III. *Observations on the Ecclesiastical Round Towers of Norfolk and Suffolk ; in a Letter from JOHN GAGE, Esq. F. R. S., Director, to HUDSON GURNEY, Esq. V. P. &c.*

Read 19th November, 1829.

DEAR SIR,

I HAVE during the summer visited many of the round towers of churches in our native counties of Norfolk and Suffolk in the hope of determining their antiquity; and have examined others in Cambridgeshire, Essex, Sussex, and Berkshire, where there are a few examples, for the sake of comparing them with our own.

Thus, above fifty round towers of churches in different districts have been surveyed, and in communicating to you the result of my observations, I have to request you will lay them before the Society of Antiquaries, together with a series of illustrations from the pencil of Mr. John Chessell Buckler, who accompanied me in my progress.

From the received opinion that these towers are of Danish origin, though I could never see any grounds for such an opinion, I was prepared to meet with a class of towers so rude and doubtful in their construction, that, like the round towers of Ireland, which Giraldus speaks^a of as if of remote antiquity in his time, they might seem to claim

^a Giraldus, giving a fabulous account of the origin of the lake, Lough Neagh, caused by the overflowing of a fountain that on a sudden deluged a large tract of land, and destroyed a wicked race of people, tells us, that in calm weather the fishermen are accustomed to point out, under water, to strangers crossing the lake, the tall, narrow, round, ecclesiastical towers peculiar to the Country. “*Piscatores aquæ illius turres Ecclesiasticas, quæ more patriæ arctæ sunt et altæ, necnon et rotundæ, sub undis manifeste sereno tempore conspiciunt; et extraneis transeuntibus, reique causas admirantibus, frequenter ostendunt.*” Topograph. Hib. dist. ii. c. ix.

antiquity higher than the Norman æra ; and yet I had been familiarized all my life to the round towers in the neighbourhood of St. Edmundsbury, and had seen nothing there that could justify such pretensions. I had even fancifully imagined that, as the two or three examples of the ecclesiastical round tower in Scotland^b might be said to be borrowed from Ireland, so, the fashion of our towers in Norfolk and Suffolk, might, in spite of difference of character, have been introduced into East Anglia, where they are most prevalent, by Fursæus, the holy monk, who came over from Ireland to the court of Sigberct, and built monasteries in his kingdom, particularly at Cnobbersburgh.^c As, too, it was manifest from Bede's relation of the vision of Bega on the death of St. Hilda, that bells were used by the Anglo-Saxons in his days,^d and as the Saxon copy of the Psychomachia of Prudentius, in the Cottonian Collection^{ee} contains an illumination or drawing of a church with a round tower, it was not unreasonable to expect to find at least one tower that might pass for Anglo-Saxon : but all these thoughts vanished when the towers themselves came before me in review.

Instead of finding this rude and doubtful character, I saw pure Norman architecture, or the Circular Style, highly finished in some, and plainer in others, until it became more or less mixed with the English or Pointed ; and with surprise I found the early Pointed Style prevalent in a great many. There was but one tower which I conceived might rank higher in antiquity than the twelfth century ; and that one not being earlier than the Norman time. None could properly be said to be doubtful in the date of their construction ; though some were so mutilated and altered that the original character was lost.

^b Brechin, Abernethy.

^c Libellus Vitæ Fursæi. Acta SS. Benedict. Tom. viii. p. 290. Bede's account of St. Fursey, lib. iii. c. xix. is grounded on this narrative.

^d Hæc tunc in dormitorio Sororum pausans audivit subito in aere *notum companionum*, quo ad orationes excitari vel convocari solebant cum quis de sæculo fuisset evocatus. Bed. lib. iv. c. xxiii.

^e Cleopatra, C. viii. fo. 7. Pudicitia gladium suum sub altare in templo recondit.

The situation of these towers varies : some are in cities or towns ; in Norwich are three, in Bungay there is one, and in Lewes one. Many will be found bordering upon the Ikenild Street ^f as it approaches Caistor, or as it winds from Buckenham to Burgh Castle (*Garianonum*), or on the route from Colchester (*Camalodunum*), by Taseburgh (*ad Taum*), to Caistor. The Church of Taseburgh stands within the Roman fortification ; and Hadiscoe tower is in a very strong position. Some are along rivers, as Piddinghoe and South Ease, at the mouth of the Sussex Ouse, the former commanding both the river and the high road. Welford and West Shefford in Berkshire, one in the Circular, the other in the Pointed Style of architecture, lie on the Lambourne ; and, on each side of the Waveney, dividing Norfolk and Suffolk, a line of round towers extends from Rickenhall beyond the source of the river to its confluence at Burgh with the Yare, a short distance from the sea ; some are on high, some in low ground : many are distant from rivers, in the heart of the country, as Little Saxham, Risby, and Beighton in Suffolk, Bartlow and Snailwell in Cambridgeshire, and Great Leighs and South Ockendon in Essex. Solitary examples of these towers are met with,^g but generally they are in clusters ; for example, the towers of Sussex and Berkshire are found together, there is a cluster about St. Edmundsbury, and they prevail in some parts of Norfolk and Suffolk, and are not met with in others.

These towers, in every district, are built of rough flint, those of Sussex being meaner structures than the rest. The flint is generally laid in

^f The Ikenild Street is traced by Dr. Mason, Rector of Orford in Suffolk, after it leaves Ixworth, through Lopham and Kenninghall, to Buckenham ; whence one route goes direct to Caistor, and the other route goes near Taseburgh, south of Hemenhale, north of Ditchingham Hall, crossing the road from Loddon to Beccles, passing between Toft and Heckingham, by Hadiscoe Church, to Burgh Castle. The road from Colchester, according to the same authority, enters Norfolk at Scole, passing by Dickleburgh, Stratton, and Taseburgh, to Caistor. This tract abounds in round towers.

^g A single specimen occurs in Surrey, at Tooting.

regular courses, the best specimens of which are Hadiscoe, Little Saxham, and Heringfleet. Norton, in Norfolk, is an instance among others, where the flint is not in courses; Fritton and Lound, in Suffolk, and the churches in Norwich, are examples where cut flint has been used in recasing the towers. None are of freestone; but with one exception, freestone is used, more or less, in the dressings of all the towers I have seen.

In the internal construction of a few, I observed alternate courses of flint, and brick or tile, as at Fritton, and Ashby, in Suffolk, and Thorpe Abbots in Norfolk; brick is also used with the flint at Rushmere in Suffolk: these bricks measure on an average ten inches by one and three quarters, and it is remarkable that they occur in towers of the Pointed Style only.

The towers externally batter more or less. Hadiscoe batters all the way up; many do so as far as the upper stage only, and are from that point perpendicular.

The towers of Sussex, and of Welford in Berkshire, and Great Leighs in Essex, have spires, the rest are plain or embattled; it must, however, be observed, that most, if not all, have had their summits altered or rebuilt, perhaps chiefly in consequence of damage from the bells. At Blundeston, not to mention other examples, windows, which I think were originally at the summit, are now, in consequence of an addition to the height of the tower, in the middle stage. Instances occur, of octagonal heads having been added to the original building; but the octagonal head to the tower of Thorpe Abbots seems to be coeval with the circular base; and a peculiarity is seen there, which must not be overlooked. On the north side of the basement is a chimney, the flue of which runs up the wall^h nine inches square, the smoke escaping from a small north loop. The external bands or string courses,

^h This flue is original; at Bedale in Yorkshire a tower-chimney occurs, and at Mettingham Church in Suffolk, there is a flue in the porch with an aperture for a fire cradle, or grate.

and the disposition of the windows of different towers, give to them the appearance of one or more stories; and some may have had floors: many, however, to judge from the state of the internal masonry, were clear from the base to the summit. Little Saxham and Blundeston, the loftiest I have met with, are each fifty-six feet high.

The circumference of the tower of Little Saxham rather exceeds the height, and this tower stands unrivalled for symmetry and beauty. The diameter of Syleham, in the clear, is only eight feet; of Hadiscoe, which is fifty-two feet high, it is eight feet four inches; the average is between ten and eleven feet; in some the diameter exceeds fourteen feet. The Sussex towers are not so solid as those of Norfolk and Suffolk: the walls of the former towers do not exceed the thickness of two feet and a half, while those of some of the latter are nearly double. Beighton, is five feet thick; Thorpe-Abbots, four feet ten inches; Norton, four feet eight inches; Saxham, four feet six inches; Hadiscoe, four feet.

These towers are attached to the west end of the churches, and always constituted a part of them. In one instance the presbytery is older than the tower: Fritton Church has a semicircular apsis of pure Norman architecture, with a tower in the Pointed Style. In other examples, the east face of the tower is flattened, but in thisⁱ the tower has been circular downward nearly to the arch, where it is shaped off in the form of a bracket. Heckingham Church, the south door of which is unusually rich, has, like Fritton, a semicircular apsis.

In speaking generally of the style of architecture of these structures, I have said that there was one tower which I conceived to be of higher antiquity than the rest. This is Taseburgh, represented in Plate II. It

ⁱ The upper part of this tower has been rebuilt, and the whole has been cased with cut flint. In rebuilding the body of the church it was widened to the south, which throws the tower out of the centre of the building. This alteration took place in the fourteenth century, and the walls are made up of the old materials. From the appearance of the wall over the chancel arch, and of the west wall of the church, the original roof seems to have been flat to a certain extent; the present roof incloses a window high above the tower arch, once external.

is ornamented with a double tier of recessed arches, having semicircular loops. In rebuilding the summit^k of this tower, the crowns of the upper tier of arches have been cut off: in other respects the design seems to be perfect, and quite in the Roman manner. The tower-arch, within, is plain and rude, four feet three inches wide, and sixteen feet and a half high; and, like the loops, is constructed of pebbles; this building being the example before noticed where no freestone is used. It will be observed in the drawing, that the tower-arch has been partly filled up, and that an early pointed arch has been inserted; a further proof of its antiquity. On the tower of Hadiscoe Thorpe a line of shallow buttresses, resembling pilasters, is seen in relief, and there is in this such a correspondence of style with Taseburgh, as to give ground for the opinion that the structures are both Norman; one, from its rude construction, early, and the other, to judge from its characteristics, late.

The towers of Little Saxham and Great Leighs, in Plate III. are examples of the finished style of Norman Architecture; the part above the buttresses of the tower of Great Leighs being of a later period; this tower has a west entrance, which is unusual. There appears to have been a door in the tower of Heringfleet; frequently a west window occurs in the basement story, generally high up. It may be observed that the towers of Great Leighs and Kirby have flat buttresses at the base. Plate IV. exhibits the plain Norman Style in the towers of Piddinghoe, Blundeston, and Welford. In Plate V. the towers of Hadiscoe Thorpe, Hadiscoe, and Heringfleet, and in Plate VI. and VII. architectural features in the Churches of Risby, West Shefford, Thorpe Abbots, and Norton, show a deviation from the Circular to the Pointed, and a mixture of style. At Hadiscoe Thorpe the windows vary in their ornaments, and in the shape of their arches; on the east side is an arch with a billeté moulding, like those of the neighbouring Churches of Hadiscoe and Heringfleet, where straight lined arches prevail. The character of

^k Blomefield, in a note to his account of the Parish of Taseburgh, says, "the steeple was rebuilt in 1385," this can only apply to the summit of the tower.

these windows may have been borrowed from the arches in the north transept of Norwich Cathedral, shown in Plate VI. which perhaps are the oldest examples of the kind to be found. The chancel arch of Risby is pointed, with Norman ornaments coeval with the semicircular arch of the tower. The Pointed Style prevails in the tower at West Shefford, and is blended with Norman ornaments in the south door. Plates VIII. and IX. contain illustrations of towers in the Pointed Style, Rushmere, Bartlow, Norton, and West Shefford, all in different counties.

It is obvious there is no affinity between the characters of the English and Irish ecclesiastical round towers; nor, as appears from the preceding observations, is there any foundation for the received opinion that our round towers are of Danish origin. Why they have been ascribed to the Danes I am at a loss to imagine, for the ecclesiastical round tower is not found in Denmark, or Sweden, or along the Elbe, as far as I have been able to learn after much inquiry. If the opinion arise from the circumstance of these towers being found to prevail in East Anglia, it must be remembered that the Danish dynasty subsisted in Northumbria as fully as in East Anglia, and yet not a single example of the round tower will be met with between the Humber and the Tweed. If it rest on the supposition¹ that the artificial mounds near the Church of Bartlow in Cambridgeshire are Danish, raised after the battle of Essendun, or Ashendune, fought between Cnut and Edmund Ironside; and that Bartlow Church with its round tower is the sacred edifice said to have been built^m by Cnut on the spot for the offering up of

¹ Morant's History of Essex, vol. ii. p. 539.

^m "Loca omnia in quibus pugnaverant et præcipue *Aschendune* ecclesiis insignivit, ministros instituit qui per succidua sæculorum volumina Deo supplicarent pro animabus ibi occisorum. Ad consecrationem ipsius basilicæ et ipse affuit, et optimates Anglorum et Danorum donatia porrexerunt. Nunc ut fertur modica est ecclesia Presbytero parochiano delegata." Malmesb. de gestis Reg. lib. ii. c. xi. Morant says, "It could not be the present Church of Ashdon, because it stands too far from the field of battle, therefore, it is with great reason supposed that it was Bartlow Church, which stands near the hills, and hath a round steeple, being the Danish way of building." Camden and Gough place

1.

2.

3.

5 Feet

I. C. Budder. 1829.

Little Saxham, Suffolk.

Tower Arch, Little Saxham.

James Basire. sc.

Great Leighs, Essex.

Paddinghoe, Sussex.

Blundeston, Suffolk.

2.

5 Feet.

1. Tower Arch, Welford, Berks.
2. North Door of Welford Church.

J.C. Buckler, 1829.

Hadiscoe Thorpe, Norfolk.

Hadiscoe, Norfolk.

James Basire, sc.

Heringfleet, Suffolk.

J. C. Buckler, 1829.

James Basire, sc.

1. Tower Arch. 2. Chancel Arch. 3. Loop in the Tower, Rissby, Suffolk. 4. Arches in the North Transept of Norwich Cathedral.

A.

2.

3.

13 Feet.

sacrifice for the slain, a glance at that tower, which is a graceful specimen among our illustrations of round towers in the Pointed Style,ⁿ will at once afford a contradiction.

Whether these towers owe their form rather to the fitness of the flinty material of the country for the circular shape, so productive of strength, than to caprice and fashion, it is difficult to decide ; particularly when we reflect that the building of them is chiefly confined to one century ; and that they abound in some, and are rare or not found at all in other districts where flint is the natural product :—that they are imitations of the military round tower I think highly probable ; the disuse of that form may have arisen from its being found not well adapted for bells.

I am, dear Sir,

Your obedient servant,

JOHN GAGE.

this battle of Essendun, or Aschendune, at Assingdon near Rochford in Essex ; and Blore, with much probability, at Essendine in Rutland, differing from Morant, who fixes it at Ashdon, on the borders of Essex and Cambridgeshire. The artificial mounds in the Parish of Ashdon, near Bartlow Church, have all the appearance of the great British Barrows. A Roman road runs near the hills, and Roman coins and other antiquities have been found in the neighbourhood. In the garden of the Rectory of Ashdon is a stone trough, said to have been found near the Bartlow hills ; it is in the form of a parallelogram, not large enough for the human body, and not very unlike the stone trough figured in plate XXXVIII of the XIVth volume of the *Archæologia*, and which was found to contain two glass urns.

ⁿ The west window has been altered.