



KILPECK CHURCH · FROM SOUTH WEST.



THE JOURNAL

OF THE

British Archaeological Association.

JUNE, 1908.

KILPECK AND ITS CHURCH.

By CLAUDE S. BUCKINGHAM, Esq., M.A.

(Read April 8th, 1908).



THE Chipecce of Norman times is the Kilpeck of to-day, and it is difficult in imagination to connect the two. The bustling little township that lay on the Welsh border, about 8 miles south-west of Hereford, and boasted of castle, priory, and church, and doubtless played its part in arresting the periodical incursions of the Welsh, is now the sequestered and peaceful village of but a few cottages. The church and two insignificant fragments of castle masonry alone remain as evidences of Norman occupation. All traces of the priory¹ have long since disappeared, but its site is pointed out as being a quarter of a mile south-east of the castle. The history of the place (as dating from 1066) is well authenticated. The Manor of Chipecce was given to one William FitzNorman by the Conqueror, and Domesday Book duly recorded "William FitzNorman holds Chipecce." He was succeeded by his son, Hugh, who in 1134 (as appears from

¹ Mentioned by Leland (*Itin.*, viii, 60).

the Register of the Abbey of Gloucester) gave to the Monks of St. Peter at Gloucester the present Church of Kilpeck (dedicated to St. David), together with the Chapel of St. Mary in the castle, and all rights and possessions appertaining to them. It is very probable that this baron had built the church, but it is certain that his gifts were made subject to a condition (which was complied with a few years later) that a dependent priory or cell should be established at Kilpeck. Canon Bazley of Gloucester opines that the object of Hugh FitzNorman in making this decision was to have a civilising centre among his tenants and serfs, as well as a regular supply of chaplains for his churches (he had another at Dewchurch) and his castle chapel.¹ In 1422-1448 the priory was united to the Abbey of Gloucester, and on the dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII its site was sold to Baldwin Treville, from whom it descended to the Booths and the Clives, and later still to Mr. Symons, the present Lord of the Manor. To trace the history of the castle—the home of several generations of the FitzNormans or the de Kilpecks (the name they assumed after Hugh's death)—and later the ruin-crowned property of their successors till vested in 1860 in the present owners—the Clive family—is not so clear. Nor do the present scanty remains in themselves warrant any great amount of research or investigation. They are to be seen on the summit of an elevated knoll close to and west of the church, and are evidently the relicts of a polygonal shell keep. The earthworks around, however, occupy an extensive area, and are eloquent proof of a considerable fortress having at one time existed here.² In or about the early 'eighties an interesting "find" was made on the castle site, viz., of an engraved copper-plate of the seventeenth century. This was purchased from a Kilpeck cottager in 1884 by Mr. H. W. Bruton, who was agreeably surprised to find that it was the work of William Faithorne, the well-known engraver

¹ *Transactions of the Woolhope Club*, 1886-89, p. 141.

² *Clarke's Medieval Military Architecture*, vol. ii, p. 162.

of Charles I's time. The plate bore upon its surface, besides the engraver's name, the portrait of a young cavalier of the period, with his age given as being in his 24th year, and a coat-of-arms. No name appeared, but from the clues given the picture has, with some degree of certainty, been identified as that of Edward Monington of Sarnesfield in Herefordshire, born in 1622, one of two brothers who were among the King's adherents in the Civil War. On this war breaking out in 1642, it is well known that Faithorne espoused the cause of the King and accompanied him on his travels; and according to Canon Bazley it is highly probable that the engraver met young Monington at Raglan Castle, and engraved his portrait during his visits there with Charles I, between July 3 and September 15, 1645. The plate would be handed to the purchaser at once, and was no doubt lost during the siege and destruction of Kilpeck Castle in the latter part of the same year.¹ Mr. Bruton presented it in 1887 to the British Museum, where it is now to be seen.

But it is neither in the memory of its famous priory nor in the possession of its castle ruins that the chief pride of Kilpeck consists. The Church of St. David—the noble legacy of Hugh FitzNorman—is, as it were, the “set-piece” of the parish. Indeed, when its size and its uncommon design, its barely altered original appearance, and the richness and variety of its ornamentation (exterior and interior), and its interior treasures are taken into consideration, it is doubtful if another such splendid specimen of a twelfth-century parish church can be found to rival it in the United Kingdom. The edifice consists only of a nave, ante-chancel, and semi-circular apse, the whole measuring something under 70 ft. in length. Its similarity therefore to the Roman Basilica or Hall of Justice is at once apparent, and, as it is common knowledge that the early Christians adapted such Roman buildings for religious uses,² it follows that this church

¹ Gloucester Cathedral Society's *Transactions*, Part II, p. 168.

² That the Romans also constructed churches on the Basilica plan is evidenced by the foundations of the church discovered at Silchester.

(built in about 1100, and no doubt embellished later) was designed on the plan of an early Christian place of worship.¹ This arrangement of previous chancel and apsidal chancel combined, or of nave termination in an apse alone, is not too commonly found in Norman churches in this country,² despite the fact that the substitution of a square east end for an existing apse was not effected till some time after the Conquest; but the churches at Moccas, Peterchurch, and Pencombe (all in the same diocese), Newhaven (Sussex), St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield (modernised), Bengoe (Herts.), Lavingham (Yorks.), Warwick (Cumberland), and Dalmeny (Linlithgow), and one or two in Kent, occur to the memory in this connection. Also in the comparatively few Saxon churches, of which the eastern termination is assured, examples of a like nature are to be found.³

In our circuit of Kilpeck Church it is pleasing to notice how little tampering there has been with the original Norman work. A trefoil-headed Early English window and an Early English priest's door, in close conjunction to each other, are the only additions on the south side, while on the north side are two smaller Early English windows, one of them also having a trefoil head, and over the west end gable has been placed a modernised Norman bell turret of two arches. But in no sense can these additions be called inharmonious, and for the purpose of giving light (as will be seen later) the windows were obviously very necessary. A corbel table, which counts between seventy and eighty corbels (most of them in

¹ The plan is a considerable modification of the plan of a typical Roman basilica, in which the division of the main building by arcades of columns was just as characteristic a feature as the apse, but it is probable that the smaller churches of early Christian times were somewhat of this design. Perhaps it would be safer to say that Kilpeck Church was built on a plan evolved from the plan of a Roman basilica.—Ed.

² On the Continent the type is universal enough. It may be roughly said that the apsidal termination is characteristic of French architecture and the square east end of English.

³ *The Arts in Early England*.—G. Baldwin Brown.

well preserved condition), runs round the entire building, and is comprised of the usual miscellaneous medley of grotesque sculptures. It is interesting to espy amongst them, however, in two places, viz., over the south doorway and at the south-east end, that distinctive mark of Christianity, the Agnus Dei with the Cross of Salvation, though the south-east corbel certainly suggests a horse rather than a lamb, and may be symbolical of the Cross being swiftly carried to be planted in all parts of the world. In both cases the Cross is of the Maltese order—a type of ornament not unusual in Norman architecture. The flat Early Norman buttresses are noticeable, as are the three weird gargoyles projecting from the west end cornice. These resemble crocodile heads, with curved tongues protruding from the mouths, and it has been suggested that in these three forms the devil is represented being driven away from the Church. But the exterior gems of the church are unquestionably the west window and the south doorway. The rich uniformity of the one is in striking contrast with the rich variety of the other. The columns of the window, as well as the moulded arch they support, are elaborately sculptured with interlaced and beaded scroll-work, the capitals being represented by human heads harnessed with beaded bridles and bits. The ornament of this window (cf. Irish crosses and carved stones), together with the want of proportion betrayed in the design of the columns and arch, are very characteristic of the Celtic School, as also are the complex carvings on the jambs of the south doorway. This doorway consists of a hood-mould and three recessed orders. The hood-mould, terminating on extensions of the abacus, is composed of a number of medallioned sculptures linked together by grotesque masques.¹ Many of these sculptures with their birds and fishes bear a striking resemblance to the signs of the Zodiac, but in their entirety they cannot be said to cor-

¹ In the beautiful full-size plaster-cast of the doorway at the Crystal Palace the hood-mould terminates on monster heads just abutting on the abacus. There are indications in the original that this may have been so.

respond. Probably they are meant to be emblematical of created life. The outermost order is a singular adaptation of the beak-head. In the centre of it is to be observed the figure of an angel playing upon a harp, which may possibly be intended for a representation of the patron saint spiritualised by wings. The intermediate order is out-turned and graduated zigzag, and the innermost is of the double roll and hollow variety. Inset in this last and surmounting a horizontal dash of incised chevron above the lintel is the exquisitely neat and chaste tympanum. Its carving represents actually a vine with beaded stems, and symbolically the Tree of Life. There are about thirty other similarly illustrative tympana in England.¹ The abaci are enriched with the star ornament and chamfered. There are single shafts on each side supported by outer jambs, all being richly sculptured. The right shaft is adorned with a mass of foliage representing the Tree of Knowledge, while alongside it on the jamb a double form of serpent, linked into bewildering knots and coils, ascends to poison the fruit of the Tree, of which Adam (as represented on the capital) is in the act of partaking. On the left capital a dragon and lion are seen in combat, probably symbolical of a fight between Good and Evil. The dragon being overcome assumes the form of a serpent and descends (as seen on the jamb) in the same duplex and knotted and coiled form as before for further mischief-making upon earth. This, though shallow, appears to be the most plausible of the many solutions that have been advanced in explanation of this puzzling sculpture. On the left shaft are carved two quaint figures standing amid foliage, symbolical of Church and State. They are garbed in an extraordinary manner, wearing, as they seem to do, high dunce caps, thick knitted woollen jerseys, and "bloomer" trousers with knotted ropes around their waists. We wonder what costume is here portrayed. Perhaps that of an Anglo-Saxon civilian; but the carrying of the cruciform mace

¹ "Norman Tympana and Lintels in the Churches of Great Britain." By Charles E. Keyser, M.A., F.S.A.



KILPECK CHURCH: SOUTH DOOR.

and sword tend rather to dispose of this idea. On the whole, it appears more likely that Welsh knights are intended. The Phrygian cap and rayed vest, as well as the trousers, would probably not be inconsistent with this theory.¹ And it should be remembered, too, that the parts of Herefordshire (including Kilpeck), which lay without Offa's Dyke, were regarded until the reign of Henry VIII as belonging to Wales.²

The inner jambs of the door are quite plain, and call for no comment. The whole doorway, which is in a remarkably fine state of preservation (partly due to the enduring quality of the imported stone of which it is built, and partly due to an outer porch of wood that for a long time covered it), forms perhaps one of the most richly stone-engraved framings of the truth, "I am the Door and the Way," to be found, for its size, in any part of the British Isles. Passing through it into the interior of the church, we are struck by several things. First, by the small dimensions; secondly, by the beautiful symmetry and proportions, notwithstanding,

"In small proportions we just beauties see."—*Ben Jonson*;

and thirdly, by the quondam inadequacy of the lighting. In the first connection, however, it must be remembered that the priory (unless this served, as some think, for the priory church) and the chapel in the castle were available for worship, and in the last that the Normans never set too much store on the wholesale lighting of their churches. In this case, indeed, two small windows obliquely placed opposite to each other alone lighted the nave, the west window being too high up for all practical purposes, and the ante or previous chancel had no window at all. This may have been purposely left unlighted as a set off, and so as to give better effect to the beauties of the apse, which enjoyed three lights.

¹ *Archæologia*, xxx, 62.

² Similarly sculptured figures are to be seen on the arches of the old Norman church at Shobdon that have been re-erected in such execrably bad taste in Lord Bateman's neighbouring park.

All the Norman windows are deeply splayed, as also in a lesser degree are the Early English insertions previously referred to. The first chancel arch is very impressive. The jambs which support it bear on them six rudely sculptured statues—three on each. The upper four are possibly intended for the Evangelists. Three are nursing gospels and crosses (the Maltese again); and St. Peter with his key, as well as his book, is clearly discernible. The lowest figures on each side are priests or holy men, and are so placed perhaps as to denote support of the gospel. They both carry either a palm branch, a scourge, or a holy water sprinkler (it is hard to distinguish which) in the right hand, and what looks like a book or cup in the left. All six divines, despite their holy offices, have the appearance of suffering from profound melancholia, and it requires an effort of will merely to reflect how such sculptures could have appealed to the imaginations or stirred the consciences of even the pre-Reformation worshipper here. The mouldings on the arch are of the ordinary Norman character, zig-zag, both out-turned and raised, figuring prominently, and the lozenge hardly less so. The abaci are ornamented with a curious fleur-de-lis design, and are continued in a string line to the north and south walls, showing perhaps that they were designed for the termination of the nave. The left capital reproduces the vine work of the tympanum, and that on the right is of the scalloped order. The apse arch is severely plain. On the jambs are hollow places for beams, evidently pointing to a screen (? rood) having been placed here in the past. The apse itself has an artistic and yet simple grandeur about it. Four slender pilasters support a broad-ribbed vaulting of zig-zag, which has a fine central boss composed of four fantastic heads in confused jumble, very similar to work (so the writer is informed) at Elkstone in Gloucestershire. The zig-zag arching of the three window splays is in happy harmony. In the angles formed by the meeting of the apse arch walls with the north and south walls are two doorless aumbries, and on the floor stands a curious relic of the past—possibly of pre-Norman make—in the shape of a detached holy water



KILPECK CHURCH: INTERIOR.

stoup. It is about $2\frac{1}{2}$ ft. high, and a pair of arms and hands is clasped round it, supporting the bowl, while four serpent heads hang down on the base. But the carving is too scanty and ill-defined to give us any clue as to the actual age of the stoup. The original Norman font has been removed from the ante-chancel, where it long stood to the detriment of space (as shown on the Plate), to its more appropriate position near the south door. It is formed of a large cylindrical bowl made of conglomerate, which is supported by a large modern central shaft with four small Norman pillars around it. One similar in size and shape may be seen at Bredwardine Church in the same diocese. The great size of the front points to the old custom of total immersion of infants. On the north wall underneath the eighteenth-century oak gallery at the west end is suspended in an iron casing the upper portion of an ancient grave-slab. A cross in low relief is carved upon it; but nothing authentic is gleanable about the stone. In the custody of the Vicar (Rev. E. R. Firmstone), to whom the writer is indebted for much kindly assistance, are a silver chalice and paten, bearing date 1669, and the Register with initial entry of 1673. Disappointingly modern dates to the *laudator temporis* (XII c.) *acti*!

The church, of which sufficient has been said to show its archæological value, was well restored by Mr. L. N. Cottingham about sixty years ago, and renovations on a smaller scale have been made since. Those who accredit the Norman builders and masons with the art of ecclesiastical symbolism in the placing or engraving of every stone, and wish in pursuance of this study to make a more detailed examination of the Kilpeck structure, would do well to consult the monograph of Mr. G. R. Lewis on the subject, published in 1842. The work is as full of ingenious argument as it is of elaborate engravings; and some of the author's less fanciful theories have been incorporated in this paper. But to one practical matter at least does he call attention. He states that when he visited the church in 1818 he saw the remains of a good deal of fresco painting upon the walls and the sculptured

forms, despite the "unsightly coatings of white, buff, and grey wash" which then disfigured the interior. That these decorations have not been preserved must be a matter of very genuine regret to all lovers of ecclesiastical antiquities; and to the writer of this paper, at any rate, it is painful to strike even one small note of sorrow at the close of an inquiry which has been richly fraught for him with interest and inspiration.

