

REMAINS OF FORMER CHURCH AT
 CHALFONT ST. PETER
 By E. CLIVE ROUSE

From June to October, 1926, repair and restoration work was carried out on the tower of Chalfont St. Peter Church, it having been found that many of the stone quoins were badly weathered and in need of replacement. When the old stones were removed many, if not most of them were found to be moulded on their inner surfaces. They were taken away and dumped in the contractor's yard, as no suitable place or plan for their disposal had been arranged. Several of the best pieces were kept privately. The stones in the yard remained in this condition, suffering from exposure and from constant moving about, until I found them some months ago. I am now glad to be able to say that all the most important pieces have been returned to the Church. They are placed in a suitable position in the porch, and are labelled so that visitors and residents alike may see and understand them.

The medieval Church of Chalfont St. Peter. "fell on July 8 in the morning (1708) when Thomas Smart was Vicar," to quote an entry in the registers, and was re-built in brick with stone dressings by the year 1714. The fragments of Gothic moulding that have now come to light were evidently from the old Church, and were re-used, flat sides outwards, by the XVIIIth century builders for the stone quoins of their brick tower, and possibly in foundations and elsewhere.

Sheahan¹ says: "The respective corners of the building (Chalfont St. Peter Church) are finished with square stones brought from the ruins of the Roman Station of Verulam, now St. Albans." What truth there may be in this statement it is hard to say. Sheahan is not a reliable historian. All the corners at the E. end have been altered by the addition of Street's "Gothic" Chancel in 1854, and most of

¹ *History of Bucks*, 1862, p. 828.

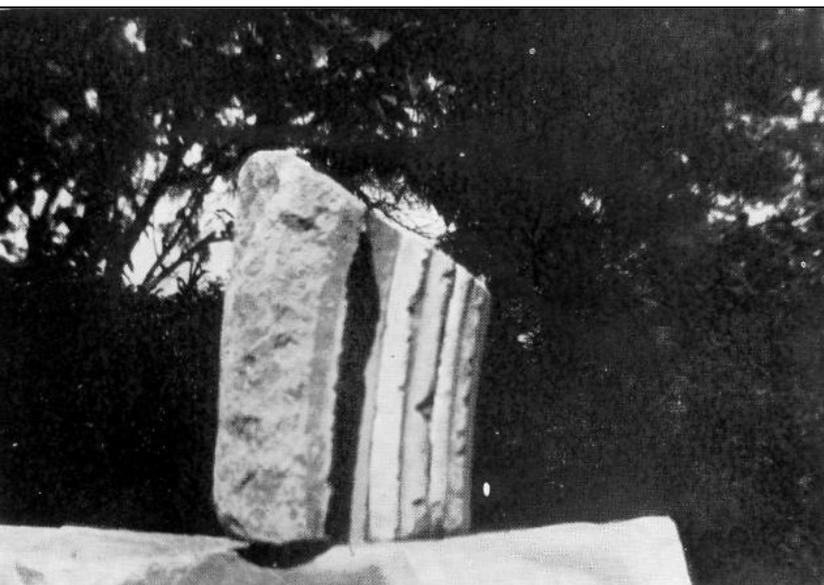


FIG. 1

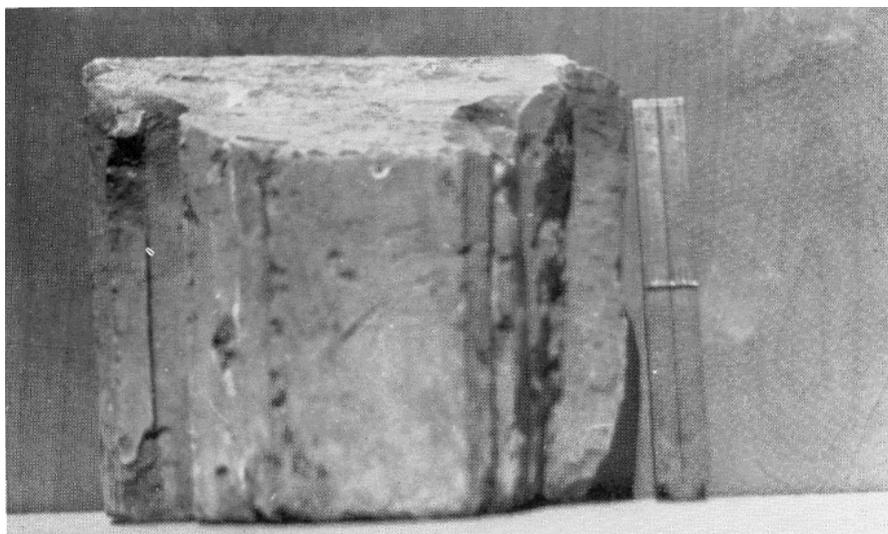


FIG. 2.

the others have since been repaired. Certainly, among the stones from the tower, there is not a single one that bears any resemblance to Roman material, as the size is not right, nor is there the slightest evidence of the characteristic Roman cross-tooling. I have been unable to trace anything bearing upon the subject in the usual records. But there may be something in it, and it is worth bearing in mind in case a chance reference should be found.

The Rev. F. H. Woods,² a former vicar of Chalfont, writing in 1900, said: "In repairing the corner of the Georgian tower it was found to be built, not of solid stone, but of rubble, with a smooth surface of plaster. The stones were evidently taken from the old Church which collapsed in 1708. Two of them have Decorated mouldings, ogee and fillet, dating about 1350, and are parts of an arch and doorway respectively." The statement is a little difficult to understand, as the tower is of brick with stone dressings. Perhaps he refers to the stone quoins which had been plastered, and may have been built up, inside, of several pieces. However, it shows the presence of old material before the present discovery. What became of the pieces is not known. Perhaps they lay about the Vicarage garden and gradually disintegrated—a process easy enough when old material is exposed in our climate. The Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, in dealing with Chalfont St. Peter Church (Vol. I, p. 84), makes no mention of anything of the kind.

In preparing the following notes upon the fragments of moulding, I have had the benefit of the opinions of Messrs. C. R. Peers and C. O. Skilbeck, and of the Department of Sculpture at South Kensington Museum.

Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 show the same piece from different angles (Section, Fig. 7, No. 1). It is part of an arch, and consists of well-cut mouldings, ogee and elliptical hollow, or cavetto. The stone is different from most of the others, and appears to be a whitish limestone

²*Home Counties Maga.*, Vol. II., 35.

or hard chalk, the remaining specimens being of Totternhoe stone. This piece evidently came from a doorway, probably from the porch into the Church, as it is not weathered, and must have been easily reached from the ground, for it is cut and scratched, the date 1604 being roughly cut on the inner surface. Several of the other pieces have similar mouldings, but none is in quite such good order. The date is probably c. 1400.

Fig. 3 and Fig. 4 (a) show another piece from different angles (Section, Fig. 7, No. 5). It is one of the largest pieces, and is about the only one that is not curved. It appears to be a base moulding of a door jamb, deep cavetto and shallow ogee, and may have come from the outside of the porch, West door, or other outside doorway, as it shows signs of previous weathering. This again is Perpendicular, about the beginning of the XVth century.

Fig. 4 (b) is a fine fragment of a door moulding, bold double ogee and fillet (Section, Fig. 7, No. 7). I considered it probably late Decorated, c. 1370, but the authorities I consulted were divided on the question: so, taking the average, one may date the piece c. 1380 to 1400.

Fig. 5 (a) appears to be a fragment of a door moulding similar to Fig. 6 (b) (Sections, Fig. 7, Nos. 9 and 8 respectively). It is of earlier character than the others, and may well be Decorated c. 1330-1350.

Fig. 5 (b) is another fragment of a door or window moulding, and consists of shallow hollow and fillet. Too broken to classify accurately, but probably XVth century (Section, Fig. 7, No. 6).

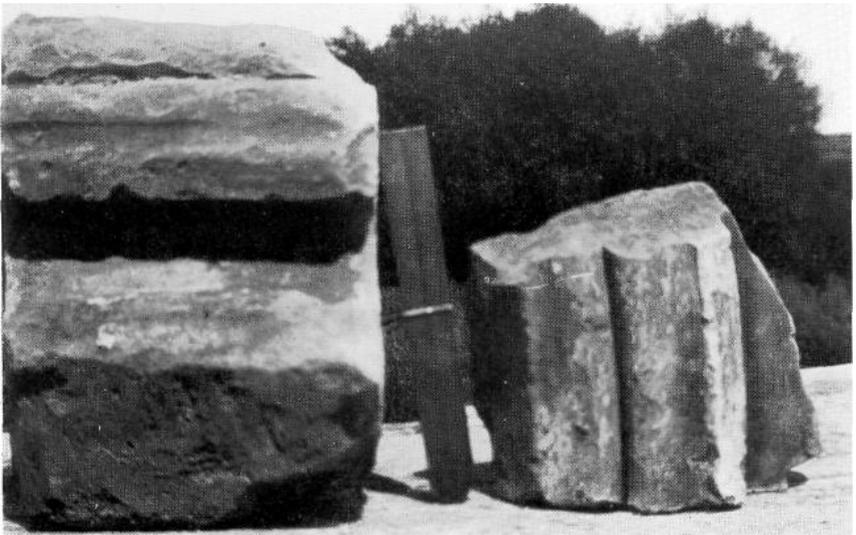
Fig. 5 (c) is a plain chamfered arch segment: there are one or two of these pieces. XVth century (Section, Fig. 7, No. 4).

Fig. 6 (a) is another arch moulding. It has either been re-cut or mutilated at some period. It is similar to Figs. 1 and 2, XVth century (Section, Fig. 7, No. 2).

Fig. 6 (b) shows three of the earliest fragments found (Section, Fig 7, No. 8). The top two pieces



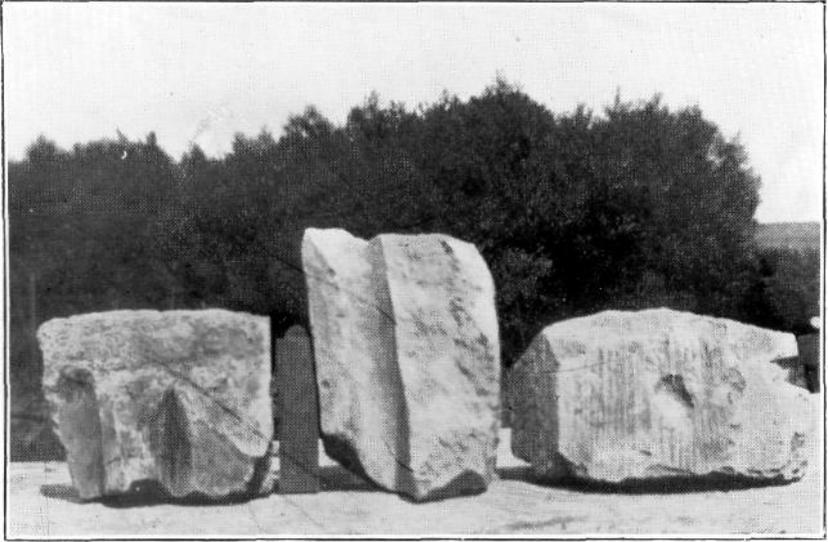
FIG. 3



a

FIG. 4

b



a

b

c

FIG. 5.



a

b

FIG. 6

have unfortunately weathered to powder since I photographed them. They all fitted together, and would seem to have formed part of a door or window mould. By the bold curve and slant, and round and hollow mouldings, these pieces may well be early Decorated, c. 1320.

Of the pieces not illustrated by photographs, but shown on the sheet of sections (Fig. 7), No. 3 is a large arch segment with plain chamfer moulding. It is XVth century, and was on the outside of the Church, to judge by previous weathering.

Nos. 10 and 11 are miscellaneous fragments with XVth century mouldings. The dotted lines indicate breakage or later cutting.

There are also pieces of XVth century window mullions, badly weathered. With the exception of Fig. 5 (a) and 6 (b), there are no fragments of the early date (1350) assigned by the Rev. F. H. Woods to the pieces he records in 1900.³

The discovery of these fragments inevitably raises the whole question of the history and appearance of the Gothic Church so completely swept away in 1708: and with the assistance they afford one in visualising the old building, one may profitably consider what is known about it.

The Manor of Chalfont was held by one Roger, of the Bishop of Bayeux, at the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086. It is improbable that there was any Church there at this early date. But one may assume that, the Manor being held by a Norman Bishop, he would, if not in person, then through his tenant, see that the spiritual needs of the district were attended to. It appears that a Church was therefore built early in the XIIth century, for we find that the *Church* of Chalfont St. Peter is included in the original endowment of Missenden Abbey, c. 1133. According to the *Liber Antiquus* of Bishop Hugh of Wells, and the *Taxatio* of Pope Nicholas IV,⁴ a vicarage was already ordained

³ There are no specimens of stones from an internal arcade; no capitals; and no purely ornamental details, or figure sculpture.

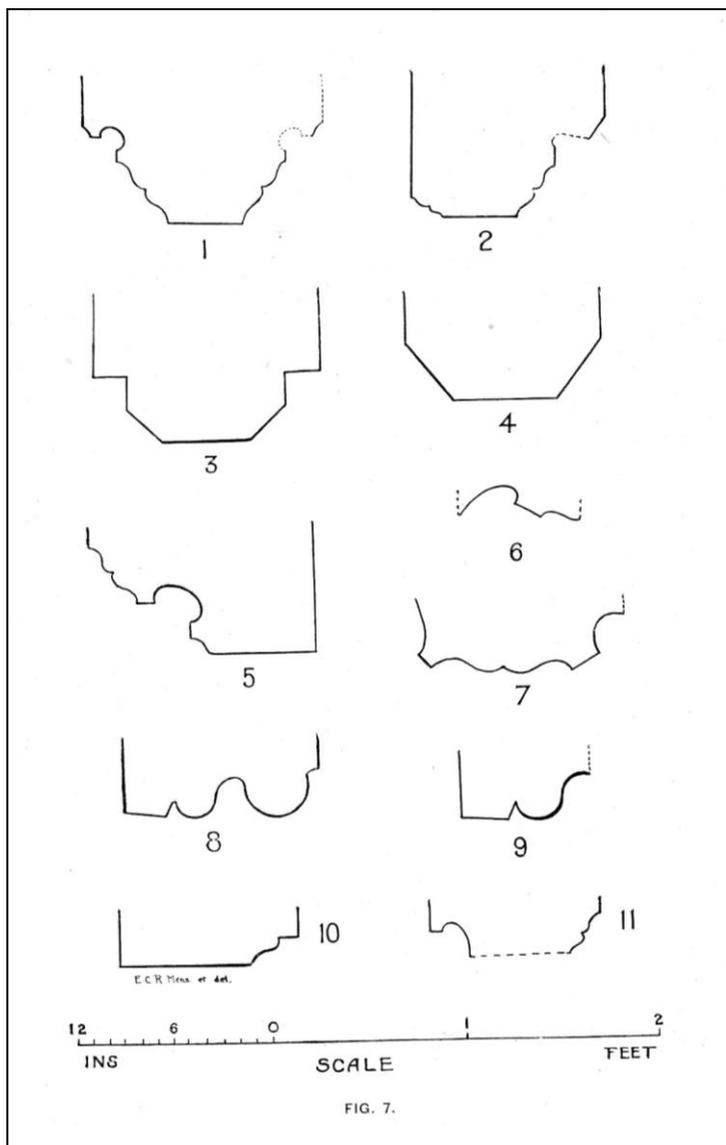
⁴ Quoted in *Vict. County Hist.*, I., 283.

by 1291. The record of Missenden Abbey, as shown in the Lincoln Episcopal Registers, is not a good one. In the visitations of Bishop Longland in 1530, 1531, and later, the buildings were seriously out of repair, and the house in debt. If the monastery itself was in this condition, it gives one to wonder how the Churches appropriated to it fared structurally, and especially Chalfont. It may well have been initial neglect of those parts of the structure for which the monastery was responsible that hastened the collapse in 1708.

In 1449 a chantry was founded in the Church, the priest to say Mass daily for the souls of the founder (William Whappelode), King Henry VI., and Queen Margaret. This does not necessarily indicate any structural work, but merely the dedication of an altar. Although it appears from a Commission of Henry VIII in 1546 that the Chantry property was not rich (£11:9:8 per annum), the Church itself was well furnished. Doubtless some neglect of certain parts of the fabric followed the Act of Suppression of 1547, when the Chantry was deprived of all its endowments. The inventories of Church goods in Buckinghamshire during Edward VI th's reign, throw some light on the details of the old Church. The inventory of 1552 mentions frontals and linen, etc., for the high altar and altars, thus suggesting a fairly commodious plan. Moreover, Chalfont was, at this period, one of the riches Churches in the County.⁵ One may therefore reasonably conclude that its architectural detail would be in keeping. Bad times were to follow, however. The Protestant ardour of Elizabeth's reign, and after, made sad havoc in our Parish Churches. Moreover, in the religious controversies of the XVIIth century, so rife in South Bucks, one may well imagine that there was little time or inclination to pay serious attention to the Church fabric. The records of this period are full of lamentable details of Churches, presenting a picture of neglect, decay and ruin beyond description.

⁵*Vict. County Hist.*, I., 308.

⁶*Records of Buck*, VI., 154-167; 245-258



In a visitation of the Archdeaconry in 1612, it is stated that "the side of the Church (Chalfont St. Peter) was so broken that a hog may creep through." In 1637 Chalfont appears in a report on 111 Churches. Only three out of this total were sound. The Church does not seem to have been in serious condition, but it "needed whitewashing."

Considering all these facts, therefore, it is not surprising that the building collapsed in 1708. Some interesting details can be gained from a Quarter Sessions Voucher for the year 1708 in the possession of our Society.

TRANSCRIPT OF VOUCHER IN BUNDLE
NUMBERED 193

To the Worship^{full} her Majesty's Justices of y^e Peace
for ye County of Bucks.

The humble Petition of y^o poor Inhabitants of y^e

Parish of Chalfont St. Peter in y^e said County—
Sheweth

That on Thursday y^e Eighth day of July instant (1708) y^e steeple belonging to y^e Parish Church of Chalfont St. Peter in this county fell to y^e ground & by y^e fall thereof beat down y^e North & South Eiles & y^e greater part of y^e Body of y^e said Church & thereby so prejudiced y^e same that it cannot be suported but must be wholly rebuilt, y^e charge whereof amounts to y^e sum of One Thousand ffive Hundred Twenty one Pounds ffive shillings & six pence (as appears by y^e moderate computation of severall able & experienced workmen which yo^o Petition^{es} & y^e Inhabitants of y^e said Parish are unable to bear wth out y^e assistance of well disposed Persons

Yo^o Petition^{es} therefor humbly pray that yo^o Worships will be pleased to certifie yo^o Petition^{es} great losses unto y^e Right Honor-able y^e Lord Chancellor of Great Brittain; To y^e end yoe Petitiones may be recommended

by his Lordship to obtain Her Majesty's Lett^{es} Patents for asking y^e Relief & charitable benevolence of well disposed Christians.

And yo^e Petition^{es} as in Duty bound shall ever pray &c:

Thom. Smart Vicar

John Bennit } Church-

Josias Copland } wardens

Tho : Saunders

Hen. Dering

R. Whitchurch

Wilkins

Hen : Gould

Rob : Toby

Tobias Gooding

Thomas Hunt

Edward Wetherby

Benedict G.....

Tho Priest

John Charsley John

Robt Bennett (es)

Robert (?) Chitch

Tho Gascoigne

(?) Hen. Wassall

We attest y^e Truth of y^e matters contained in this Petition

On six small sheets attached appear details of the work to be done.

The Joiners' Work

Cmes to £100

The Blacksmith

Work £20

The Glasuers

Work comes to £10

The Brickers

Work comes to

£641 2s. 6d.

The Plumers

Work comes to £100

The Carpenters

Work comes as folows

£650 3s. Od.

641 2 6

650 3 0

On reverse

100 0 0

100 0 0

20 0 0

10 0 0

1521 5 6

One thus learns, indirectly, that the plan of the Gothic Church consisted of chancel, nave with aisles, and West tower. From the fragments of moulding here reviewed one can also presume the presence of a doorway covered by a porch, probably on the South,

and possibly a West and North door. The tower evidently fell Eastwards, doing terrible damage; and this fully explains the need for total re-building. The "relief and charitable benevolence of well-disposed Christians" was obtained. But some of the collections in surrounding Churches were pitifully small. All Saints, Hertford, on Jan. 18, 1710, contributed £2: 6: 0, and St. Paul's, Walden, on June 10, 1710, the princely sum of 1s. 3d.

As we have seen, the Church was re-built in brick with stone dressings, some of the old material being used for this latter purpose, on a plan of very small chancel, aisle-less nave, and West tower. The Georgian windows were unhappily removed when Street built his pseudo-Gothic chancel and carried out other alterations in 1854, tracery windows being substituted. As far as I have been able to ascertain, no plan of the Gothic Church was preserved, and no record of any discovery during the work of 1854 exists.⁷

To summarise, it seems that a Norman Church, probably of small proportions, perhaps chancel and aisle-less nave, was built between 1090 and 1133. No detail of this period is preserved. Nor is there any structural record of the Early English period. Both Decorated and Perpendicular details occur in the stones here described. It would seem that the Norman Church was extended by the addition of aisles, porches, etc., during the XIVth and XVth centuries, in which case much of the earlier detail would disappear, especially if the original Church had been aisle-less. The fragments here described are, thus, the sole existing structural relics of what must have been a spacious and elegant Church.

⁷ It is curious that not more of the old material was used, in order to lessen the cost of the re-building. There must have been a great mass available. No doubt much was used in the foundations; and some probably found its way into houses in the district, or was employed as road metal. Sheahan, on p. 829 of his book already quoted, says: "The font is plain and very ancient" The present font is palpably XIXth cent., so it looks as if the old one had been comparatively recently discarded. I can find no record of it. The font at Hedgerley has survived two re-buildings of the Church.