XI. *Additional Observations to Mr. Ashpitel's Paper on Chancels*, by JOHN HENRY PARKER, Esq., F.S.A. *In a Letter addressed to SIR HENRY ELLIS, K.H., F.R.S., Director.*

Read February 5, 1857.

Oxford, Jan. 7, 1857.

DEAR SIR HENRY,

I was unfortunately not able to attend the Meeting of our Society on the evening when my friend Mr. Ashpitel read his learned and valuable paper on Chancels, but I have since been favoured with the perusal of it, and have been requested to make some additional observations on the subject. Far be it from me to attempt to answer Mr. Ashpitel; on the contrary, I would rather confirm what he has stated and illustrate it by some notice of the practice in France and England, Mr. Ashpitel having avowedly confined his attention chiefly to Italy. He has clearly demonstrated that in this instance, as in many others, considerable errors and confusion have arisen from a different sense being given to the same word, or from a gradual change in its meaning. We were all probably aware previously that the word chancel is derived from the Latin word *cancellus*, or the Italian *cancelli*, signifying a railing or screen; but it had not occurred to us that the original use of this railing or screen was to protect the chorus or choir from the pressure and interruption of the people while they were singing; hence the two words chancel and choir are synonymous in the sense of the place for singing, but that place is not by any means necessarily the eastern limb of the church. He has shown us that in Italy this singing-place, choir, or chancel, is continually changed even in the same church at different seasons of the year.

In the south-west of France,* as I have myself seen, and, as I am informed, in Spain also, the chorus are usually placed in the middle of the church, with as much space at the east end as at the west, and the congregation assemble on all sides of the choir, a large proportion being placed between the east end of the choir and the altar. The choir is railed off on all sides, and the altar has a separate railing in

* The church of Quimperlè in Britany is built on a very remarkable plan, the principal part of the fabric being circular, with the choir raised on a platform in the centre, and the aisles carried round it at a considerably lower level; both the nave and the apse for the altar being comparatively small and insignificant.

front of it. This custom is common in those provinces which were formerly English—Aquitaine and Gascony, and may probably have been introduced from thence into England. It is certain that in many churches in England the choir extended into the nave and was not confined to the eastern division of the building; it was surrounded by a screen separating it from the nave and aisles, and in some instances there seem evident marks of there having been a screen at the east end also. The choir extended only as far as the stalls, the space eastward of the choir being called the presbytery. In many churches there were small chantry chapels inclosed with screens called *parcloses*, and the space so inclosed for the chantry priests to chant the service was also called a *chancel*, so that there were several *chancels* in the same church. Many of these *parcloses* still remain, and many more have been destroyed within the last few years among the recent *restorations*.

Mr. Ashpitel has pointed out the arrangement of the ancient basilica or law court as the origin of the similar arrangement of the early churches, and the tribune or *bema* at the end forming a semi-circular apsis in which the seats for the priests were arranged in successive steps, exactly like a small Roman theatre, with the bishop's seat at the top overlooking all the rest, the altar being placed at the foot of these steps on the chord of the apse.

He has omitted to mention that the apsis or tribune was railed off by its own separate cancellus, even from the earliest period. The basilica of Trajan, built in A.D. 98, is precisely on this plan, with the Pagan altar on the chord of the apse; and, although there is no cancellus, there can be no doubt that there was one of wood, as the judge who sat behind it was thence called the "*cancellarius*." (See the Plate.)

In the plan of the original church of St. Peter at Rome, built A.D. 330 on the model of a basilica, the cancelli of the altar are distinctly marked, whilst the choir is insignificant and placed on the north side of the nave. In the Saxon cathedral at Canterbury, built A.D. 950, the same plan is copied, but in that instance three altars were introduced in the tribune, which had become the presbytery, besides others in side-chapels, and the choir had taken its place between the presbytery and the nave, nearly the same as in the churches of the twelfth century. It will be observed that there is no procession path round the east end; that custom did not come in until the twelfth century, when a change of the ritual rendered it necessary. The church on the island of Torcello at Venice is one of the most perfect specimens of this class, being quite unaltered, and should be added to the other examples cited by Mr. Ashpitel. This arrangement continued in use until the twelfth century, and the few stone churches built in England during the Saxon

period, being copied from Roman models, were on this plan. In several instances the semi-circular apse was destroyed, and a flat east end built, in the twelfth century.^a In some cases the plan seems to have been altered during the progress of the work. The old cathedral at Canterbury was on this type, but the arrangement was altered in the restoration after the fire. In the apse at Norwich the bishop's seat of the twelfth century still exists, or did when I was there last, on the top of the wall or solid screen which incloses the choir: it is hidden by modern work, and cannot be seen without a ladder.

Another point which Mr. Ashpitel did not mention, but which is interesting to us in England, is that the chancel, in the modern sense of the word, that is, the eastern division of the church, is not, in strict legal phraseology, part of the church at all. The parish is bound to keep the church in repair, but not the chancel, which belongs to the rector, and the rectorial estate is chargeable with the repairs.^b The landowners, who have become lay rectors, generally evade this duty as much as possible, and many chancels have been pulled down to save the expense of keeping them in repair. I remember an instance of a country church and chancel, which had fallen into a very bad state of repair, being rebuilt by subscription, and the lay rector munificently giving a hundred pounds on condition that the plan he approved of should be adopted, in which there was no chancel, so that he saved the rectorial estate not only the expense of rebuilding the chancel, but all future repairs also.

At the time of the Reformation this legal distinction between the church and the chancel was perfectly well understood, in popular language as well as in law. Many chancels were pulled down within a few years after the suppression of the monasteries which had supplied the chorus of monks. To stop this wholesale destruction, the order was introduced in the second Prayer-book of Edward

^a In other instances, however, the east end was originally square, as at Daglingworth, near Cirencester, a church of the ante-Norman period, which is also divided by two stone arches into three distinct portions: the Sanctuary, or place for the altar; the Choir, or place for the chorus; and the Nave, or place for the people. The same divisions may be noticed in other long narrow churches of later date, probably re-built upon old foundations, as Besselsleigh, Berkshire.

^b In the Constitution of Archbishop Gray, A.D. 1250, after directing what things the parishioners are bound to provide, it is ordered that "all other things shall belong to the rectors or vicars, according to their several ordinations; that is, the *principal* chancel, with the reparations thereof, as to the walls, and roofs, and glass windows, with desks and benches, and other decent ornaments, that they may sing with the Prophet, Lord, I have loved the comeliness of Thy house."—Johnson's Canons, vol. ii. p. 177.

In the Legatine Constitution of Othobon, A.D. 1286, "And let them also cause the *chancels* of the church to be repaired by those who are bound to do it in the manner before expressed."—p. 232.

In both these cases it is evident that more than one chancel to each church was usual.

VI. that “chancels shall remain as they have done in times past.”^a Numerous instances might easily be cited in which the chancels were destroyed at that period, the chancel-arch walled up, and a window of the debased Perpendicular Gothic in use at that time introduced, as the Abbey Church at Shrewsbury, Fotheringhay in Northamptonshire, Deerhurst in Gloucestershire, and numerous others,—probably each Fellow of this Society could supply instances from his own neighbourhood. In other cases the chancel-arch was walled up, and the chancel applied to some other use, such as a family burial-place, as at Arundel in Sussex, Dunster in Somersetshire, and many others. Several of these have, however, been restored to use in the recent restorations, which have done some good, as well as much harm from hasty indiscriminate zeal.

The order that the two Tables of the Commandments should be put up at the east end of the *church* does not mean of the chancel, but at the chancel-arch; and the chancel-arch was very commonly blocked up, either with a wall, or a partition of boards or plaster, against which these two Tables were placed. Beneath these was placed a third *Table*, called indifferently the Lord's Table, or the Lord's Board, or the Communion Table.^b This table or board was ordered to be moveable, and it was probably placed upon trestles, the same as a domestic table in a hall of the same period would have been. Whatever it rested upon certainly formed no part of the table, in the language of that day. The modern upholsterer's usage of the word table, to include the framework and the legs on which it rests, is not above a century old. I have occasionally met with the Tables of the Commandments of the time of Edward VI. or of Elizabeth, still remaining against the boarded partition under the chancel-arch. A Communion-table of that period I do not remember to have met with: they were all removed into the body of the church by the Puritans; and the earliest Communion-tables we find are generally of the time of Charles II. In these the table itself—that is, the board or slab—is always detached, resting on the framework by its own weight only, or else it is fastened with modern nails or screws. This seems to be in conformity with ancient usage, as we find mention in mediæval documents of the “tables

^a This order for the preservation of chancels was objected to by the Puritans on these grounds: “Whether the preservation of chancels be not scandalous to many by confirming them in the superstitious opinion of the holiness of one place more than of another.”—Survey, &c. p. 40.

^b Bucer objected to the communion table being placed on the same site as the altar had stood upon, and his advice was followed by Archbishop Grindal in his Injunctions, and in the second Prayer-book of Edward VI. But in the Injunctions of 1559 Queen Elizabeth ordered the tables to be replaced where the altars had formerly stood.

of the altars.”^a In the legend of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders, in the twelfth century, these are mentioned in a manner that shows that they were detached from the substructure. In the islands of Jersey and Guernsey the Communion-table is usually kept in the vestry, and is brought out into the body of the church when it is wanted for use.^b

Many chancels were rebuilt in the time of Charles II., sometimes in the Italian style, in other instances in an imitation of Gothic work : of this latter class is the well-known chancel of Islip, Oxfordshire, built by the celebrated Dr. South, as recorded by an inscription on one of the tie beams. At this period the altar was always placed against the east wall, and protected by a railing ; the chancel-screens were restored in some few instances, but far more generally the altar-rails only, in conformity with the practice of the early Christian Church, the custom of inclosing the high altar and the chorus within the same solid screen having been only introduced in the thirteenth century, along with the procession-path, and the Lady Chapel. The present altar-rails frequently mark the situation of the ancient screen between the sanctuary and the choir, as in St. Martin's church, Colchester, where the ancient division is very evident. As our present Prayer-book and Act of Uniformity are of the time of Charles II., the practice of those Anglican divines who assisted at this last revision, and the custom of their day, is a safer guide than that of the time of Elizabeth, which is no more binding on us than that of William the Conqueror.

Mr. Ashpitel has demonstrated that the custom of the orientation of churches does not exist in Italy, and never has been the practice in that country. It cannot therefore be a law of the Church ; but it is remarkable that the custom has always been general, almost universal, in France and England, which seems to show an early tradition for it.^c The ancient Gallican Church, and through it the ancient British Church also, was of oriental and not of Roman origin, of which

^a Cardinal Wiseman mentions in his “Fabiola, or the Church in the Catacombs,” a tradition of the Roman Church, that St. Peter used a portable wooden altar, and among the relics preserved at St. Peter's at Rome is a wooden slab or board said by tradition to have been that altar. Cranmer was probably acquainted with this tradition.

^b A few instances also remain in different parts of the country of the Puritan usage, in which the Communion-table is placed in the middle of the chancel, with seats all round it, so arranged that it was impossible to kneel at it. I remember to have seen several of these, but they are fast disappearing.

^c Staveley, in his History of Churches, says, “The chancel at the east end thereof, warranted, *it is said*, by an apostolick constitution.” (p. 154, 2nd edition.) In the margin he gives the Latin, but no reference. I need not remind you that the early canons of the Church, called the Apostolical Canons, were written in Greek in the second or third century. I have just read them through again carefully in John Johnson's translation, but can find no mention of this subject.

many ancient customs give evidence, especially the time of observing Easter, so warmly disputed between the followers of Gregory and the British bishops. The Welsh Church retained its ancient usage in this respect until the twelfth century. Most probably the orientation of churches is part of the same original tradition; but, as many churches are not due east and west, various theories have been started to account for this, the favourite one being the direction of the sun at its rising on the day of the saint after whom it is named. I think it more likely to have been on the day the foundation was laid; but I believe the variation to be generally accidental, arising from situation, or the nature of the soil, or some similar cause.^a Certainly many churches may be found dedicated to the same saint which have very different orientations; the rule seems to have been simply that the direction should be *eastwards*, without regard to the strict point of the compass, whether north-east or south-east.

It has always been, and I believe still is, a disputed point in law, whether the wall which separates the nave from the chancel, through which the chancel-arch is pierced, belongs properly to the chancel or the nave, and whose duty it is to repair it. The consequence of this is, that it is very frequently the oldest part of the church, the chancel having been rebuilt at one period, and the nave at another, and this wall and arch left standing in both, so that the chancel-arch may be of the twelfth century, or even earlier, while the chancel is of the fourteenth, and the nave of the fifteenth. But, as the early chancel-arch was very small, often not larger than a doorway, a larger arch has frequently been made through the wall at a later period. This is the case to a remarkable extent in South Pembrokeshire, where, the material being very hard and difficult to work, these larger arches are cut through the wall, as if they were hewn out of a rock, in a very rude and clumsy manner, the wall through which they are cut being usually very thick, and the task a difficult one.

I remain, dear Sir Henry, yours sincerely,

JOHN HENRY PARKER.

^a The variation of the axis between the nave and chancel is often very remarkable, and has given rise to various theories to account for it. The most usual cause I believe to be, that the two parts of the building were erected at different times, and the ground-plan laid out carelessly, which was frequently the case in mediæval work, even when the superstructure would have led us to expect extreme care. The most remarkable instance of this deviation is the cathedral of Quimper, in Britany; here the chancel is of a different date from the rest of the church, and, I believe, there was something in the nature of the site which prevented the straight line from being followed. In some instances, however, this deviation does appear to have been intentional, and it has not been satisfactorily explained.