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CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARISH CHURCH

§ 1. The early history of the English parish church is obscure, owing to the fact that architectural remains of the earliest fabrics are somewhat scanty, and that their actual date still affords ground for dispute. The episcopal constitution of the Romano-British church is not fully known; but it is probable that, as in Gaul, every considerable centre of population possessed within its walls a church, which followed the 'basilican' arrangement common to the Christian churches of the Roman empire. But while, on the continent of Europe, the ecclesiastical history of the chief provincial capitals remained unbroken, and the great cathedrals of the middle ages rose upon sites which had been, from the establishment of Christianity in the empire, the centres of the religious life of Roman cities, the continuous history of church-building in England was broken by the relapse into

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heathenism which followed the victorious invasions of the Saxons. The history of church architecture begins again with the coming of St Augustine in 597 A.D. Of churches which may reasonably be said to have been built as an immediate result of his mission, there are several remains in Kent; and the famous church of St Martin at Canterbury is probably in large part the building which he and his companions used for their first services. There is more than one theory as to the original extent of the church; but there can be little doubt that the western part of the chancel, the south wall of which is built of Roman brick, is of Augustine's time. Bede tells us that Augustine found an earlier church, built during the Roman occupation, on this site or on a site closely corresponding to it. It is safe to assume that he repaired this building, and spared all that he could of its materials. Apart from the Kentish churches there remains, on the remote part of the Essex coast, a building known as St Peter's on the Wall, which appears to be connected architecturally with the Kentish group. Its history cannot be traced back earlier than about 653 A.D., when St Cedd was sent from Northumbria to preach to the East Saxons. One of his two chief missionary centres was the Roman city of Othona, then known as Ythanceaster, at the mouth of the Blackwater. Here he ordained and baptized: he also, says Bede, built churches in

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several places. St Peter's on the Wall, now long disused, stands on the site of the eastern gateway of Othona, and is largely built of re-used Roman material. It presents difficulties of site and plan which forbid us to connect it positively with St Cedd; but there is a high probability that it is his church, while, in point of plan, it is too closely allied to the Kentish group to admit of a doubt as to its connexion with those churches. The actual way in which the connexion came about is, however, a difficult problem to solve.

§ 2. There is much uncertainty with regard to the chronology of pre-Conquest architecture in England. From the actual masonry of the buildings it is difficult to gather much information. Saxon builders shewed little architectural skill: their methods were unprogressive; and the chief criterion by which we may estimate any degree of progress in their work is found in their efforts to develop the ground plan of their churches. The course of architectural evolution between the coming of St Augustine and the Norman conquest suffered more than one serious check. The later part of the seventh century, the age of Wilfrid and archbishop Theodore, was an epoch during which ecclesiastical art flourished. It is now that we arrive at the beginning of the history of the parish church as distinguished from the monastic missionary settlement of early Saxon times.

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The churches which Augustine and his companions had founded at Canterbury and Rochester were churches of monasteries, established as missionary centres in a heathen kingdom. The work of evangelisation was carried on for a century afterwards by the agency of monastic communities. The churches of Benedict Biscop at Monkwearmouth and Jarrow, Wilfrid's churches at Hexham and Ripon, the Mercian churches of Peterborough and Brixworth, were all churches of monks. But, as Christianity grew in the Saxon kingdoms, churches were naturally multiplied. Wilfrid himself was a large land-owner in Mercia, and may be credited with the building of churches upon his lands: the foundation of the monastery of Brixworth and the church of Barnack may be attributed to his influence. His example would be followed by others; and we shall not be far wrong if we look upon the private estate of Saxon times as identical with the early parish. Owners of large estates built churches upon their property; and undoubtedly the growth of church-building on private lands led to that organisation of the ecclesiastical system in England, which was the great work of Theodore's episcopate. During this period, the church plan was founded upon a compromise; but continental influence, if modified by contact with Celtic traditions, was strong; and this influence came from Italy through the channel of the Gallican church.

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§ 3. When Wilfrid died in 709 A.D., the age of religious and artistic activity was already passing. The power of Northumbria was declining; and the record of the next hundred years is one of quarrels between the various tribal kings of Britain. At the end of the eighth century the Northmen appeared on the Northumbrian coast. Significant features of their activity were the destruction of the church of Lindisfarne and the sack of the monastery at Wearmouth. During the next fifty years, while the kingdom of Wessex was rising to the front place in English affairs, the incursions of the Danes became more constant. In 851 A.D. a Danish army took up its winter quarters in England. From Thanet and Sheppey the Northmen extended their ravages over the whole east coast. The army which defeated the East Anglian levies at Thetford in 870 marked its progress across Mercia and East Anglia by the destruction of monasteries, chief among them the abbey of Peterborough. During the next hundred years, under the constant pressure of Danish invasion, little or no church-building can have been done; and it is likely that, for a long time before 870, little progress had been made. In 958 or 959 Edgar the Peaceable succeeded to the throne of Wessex and became master of the whole of England. During his reign, which lasted till 975, the great ecclesiastics who rose to influence at his court, Dunstan, Oswald and Ethelwold, busied

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themselves with the re-establishment of monasticism in England, and the rebuilding of churches. The activity of Oswald in Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and at Ramsey in Huntingdonshire, of Ethelwold at Winchester, Ely and Peterborough, shews how widespread was the area of the destruction wrought by the Danes. This period of revival lasted until the beginning of the eleventh century. The Danish conquest under the heathen Swegen brought more destruction with it, and although Cnut restored the churches which his father had destroyed, it was probably not until the accession of Edward the Confessor in 1042 that another era of church-building began in earnest.

§ 4. During the religious revival under Dunstan and his fellow prelates, the reformers looked once more to the continent for inspiration. Gaul, however, was no longer a possible source. Between England and the French kingdom which was rising on the ruins of the Neustrian monarchy, lay the Danelaw of Gaul, the province of Normandy. Although the abbey of Fleury on the Loire had a strong influence on the revival, intercourse was less restricted with the neighbourhood of the Rhine, where the Austrasian kingdom pursued its existence under the powerful sway of the Saxon emperors who had superseded the house of Charles the Great. It was from monasteries in this district that the restoration

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of the religious life in England was most powerfully helped; and with such help, came inevitably architectural influence. If we are to look anywhere for the immediate origin of such well-known features of pre-Conquest architectural detail as "long-and-short" work or strip-work, it is to be found in the early religious buildings of the Rhine provinces. Their ultimate origin was, no doubt, Italian; but during this period, English building indicates no such close communication with original sources as existed during the period of Gallo-Roman influence. The era of German influence lasted but a short time, and examples of it, though familiar from the peculiar details of their masonry, are comparatively few. The builders of the period immediately preceding the Conquest seem to have been thrown more upon their own resources, and to have abandoned German details gradually in favour of a more simple fashion of building. Certain German features, however, which had been imperfectly developed during the period of revival, persisted in their work; and the closest parallels to the English towers of the eleventh century, so common in Lincolnshire and parts of Yorkshire, are to be seen in western Germany, and in that part of Italy where German influence was most powerful.

§ 5. The development of Norman architecture in England was due to the increasing skill in construction which followed the Conquest. For the building

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of the larger churches, foreign prelates relied on the help of Norman masons, trained in artistic methods far in advance of those which Saxon builders had learned to use. The great aisled churches of the monasteries, Durham, Winchester, Norwich, or Gloucester, planned and built under the superintendence of men who were in close touch with the contemporary art of Normandy, led the way, and provided patterns of architecture which could not fail to exercise an influence upon the smaller churches of the country. In the early parish churches of the Norman period, we cannot expect to find this influence strongly marked. Local masons had little opportunity of acquaintance with the more advanced craftsmanship of the Normans until some large cathedral or abbey church rose in their neighbourhood, and supplied them with a model. Even then their imitation would be rough and uncertain, until practice made perfect their first attempts. The model would also provide them with a plan far beyond the requirements of a parish church, where a single priest served a limited congregation. There was no need of the provision of a large quire or of a number of separate altars: the ritual necessaries were all of the simplest kind. The old plan therefore sufficed in most instances. It is in the masonry that we notice the earliest introduction of modifications and improvements. The thin Saxon walling gives place to more massive construction:

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walls composed of a rubble core with facings of dressed stone take the place of the rubble masonry with through-stone quoins and dressings of the later Saxon period. The recessing of the arch, with shafts in its jambs, becomes gradually understood : the beginnings of the practice were rough and unintelligent, and it was not without difficulty that the local builder learned the structural use of jamb-shafts as supporting and corresponding to the orders of the arch above. Our country churches supply many instances of this faltering treatment of new motives. Here and there it is possible to trace the direct influence of some large Norman building on the work of the country mason. At Branston, four miles south-east of Lincoln, the western tower of the church belongs to the class which is common in the neighbourhood—a class whose origin is earlier than the introduction of Norman influence. Its masonry has several characteristics of the type known as Saxon. But the high arch of its western doorway, and the small arcades which have been introduced, on either side of the doorway, in the face of the tower, shew very clearly that its builder had seen Norman work, and was attempting, roughly, but not without success, to copy it. Further, the arch of its doorway, and the tall shafts, with crocketed capitals, which support it, are beyond doubt closely imitated from the lower arches of the Norman west front of Lincoln minster.

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As the Norman church at Lincoln was consecrated in 1092, the tower at Branston can hardly be earlier than that date, and may be several years later. Such examples as this shew that there is still much to discover with regard to the chronology of the later Saxon architecture, and that the grasp of new methods by native builders was acquired very gradually.

§ 6. We know, from the indications with respect to certain counties supplied by Domesday Book, that in 1086 the number of parish churches in England corresponded closely to the number which existed until the comparatively modern sub-division of parishes. Domesday was not intended to be a directory or clergy list; and the return of the churches existing upon manors depended upon the view which its individual compilers took of their duties. We have seen that the earliest English churches were monastic centres of missionary influence, built on land granted by wealthy converts to Christianity. The revival at the end of the tenth century was also monastic. But, after the age of Dunstan, the monastic ideal suffered an eclipse. The parish churches of the later Saxon age, although many of them had been granted to, and remained the property of monasteries, were for the most part, if not entirely, served by secular priests who were under no monastic obligation. The parish was co-extensive, so far as we can tell, with the estate

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