pier, to curve southward, and on being completely bared of the gravel to a depth of $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet was found to be the foundation of the east end of an earlier church, and swept round in apsidal form until it was lost to view under the tiled paving in front of the chancel screen, which was not disturbed. This curved wall was five feet high, seven feet wide at the bottom, five feet wide at the top, and battered internally. The topmost remaining course, which from the marks on the stone must have been two feet above the level of the ground was faced on both sides with worked Bembridge or Quarr Stone. The southern side of this wall completing the apse was traced again on the south side of the church, and disappeared in like manner under the S.W. pier of the tower.

When the south side of the nave was stripped of its flooring the soil was removed with great care, and further discoveries were made, including the remains of foundations of a wall about five feet thick, constructed of flints and soft mortar, completely disintegrated. This was traced for some 60 feet westward in a line with the south arm of the apse and lying just in front of, and under the south line of columns of the nave. The wall ended abruptly at about a yard to the east of the last of the Norman columns. Built into the northern face of this wall and extending only to the second column was a later wall about two feet thick, faced with plaster, and here and there with stones with Norman tooling. This was met at right angles by a cross wall starting from the second pier and running across the church. These latter walls were evidently the foundations of the woodwork of the choir stalls and possibly a rood loft of the church, and of

much later date than the crumbling remains of the long wall which extended 30 feet westwards of them.

On careful examination of the soil the traces of three different cement and concrete floors were discovered. First, at about eight inches below the level of the present floor was a layer of cement about one inch thick extending westward as far as the cross wall. This floor rested on about two inches of burnt *débris* which contained a good many pieces of broken stained glass, which were pronounced by an expert to be of 14th century type. From the charred remains we conclude that the choir stalls had been destroyed by fire, at some early date and this is confirmed by the traces of fire on the stone work of the triforium at the south and east of this spot, and the change that had evidently taken place in the construction of the roofs (from Norman to English), about the year 1305.

The burnt *débris* lay upon a flooring of gravel concrete about eight inches thick, which was observed again westward of the cross wall, and extending to the end of the Norman work.

Another layer of concrete in its turn was found to be placed as a third floor, consisting of six inches of flints, in some places mixed with broken Roman tiling and bricks, and faced with cement. This lower floor extended under the cross wall and right down to the end of the Norman work. The soil beneath appears to have been undisturbed.

This was the extent of our investigations. We must however, record that the stones of the cross wall, as also some of those on the southern side of the apse had been used for some building as far back as Roman times. Patches of Roman cement were still adhering to their faces, as well as portions of the later mortar in which they were set, and fragments of Roman roof tiling and bricks gave evidence of Roman buildings on the spot. It only remains to observe how far these remains fit in with what we know of the history of Romsey Abbey.

The earliest mention of an Abbey at Romsey is in the Chronicle of Florence of Worcester, who states that it was founded by Edward the Elder, son and successor to Alfred

in 907, and refounded in 967 by Edgar, who in his charter for the foundation of Malmesbury Abbey, remarks that nearly all the then existing monasteries consisted of "little else but rotten boards and lumber." It is probable therefore that Edward the Elder's early foundation was chiefly if not wholly of wood, but that Edgar's Abbey was a much more ambitious building. Of Edgar we are told that:—

"Mikille he wirschipeð God and served our Lady. The Abbey of Rumseye he feffed richly with rentes full gode and kirkes of pris. He did therein of nonnes a hundreth ladies."

He also founded an almshouse in Romsey for poor old men and women, and it may be worth while to remember that the church at Winchester, built at the same time as Romsey and under the same Bishop (Ethelwold), was remarkable for its splendid apsidal east end. It is just possible therefore that some part of these foundations may go back as far as his time 963-984.

In 994, Romsey Abbey and Edgar's Church were burnt by the Danes under Sweyn and Anlaf. We have no historical notice of its re-building until we come to the present abbey, which was almost certainly built by Stephen, of Blois, about 1130. The remains of the apse, the recently discovered foundations of the north wall and the old work in the south aisle above described, must from their style of work have formed part of a church built somewhere between 994 and 1130, and of this we have evidence which will enable us to fix its date more exactly.

Working downwards from 994, we find that the country was so over-run by the Danes, and so perpetually harassed with war from 994 until 1014, that it would be practically impossible for any church to be built at Romsey until after the latter date when Canute came to the throne, and on becoming a Christian a few years later, set to work to re-build some of the churches which Sweyn his father had destroyed. Of these Romsey was one, and this church would be prominently under the notice of Canute, who resided occasionally at Southampton, and at Winchester where he made his great offering of his crown to Christ. Emma (Elfgive) his queen, resided at Winchester, and lived as regards the latter part of her life at the Abbey of S. Mary, to which the

nuns of Romsey had probably fled when the Danes destroyed the Abbey in 994. Emma was a great benefactress of Romsey previous to 1043, when she was despoiled of her property by her unnatural son, and finally died at Winchester in 1052.¹ The evidence of the two crucifixes points to the same period. The date of the larger is admitted by most to be not later than 1050, and the date of the other is put at 1030 or 1050. It is pretty certain that neither is earlier than 994, as anything existing then would have been destroyed by the Danes. What is more likely than that the Abbey of Romsey was rebuilt about this time, under the auspices of Canute and his queen?

Taking the other limit and working backwards we come to just the same conclusion. We know that there was a cloister attached to the church in 1100, because when King Rufus visited Romsey to see Matilda, her aunt Christina prevented him. According to Dean Kitchin she invited him into the cloister, that he might see her garden and the lovely roses for which Romsey was famed. While there, as if by chance, the procession of nuns filed by, and when the King saw the young Matilda veiled he ventured no further but took horse and rode away.²

This cloister would be built up against the south wall of the church, and we find that the Abbey is mentioned in Domesday book as standing in the midst of the Township in 1085. We have seen that the style of the two remaining bays of the south aisle wall is earlier than the rest, and it may be noticed that the newer work of the easternmost bay of the side aisle, containing the Abbess's door, was built after the south transept. It was just that wall which would be left undestroyed latest in building a new church, because the cloister even so early as that had an upper story of conventual buildings built over it, which would have need to be pulled down in this south wall if the church were interfered with. Therefore we may conclude that those

¹ "1052.—This year died Elfgive the lady relict of King Ethelred and of King Canute, Elfgive in English, Emma in French." *Anglo Saxon Chronicle*. Bohn's Ed. pp. 409, 429.

² *Historic Towns (Winchester)* by Dean Kitchin, p. 68.

two bays formed part of a church that was standing in 1081, when Christina became Abbess of Romsey. If moreover, we consider the state of the country between 1060 and 1080, we shall find it hard to conceive a time when the building of a large church by the *Saxon* nuns was less likely. The country was then the scene of the Norman conquest; the Saxons were being dispossessed everywhere; and here, at Romsey, was in a sense the last refuge of the defeated and dethroned royal family. The very fact that Christina, the sister of S. Margaret of Scotland, and of Edgar Atheling, was allowed to be appointed Abbess here instead of the Abbey being ruled, as was the case elsewhere, by superiors of Norman race, further diminishes the likelihood of any new church having been built between the Conquest and her Abbacy. The harassed Saxons had something else to do during those troublous years.

We may therefore conclude that the upper stones of the apse, lately laid bare, and the old work in the south aisle probably belonged to the time of Canute, or a little later, and that it is just possible that the long wall in the church which we noted as so decayed may be assigned to the earlier foundation of King Edgar. The similarity of the work in the *foundations* of the apse with the remains of Bishop Ethelwold's apse in the crypt of Winchester Cathedral would lead one to conclude that it also is of Edgar's time.

Two panels are now placed in the flooring of the Abbey, so that by lifting them up any who are interested can see a portion of the apse wall. For the accompanying plan of the church showing the position of the early foundations, also for valuable suggestions on several points, thanks are due to Mr. N. C. H. Nisbett, F.R.I.B.A.

