

**XX. *Remarks on the architectural History of Westminster Hall:  
in a Letter from SYDNEY SMIRKE, Esq. F.S.A., to Sir HENRY  
ELLIS, K.H., F.R.S. Secretary.***

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Read 28th May, 1835.  
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12, Regent Street, May 25, 1835.

DEAR SIR,

YOU are well aware that the great Hall at Westminster has been for some time past undergoing a complete repair and restoration under the direction of my brother, Sir Robert Smirke. A work of this nature, requiring at every step the closest observation and the most scrupulous care, is necessarily slow, and its progress was for a while suspended by the late destructive fire, from which this Hall was with difficulty preserved.<sup>a</sup> In the execution of these repairs favourable opportunities present themselves of ascertaining the previous state of the building, and of verifying the changes which it is supposed to have undergone. To these interesting objects of inquiry neither my brother nor I have been indifferent, and it is at his suggestion that I have undertaken, as each part of the work is successively brought under examination, to note down and to submit to the Society of Antiquaries whatever may be thought worthy of being recorded in its Transactions.

As the first fruits of our observations, I beg leave to lay before you a few remarks upon those points which have hitherto more particularly attracted our notice.

<sup>a</sup> It gives me great pleasure to put on record that to the zealous exertions of the contractor, Mr. Robert Johnstone, and of about thirty of his masons who quickly assembled round him on the night of the fire, may be fairly attributed the present existence of this noble Hall.

If we were entirely destitute of historical evidence of the fact, that the construction of this Hall is referrible to at least two very distinct periods, we should yet find conclusive proof of it in the structure itself. I do not mean that its present architecture exhibits to the eye any material diversity of style or date; but there are other indications less obvious, although not less decisive, which I propose to make the subject of my present letter.

At the period when those alterations and new works were undertaken, which gave to the Hall its present character and appearance, the old walls seem to have been left nearly untouched from the pavement up to the bottom of the range of windows, in what may be called the Clerestory; but the greater part of the walls on both sides was, from the string course upwards, faced with a new surface or casing of ashlar stones, consisting chiefly of the Reigate sandstone, and partially of the Caen stone, and of the stone known by the name of Kentish rag. This new surface was in most places brought forward several inches in front of the original surface, the former being superadded without disturbing the latter. In doing this an attempt was evidently made to correct in some measure the irregularities of the side walls in the original building, which are neither straight in the plan, nor parallel to one another, and which also deviate very sensibly from the perpendicular.

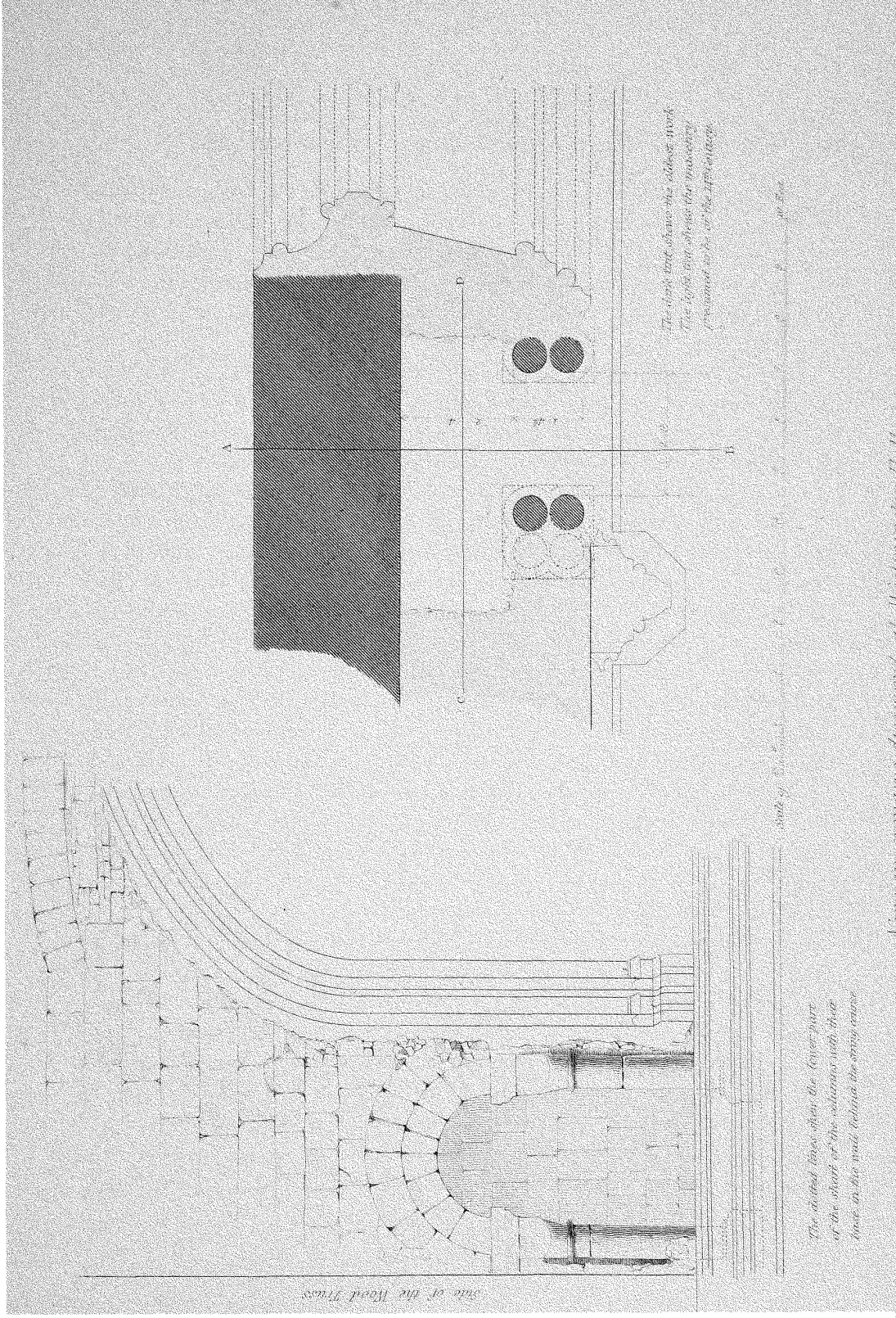
At the same period the present windows were inserted, though not in the places occupied by those which, as I shall hereafter have occasion to remark, lighted the original building. The great trusses of the roof also were then added; and it was then, too, that on the outside, abutting upon the original buttresses, which were of a flat Norman character, the powerful flying-buttresses were added opposite the alternate trusses, in order to resist their great lateral thrust. Of all the above works there is the most distinct evidence.

On recently removing the stones which formed the second, more modern, surface, a measure rendered necessary by their decayed and mutilated state, many of them were found to be moulded, and to have belonged to some previously existing building; the moulded face being set inwards, with the plain back, or bed, outwards. Most of these moulded stones had certainly formed a part of the more ancient Hall, as will be shewn hereafter; whilst a few must have belonged to some other, later building, being carved, painted or gilt, much in the manner of St. Stephen's Chapel.

That the present windows belong to this second period became obvious (without reference to their form and style) on removing the stones which composed their wide bevelled jambs ; for many of these stones were found to have their backs worked or moulded, and a vast number of fragments of small circular shafts were discovered lying promiscuously among them, together with portions of Norman capitals and bases.

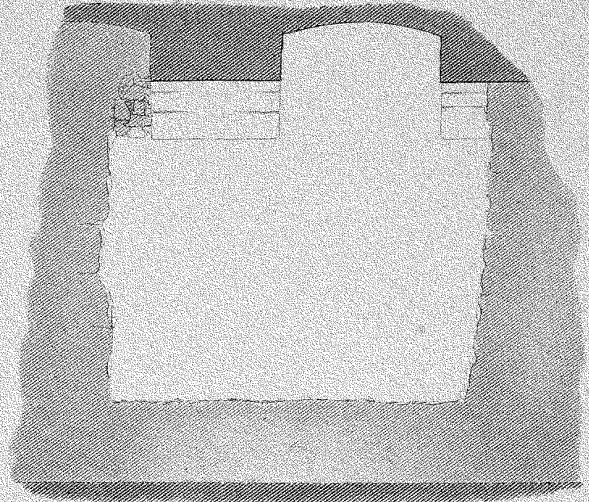
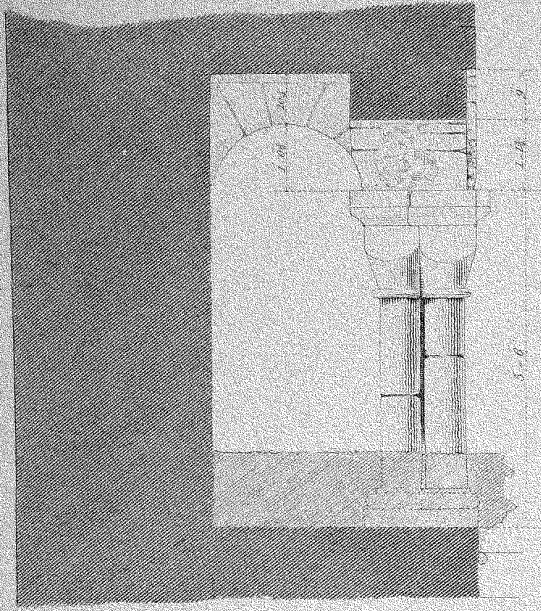
But still more important indications of the earlier architecture of the Hall have been brought to light. On examining the *original face of the walls*, laid bare in many parts by the removal of the subsequent ashlar, traces of the former existence of a kind of arcade, or gallery, became visible, and at once accounted for the innumerable fragments of small columns above alluded to. This gallery consisted, it appears, of a range of small circular arches springing from a square moulded impost, supported by small columns in clusters of four together. That these arches continued along both sides of the Hall, is to be inferred from the actual occurrence *in situ* of many portions of them, at every part of the walls hitherto examined: and at the southern extremity of the east and west sides of the Hall considerable portions remain undisturbed. On the east side one perfect arch, with its impost and columns, is laid open to view, the interior of the cavity having been loosely filled with rubble masonry: on the west side, and immediately opposite to the above, a similar arched cavity was found, and I may add, that the manner in which this last mentioned cavity was left without any filling in whatever, and yet with an enormous additional weight imposed upon it, had occasioned a very serious failure in the superincumbent work. As the drawings which accompany this letter (see the Plates XLVI. XLVII.) will probably explain the details of this arcade more satisfactorily than any verbal description, I abstain from any further, more minute detail. The arches and columns are purely Norman in their character, and there need be no hesitation in referring them to the earliest period of the building. Unlike the ecclesiastical triforia, which usually opened into the roof of the aisles, this arcade appears to have opened into a very narrow passage running longitudinally, and obtained in the thickness of the walls, like that in the church of St. Cross, the keep of Rochester Castle, and many other buildings. The soffite of this passage was vaulted over with a flat segmental arch, and the sides of it were very thinly coated over with fine plaster, and jointed with

*remains and part of the wall, including the Norman porch in the south-east. Much of which was recently exposed to view and which remains part of the church destroyed by the alterations in the 17th Century.*



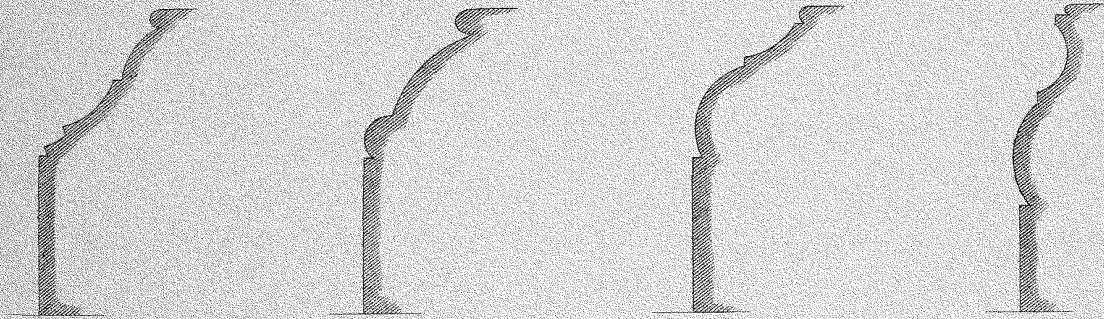
*West front of the choir part of the church at Heyminster Hall*

*Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London, April 1875.*

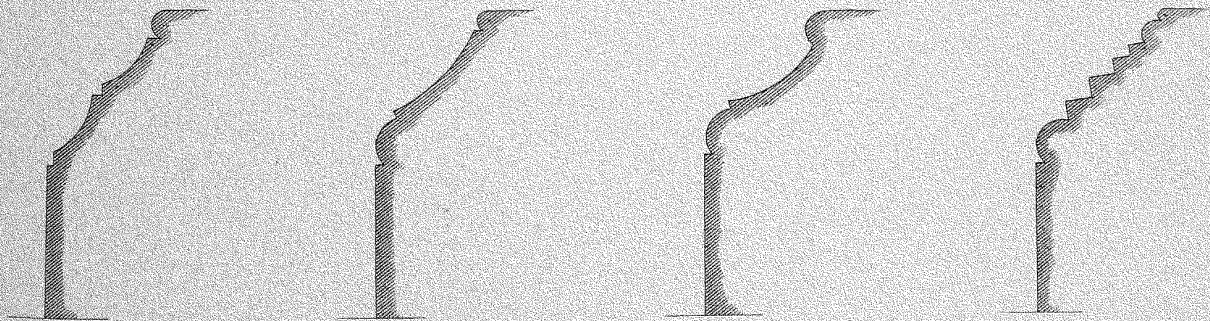


The sectional lines here referred to are marked upon the Plan, Plate XLVI.

Scale of 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Feet



Sections of various bases of columns found on removing some of the masonry of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

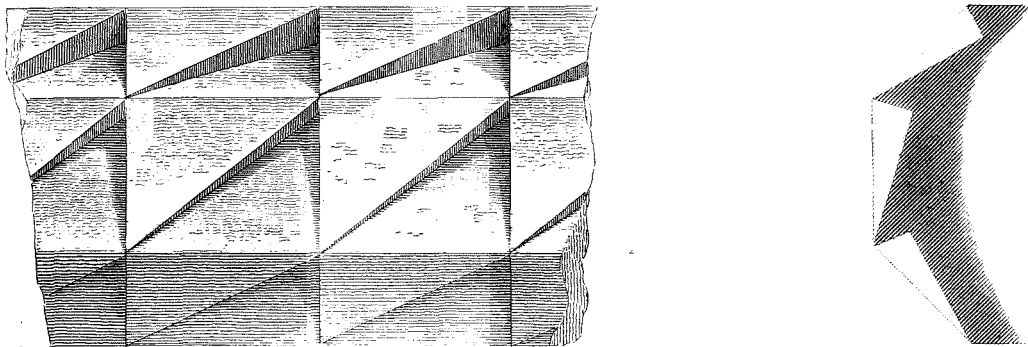


Scale 4 of the full size.

*Norman remains discovered at Westminster Hall.*

brown lines in imitation of masonry ; the columns and imposts were painted with bright colours, among which red and black or dark brown are very discernible. There is also reason to believe, from several small portions of the original surface that have been detected, that the general surface of the walls, both above and below these arches, was similarly finished, and ornamented with rich and minute painting, probably of some subsequent date.

In many places there have been brought to light unequivocal proofs that, alternating with the above-mentioned small arches, much larger arches occurred at regular intervals, which formed apertures in the wall having plain square reveals, and which were undoubtedly windows lighting the original Norman Hall. The heads of these apertures were circular, and were ornamented on the inside with a plain Norman archivolt,



consisting of a round and hollow, springing from a moulded impost which was continued, as a string-course, throughout the whole length of the Hall. On the outside a column appears to have ornamented the salient angle of the reveal, with a moulded base resting on a string-course, carved on its face in the plain rude manner of early Norman work, and much resembling a string-course at Waltham Abbey.

Besides these windows on the east and west side walls, there were others corresponding with them in every respect at the south end, two of which remain distinctly visible within the Hall on each side of the great south window; these were found to have been filled in with masonry, and concealed from view by a thin coat of plaster. There is no doubt therefore that the Hall formerly received a portion of its light from the south end, like the lesser hall of the palace (called by Stow the White-hall, and now used as the temporary House of Commons) which was lighted from the south end by the three circular-headed windows ornamented with a zigzag moulding, and still visible in the outer wall of that building.

To what use the long narrow passage or Alure above-described could have been applied, must, I presume, continue the subject only of conjecture; it would, however, at least be convenient in giving access to the windows, and in affording the means of suspending tapestry or other hangings, which on state or festive occasions no doubt clothed the walls from the string-course downwards.

In Strype's time a series of banners also appear to have projected from the walls, probably at the level of the string-course, but I know not whether a similar practice prevailed in the early times to which we are now alluding. Ready access could have been obtained to this gallery from the contiguous parts of the palace, and the adjoining collegiate buildings of St. Stephen's.

In thus reverting to the principal features of the Hall previous to the important alterations which it underwent at the close of the fourteenth century, I must not omit to mention the doorways that connected it with the surrounding buildings. Four of these appear to have opened at the level of the pavement, which by their square reveals and plain circular heads, are identified with the earliest period of the work. One of these was found at the upper or south end, near the south-east angle, and must have led directly to the lower end of the White-hall, or lesser hall of the palace. Another door was traceable on the west side, which, with a third on the same side at the lower or north end, gave access to the buildings which probably abutted upon the west side of the Hall. Clear indications of a fourth are observable in the eastern wall at the lower end and opposite the last mentioned door. This last appears, from the position of the rebates, to have had gates opening inwards, and to have given

access to the Hall from the outer court of St. Stephen's. By a patent, dated 43<sup>d</sup> of Edw. III. alluded to by Stow,<sup>b</sup> we are informed that, among other privileges granted by that monarch to the Dean and Canons of St. Stephen's, they enjoyed a free passage, or right of way, through the great Hall to their chapel during daylight. It is not therefore improbable that this free passage lay through the two last-mentioned doors, viz. those east and west, at the lower end of the Hall; and this leads to the further conjecture that the Hall was originally planned more in accordance than at present with the usual arrangement of such state apartments; having the customary screen or *sperre*, enclosing the two opposite entrances, occupying the lower end. These two doors, however, together with the privilege alluded to, must have ceased to be used when the alterations were effected in the reign of Richard II.

Having brought before you some of the more material practical evidences of the existence of the Hall under an aspect very different from that which it now wears, I will close my present communication, by a few observations on the construction and materials of the Norman work. The great body of these walls appears to be composed of the rudest sort of rubble work laid nearly at random, and embedded in an abundance of mortar; the stones are all small and various in their nature; I have observed among them many fragments of chalk and of chalk flints; many of the rounded nodules of ferruginous clay, known as septaria or cement-stones, which occur in abundance on the south beach of the Nore; some masses of the petrified wood common in the same locality; also irregular blocks of the Kentish rag, described in old documents as *grisix petrx*; pieces of Caen stone, and of the firestone or Reigate sandstone; a few pieces of red and pale-coloured bricks are found, but these very rarely occur. The mortar in which all these heterogeneous stones were embedded, does not appear to have been used so thin as to have the fluidity of *grout*, and was made of chalk lime with coarse gravel and pit sand; it is lamentably deficient in strength, the chalk lime was so imperfectly pulverised that pieces of it, pure and unaltered, pervade the whole of the mortar. I have observed no where any of those comminuted shells which are found in the mortar used in constructing the White Tower, Rochester Castle, and other early buildings.

<sup>b</sup> Survey of London, 1720, vol. ii.

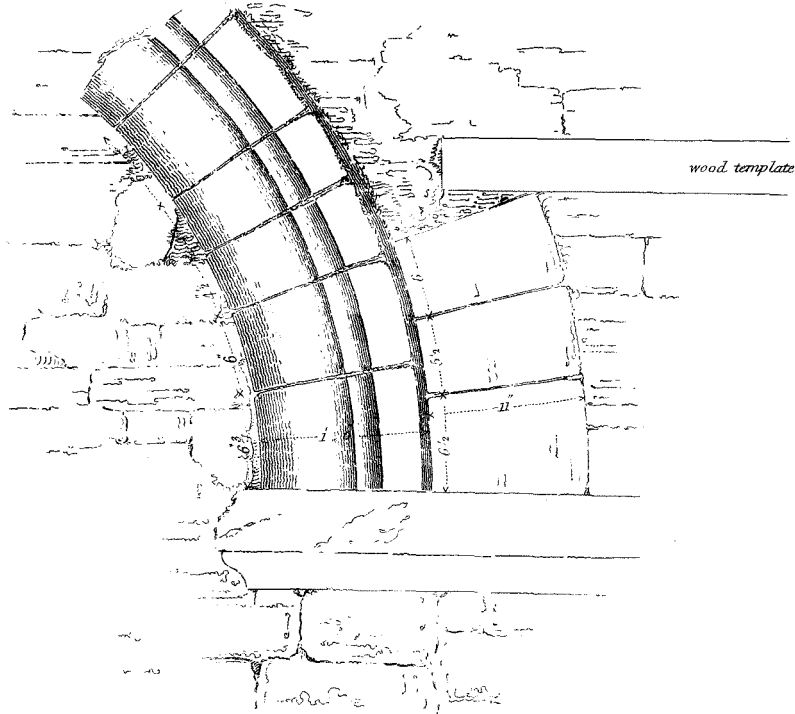


This rubble walling was cased on the outside with small roughly squared ashlar laid in courses, and on the inside, from the bottom of the clerestory upwards, there was a similar casing consisting of small squared stocks, chiefly of freestone, only a few inches thick, and having but little bond to connect them with the rubble : from the clerestory downwards there was no casing, the surface of the rubble work having been probably smoothed down with a coat of plaster. At the ground level the four doors mentioned above as having apparently formed part of the earliest architecture of the Hall, present an anomaly in respect to the stones with which their circular heads and jambs were worked. They are of a coarse shelly limestone, no where occurring, as far as we have yet observed, in any other part of the building, and appearing in many respects to resemble the Quarr Abbey stone of the Isle of Wight.

The columns of the arcade in the upper part of the walls, were made for the most part of a large-grained oolite, resembling the coarser varieties of Caen stone.

The arches, both over the Norman windows, and over the small arched openings between them, I find chiefly turned in the Reigate stone, a freestone which appears to have been extensively used throughout this palace.

I cannot speak in terms of any commendation of the excellence of this part of the masonry ; many of the voussoirs are scarcely cuneiform ; no attention was paid to making such an arrangement of joints as to ensure a key-stone at the crown of the arch, and the joints are themselves very clumsy, being often half an inch, sometimes even three quarters of an inch in thickness, and filled in with a very weak, friable mortar ; an evil rendered the more important by the singularly small dimensions of the archstones generally, as will appear by the following sketch, which represents a portion of one of the Norman window heads on the west side of the Hall.



In the plain ashlaring also, I observe a disregard to the proper over-lapping of the vertical joints.

These technical facts, though trifling, are not without interest in their bearing upon the history of English Architecture. If we find workmanship of so rude a character in the principal Hall of the Royal Palace, we may safely assume that, at this period, good and experienced masons were wanting; and this confirms the supposition of Somner and others, that the efforts of Anglo-Saxon architecture were of a humble character, and that previously to our connection with the Norman duchy even churches were, for the most part, rude structures of timber.

I remain, dear Sir,  
yours very faithfully,  
SYDNEY SMIRKE.

## POSTSCRIPT.

ALTHOUGH not strictly connected with the subject of my letter, I cannot omit to take this early opportunity of putting the Society in possession of a fact lately brought under the observation of my brother, which, it is believed, has escaped notice.

It has been ascertained beyond any reasonable doubt, that the present walls of St. Stephen's Chapel were formerly surmounted by a Clerestory, containing an upper range of windows, probably of large dimensions. The destruction by fire of all the wood-work and other materials which enveloped the upper part of the building, has brought into view decisive indications of this upper story, the existence of which receives strong confirmation from several expressions used in the original accounts for the works at the chapel, and also from some old engravings by Hollar and others, of various dates.

I need not add therefore, that the remains in their present state, beautiful as they are, represent the building in its original form and proportion, almost as imperfectly as in its gorgeously painted, gilt, and silvered decorations.

This interesting and unexpected discovery has been made by Mr. Mackenzie, whose observations I have taken pains to verify by actual inspection. I am sure you will agree with me in regarding it as a fortunate circumstance that his Majesty's Office of Woods and Works, at the suggestion of my brother, has directed the remains of this public monument, interesting alike to the historian and antiquary, to be examined, collated, and delineated with scrupulous fidelity by an artist so eminently qualified for the task. By these means the most ample memorials of the work will be preserved, and the materials for its restoration will be stored up, as it were for future use, in case the two Houses of Parliament shall eventually determine on recommending the adoption of that course.

S. S.

*May 27, 1835.*