

CHURCH BUILDING IN CHESHIRE DURING THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

Contributed by Fred H. Crossley, F.S.A.

IN the procession of mediaeval styles shown in the architectural development of the churches of Cheshire, the thirteenth century plays an inconspicuous part. What remained of the period at the commencement of the nineteenth century was dealt with faithfully by the Victorian restorers, who preferred to make a clean sweep of a mediaeval fabric and a fresh start, erecting buildings which no doubt pleased their patrons and probably themselves, but which are of no importance when considered historically, architecturally, or as having the least connection with local tradition or masoncraft. Amongst those churches retaining portions of thirteenth century work which were destroyed, these dates may be included, Coddington 1833, Runcorn 1849, Barthomley 1852, Bidston 1856, Dodleston 1869, Daresbury 1871 and Eastham 1874. In a few cases, as at Runcorn, the remains were important, but nothing was spared.

What is now left to us of thirteenth century date consists principally of the arcades and a window at Prestbury, the arcades and the lower part of the tower at Acton; a doubtful arcade at Eastham, the remains of structural masonry at the east end of the north aisle at Astbury, and, just outside the county (although at one time within it) the nave arcades of the church at Holt. When added together the destroyed and existing work still forms a meagre output for the century, and it is evident that either the earlier buildings sufficed for the needs of the scattered communities, or that the county had not sufficiently recovered from the ravages of the Conquest. We must also allow for later rebuildings in the mediaeval period, but it is usual for some data to be left, if only grave slabs, as at Malpas. Remaining monastic architecture shows that work of importance was not only commenced but continued throughout this century, as exemplified in the nave of St. John at Chester,

Norton priory, and the work of the chapter-house and quire of the abbey at Chester; be that as it may, the thirteenth century cannot vie with the work of the preceding century or with the later important revival of building undertaken in the later years of the fourteenth century. Dealing first with the work now destroyed and of which we have only written evidence, the following extracts will give an idea of the material which disappeared during the nineteenth century.

BARTHOMLEY, 1846. The chancel has an Early English triplet at the east end, and also a lancet, now closed, on the north. The exterior of the chancel is much modernized. (Glynne, *Cheshire Churches*, p. 102.)

The chancel has been twice rebuilt since 1846 and now bears no relation to its former style.

BIDSTON. In 1816 the nave was divided into three bays, and separated from the aisles on each side by three arches, with caps and bases of pure Early English form. Before 1856, the chancel had been divided into two bays, but the arches and pillars had been removed. The east end presented three gables, the centre one wider and higher than the others. No vestige of the chancel arch remained; but there were portions of the work which evidently belonged to an older church, erected about the middle of the thirteenth century. (Ormerod, Vol. 2, p. 468.)

The nave has on each side three low pointed arches, the piers on the south circular; on the north, one circular, one octagon. (Glynne, *ibid*, p. 60.)

The church was entirely rebuilt with the exception of the tower in 1856.

CODDINGTON. The church of Coddington is a low mean building of red stone, surmounted by a wooden bell-tower. It consists of nave, chancel and side aisles, which are divided from the body of the church by three highly pointed arches, resting upon cylindrical pillars with capitals. At the end of the south aisle is a lancet window. (Ormerod, Vol. 2, p. 734.)

The whole fabric of the church was taken down and rebuilt in 1833.

DARESBUURY, 1852. The arcade on the north of the nave has six plain narrow pointed arches with low octagonal piers, having moulded capitals; the west respond dies into the wall—the eastern is a half octagonal pillar with capital of quite Early English foliage. (Glynne, *ibid*, p. 47.)

1871. Daresbury church wholly rebuilt save the tower.

DODLESTON, 1869. On the south side of the chancel is a good single window with a trefoil head and good mouldings of transitional character Early English to Decorated. (Glynne, *ibid*, p. 122.)

The church was entirely rebuilt in 1869. The curious early window is now in the vestry.

NANTWICH. The late Sir Gilbert Scott, in 1854, discovered on or near

the site of the west door some remains of thirteenth century date of a former church; and he was of opinion that the builders of the present church allowed that portion to remain as the oldest feature of the then newly constructed building. This fact explains why at the restoration of the church, the west door was re-constructed in imitation of the Early English style of architecture. (Hall, *History of Nantwich*, p. 330.)

1855. The west doorway is almost Early English, the arch mouldings deep, and one enriched with toothed ornament. The shafts are gone, but the moulded capitals remain. (Glynne, *ibid*, p. 1.)

1893. The west doorway is now restored as an Early English doorway, as a memorial of a probable earlier church in situ.

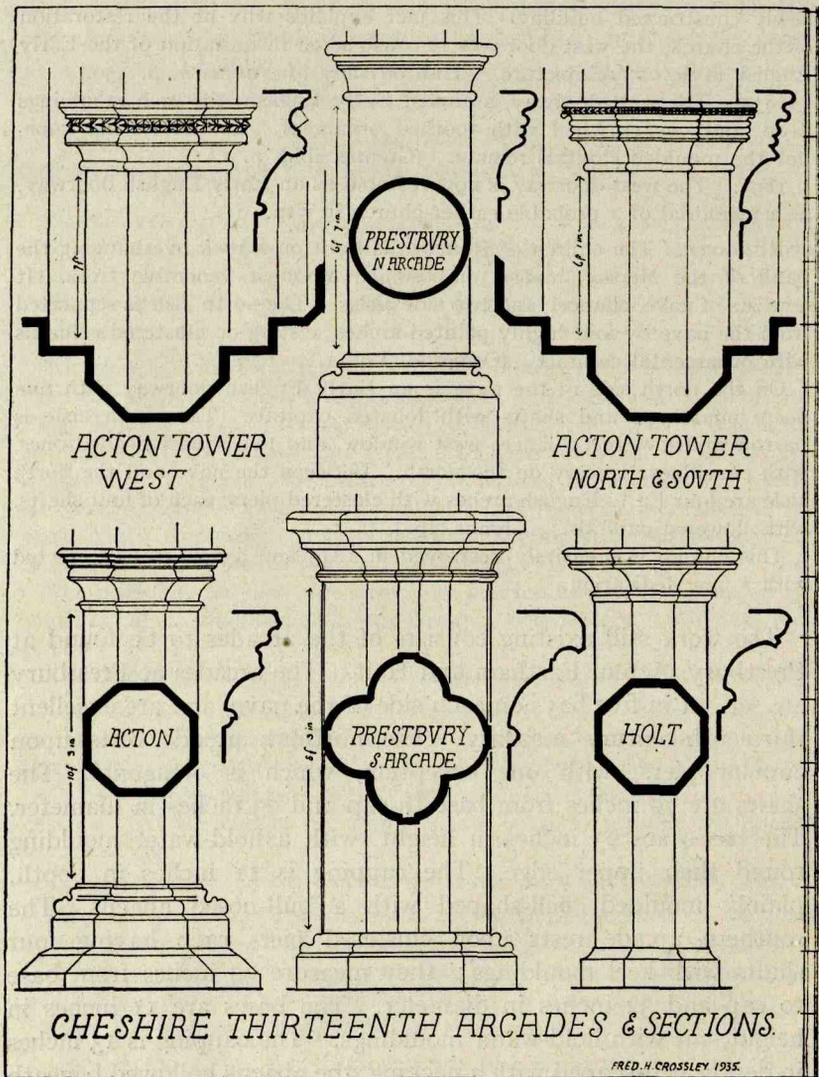
RUNCORN. The church of Runcorn is built on a rock overhanging the bank of the Mersey, and is embosomed amongst venerable trees. It consists of nave, chancel, and two side aisles. The north aisle is separated from the nave by four highly pointed arches, resting on clustered columns with ornamental capitals. (Ormerod, Vol. 1, p. 676.)

On the north side of the nave is an Early English doorway with fine deep mouldings, and shafts with foliated capitals. The north aisle is narrow and low, has a lancet west window, and two square-headed ones, with curvilinear tracery on the north. Between the nave and the north aisle are four Early English arches with clustered piers, each of four shafts, with flowered capitals. (Glynne, *ibid*, p. 55.)

This church was entirely destroyed in 1849 and a new church erected with a new dedication.

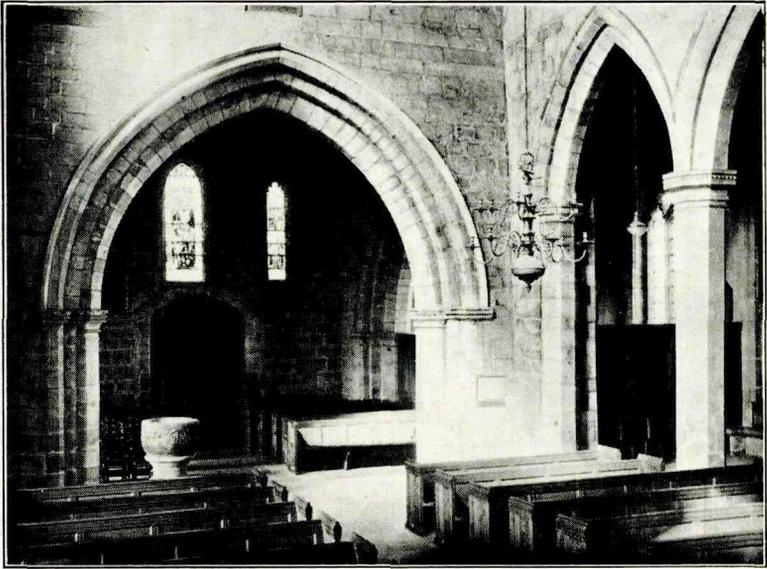
The work still existing consists of the arcades to be found at Prestbury, Acton, Eastham and Holt. The arcades at Prestbury are set out in five bays on each side of the nave, and are excellent thirteenth-century masonry. The northern arcade rests upon circular piers, with one exception, which is octagonal. The shafts are 79 inches from base to cap and 23 inches in diameter. The bases are 23 inches in height, with a hold-water moulding round their upper edge. The capping is 11 inches in depth, plainly moulded, bell-shaped with a bull-nosed abacus. The southern arcade rests upon clustered piers each having four shafts with keel mouldings; they measure 99 inches from base to cap and 32 inches in diameter. The bases are 11 inches in height, cut with hold-water mouldings. The capping is 13 inches in depth, bell-shaped with a necking, the abacus hollowed beneath having a good projection. One capital is enriched with tre-foiled foliage.

The arcades at Acton are in four bays on either side of the nave, and are similar in design. They have acutely-pointed



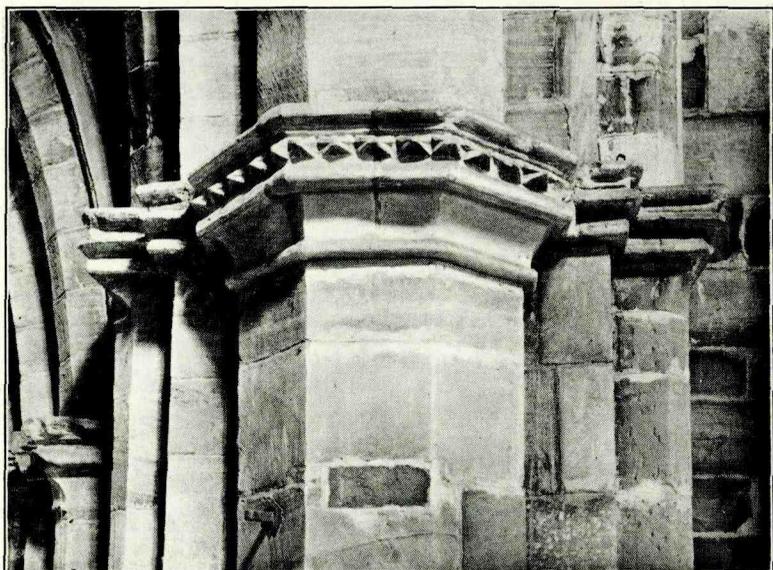
CHESHIRE THIRTEENTH ARCADES & SECTIONS

FRED. H. CROSSLEY 1935.



ACTON, THE TOWER ARCH.

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ACTON TOWER ARCH, DETAIL.

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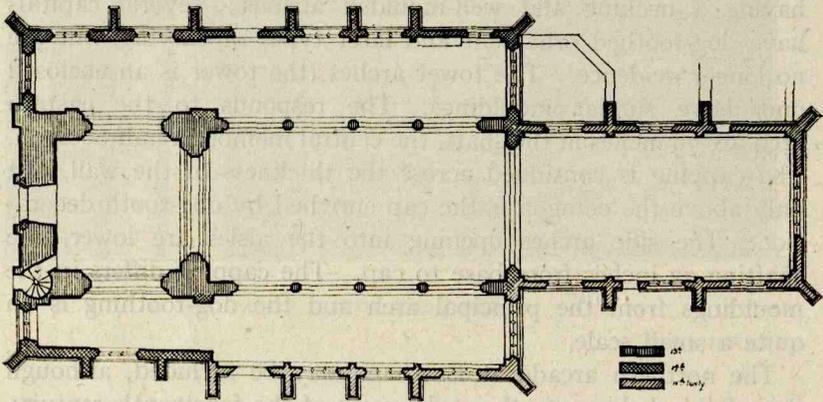
arches with chamfers, surmounted by a small weather-moulding which is connected throughout. The arcades have been drastically restored by Austin and Paley and the carving upon the capitals re-cut and probably re-designed. The shafts of the piers are octagonal, being 123 inches between base and cap and 22 inches in diameter. The bases are enriched, standing upon a chamfered lower stone 8 inches in thickness and 46 inches in diameter. The base proper is 12 inches in height, and is completed with a richly wrought hold-water moulding cut upon the top edge. The capping is also 12 inches in depth, bell-shaped having a necking and well-moulded abacus; several capitals have dog-toothed ornament and later types of carving, but are no longer evidence. The tower arches (the tower is an enclosed one) have similar mouldings. The responds to the eastern arch are 79 inches in the shaft, the central member a half-octagon. The capping is continued across the thickness of the wall, but only above the octagon is the cap enriched by dog-tooth decoration. The side arches opening into the aisles are lower, the shafting 73 inches from base to cap. The capping differs in the mouldings from the principal arch and the dog-toothing is on quite a small scale.

The northern arcade at Eastham may be included, although it probably belongs to the early years of the fourteenth century. Mr. Fergusson Irvine, in his "Notes on the Parish Churches of Wirral," states that it is Early English. Until the drastic restoration of 1874 the chancel retained a lancet window which then disappeared, together with much else of interest. The arcades of the nave are of four bays, the southern a little later in date than that of the north. The arches are fairly low, acutely pointed with chamfered mouldings resting upon short plain octagonal piers 50 inches in height and 22 inches in diameter. The bases are 21 inches, the capping 10 inches in depth, bell-shaped with a necking and a well-moulded abacus, the whole work plain and good.

The nave arcades at Holt are of five bays on each side of the nave, having a 9 foot space between the pillars and only 15 feet between the arcades; they stand upon insignificant bases 7 inches in height with a simple hollow moulding cut round the top edge. The capping is 10 inches in depth, bell-shaped with a necking

and moulded abacus having a 7-inch projection. The general effect is dignified and imposing, owing to the extreme width of the aisles and the narrowness of the nave. The walls of the chancel are of thirteenth-century masonry but have been broken through to make late arcades into the fifteenth century side chapels.

Of other constructional features remaining there is the lower half of the tower at Acton and the east end of the north aisle at Astbury. The former is enclosed, having three arches opening



ACTON, CHESHIRE

F. H. & M. L. CROSSLEY 1916



into the nave and aisles. On plan it measures 32 feet square, the inner walls 5 feet in thickness, the outer or western wall 6 feet 7 inches. On the exterior the tower has clamp-buttresses at the corners with flat pilaster buttresses between the windows. The vice is placed in the south-west corner and is approached from within and without. The exterior doorway has intriguing semi-circular steps. The western doorway was either altered or was an insertion of the fourteenth century; above this however, the triplet of lancet windows has been preserved, the tallest in the centre. From an examination of the masonry employed, consisting of small squared stones, it is obvious that the builders utilised and re-used the materials from the earlier twelfth century

church which stood upon the site, and, as at Neston, proved useful when they came to erect their new and massive tower. This material extends as far as the present roof of the nave, the upper stories being of later date.

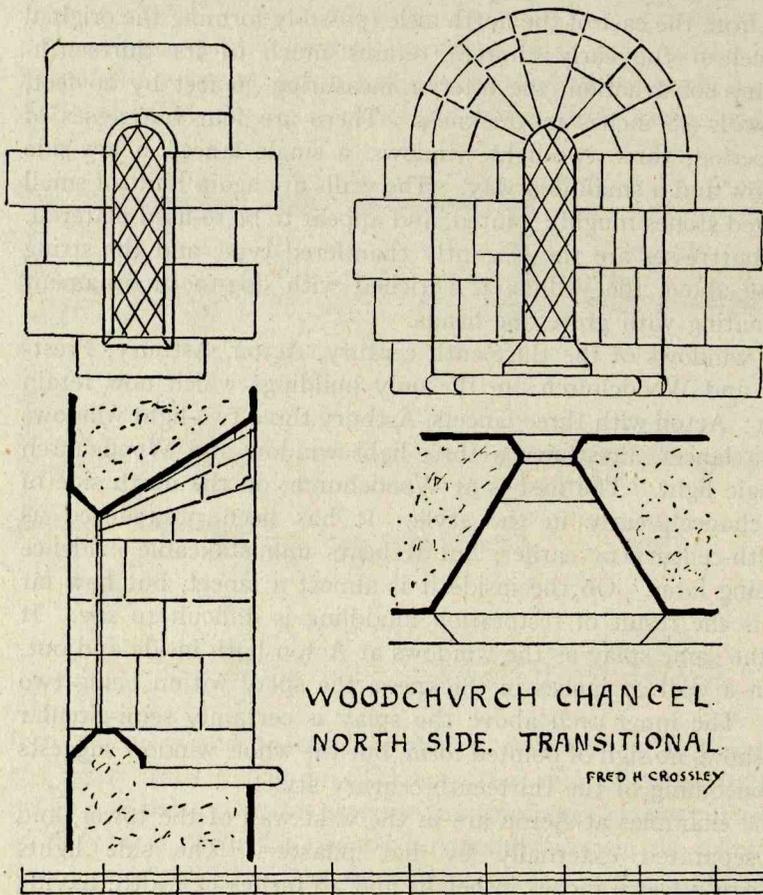
The Astbury work is sparse but interesting. The first two bays from the east of the north aisle (possibly forming the original chancel of the early church) retains much of its thirteenth-century construction, the interior measuring 36 feet by 20 feet, the walls 38 inches in thickness. There are four buttresses of the period, three two-light windows, a single lancet, a low-side window and a small doorway. The walls are again built of small squared stones roughly jointed, and appear to be re-used material. The buttresses are the elegantly chamfered type, and the string course above the walling is enriched with dog-tooth ornament alternating with grotesque heads.

Of windows of the thirteenth century, Acton, Astbury, Prestbury and Woodchurch are the only buildings which now retain them; Acton with three lancets, Astbury three two-light windows and a lancet, Prestbury a three-light window and Woodchurch a single light. The first is at Woodchurch, on the north side of the chancel, early in the style. It has been pronounced as twelfth-century or earlier, but it bears unmistakeable evidence of being later. On the inside it is almost a lancet, but how far this is the result of restoration muddling is difficult to say. It has the same splay as the windows at Acton both inside and out, set in a wall 27 inches in thickness, the splay within being two feet. The inner arch above the splay is certainly semi-circular and shows no sign of pointed form, but the whole window suggests the oncoming of the thirteenth-century style.

The examples at Acton are in the west wall of the tower, and are separated externally by flat pilasters. The side lights measure 7 feet 6 inches in height and 18 inches in width, having sharply-pointed heads; they are treated with great simplicity with a six-inch splay cut round them. Within, however, they assume greater importance, being 12 feet 6 inches in height and 5 feet 9 inches in width, the splay five feet from glass to inside wall and 18 inches in spread. The inside edges are completed by a round thirteenth-century moulding with a fillet, terminating below in moulded bases. The head is four-centred

and the cill horizontal for 4 feet 6 inches, then dropping down at an acute angle.

The two-light windows at Astbury are externally plainly moulded; they are designed with simple tracery dividing the



window into two lancets, with a kite-shaped tracery light between the heads. In form they might be either late thirteenth-century or early fourteenth-century, and are similar to the windows in the south aisle at Bebington in Wirral, which are certainly of fourteenth-century date. The frame has a single chamfer, and the window has a weather-moulding above, and rests upon a

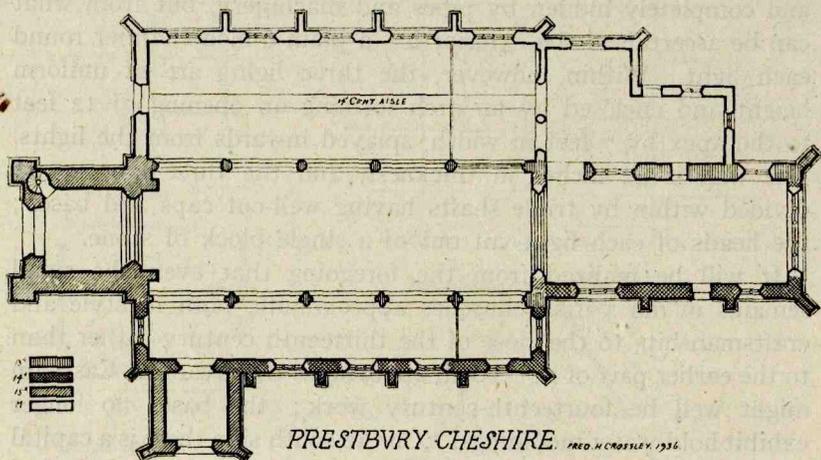
string course below. The windows measure 9 feet by 4 feet and recede 12 inches to the glass. Within, the frame is 12 feet by 7 feet; the sides are splayed and are 21 inches in breadth, completed above by the moulded section of an arc, otherwise the chamfers repeat those of the exterior; the cill within also rests upon a string course. The lancet window and the low-side window are both trefoiled in the head.

The three-light window at Prestbury is on the north side of the chancel, the exterior now inside a modern organ chamber and completely hidden by pipes and machinery, but from what can be ascertained the exterior has a plain 6-inch chamfer round each light. Within, however, the three lights are of uniform height and enclosed by an arch forming an opening of 12 feet to the apex by 7 feet in width, splayed inwards from the lights. The wall is 42 inches in thickness, and the three lancets are divided within by triple shafts having well-cut caps and bases; the heads of each light cut out of a single block of stone.

It will be realized from the foregoing that even the small remains in our parish churches approximate, both in style and craftsmanship, to the close of the thirteenth century rather than to the earlier part of it. To all appearance the arcade at Eastham might well be fourteenth-century work; the bases no longer exhibit hold-water mouldings. On the south side there is a capital enriched with a minute variety of dog-tooth similar to the capital preserved at Waverton, both of them of decidedly fourteenth-century character. Again at Astbury both single windows have trefoiled heads, and the double windows have simple tracery (certainly not bar tracery) suggesting early fourteenth-century style. The two unquestionable examples found at Acton and Prestbury are a small residium to show for such an important architectural century. It is possible to eke out this meagre allowance by reference to the work accomplished by the masons of the Cheshire monasteries. Of Norton the merest fragment remains, of Combermere less and of Vale Royal nothing, but this magnificent pile was not begun until near the close of the century.

Of St. John's, Chester, and St. Werburgh's abbey, now the cathedral, more is left. The triforium and clerestory of the nave of St. John's form two continuous bands of open arcading, one above the other. The work was erected slowly, the nave taking

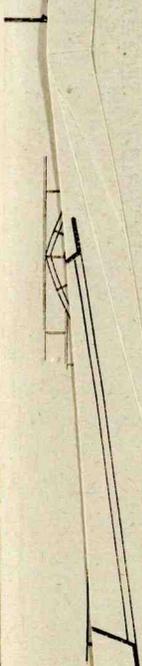
a hundred years to build. The triforium at the east end, by the crossing, upon both sides, is in a transitional stage, retaining its squared bases, caps and abacus; before reaching what is now the west end, the caps have become bell-shaped, the bases remaining square. The clerestory however is the complete product of the thirteenth-century masons, with rounded bases, bell-caps with carved foliage and lighter arches. The columns in the triforium have three shafts with annulets placed halfway



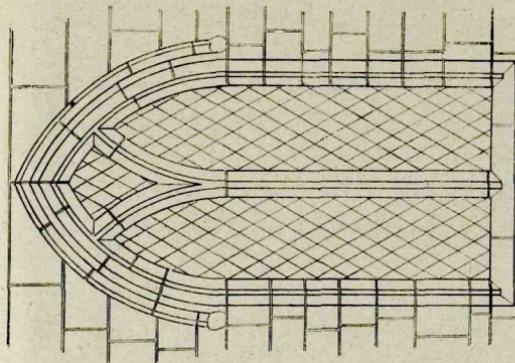
up the shaft, arranged upon three sides of a squared core; in the clerestory the core apparently disappears, being kept behind the shafts, which are brought close together and without rings. Unfortunately, owing to constructional difficulties, it is impossible to traverse either gallery. Four bays on either side survive, enough to judge of the grandeur and impressiveness of the old building.

The abbey or cathedral, like St. John's, has an unreliable exterior. Scott was let loose upon the latter, and everything we see is not to be believed. Indeed, the exterior is more akin to the Victorians than the mediaevalists, and when we have examined it we feel grateful that we have not to impute such

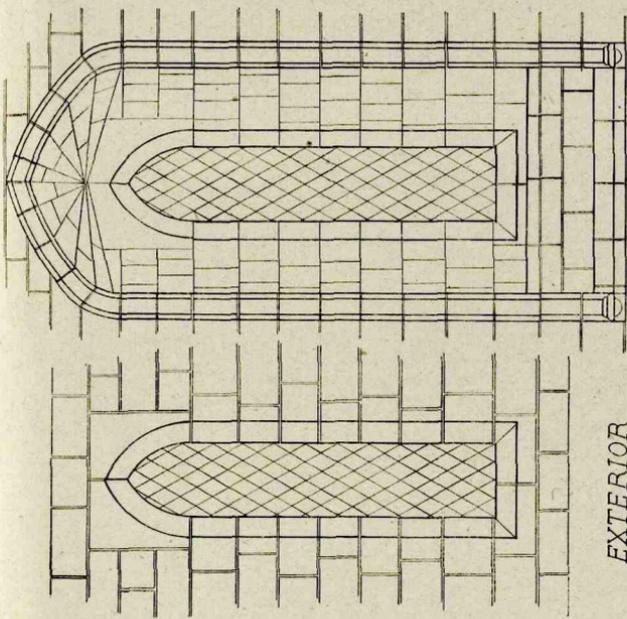
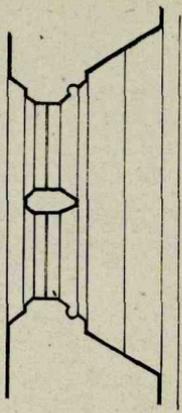
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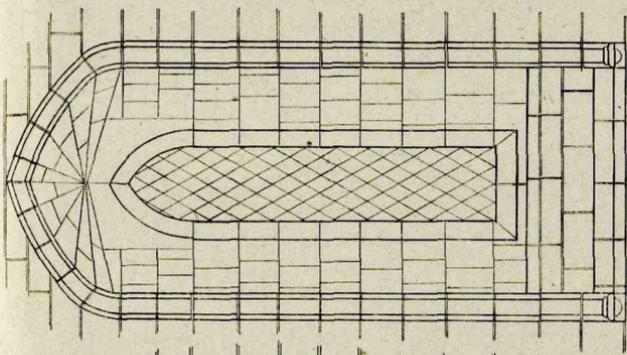
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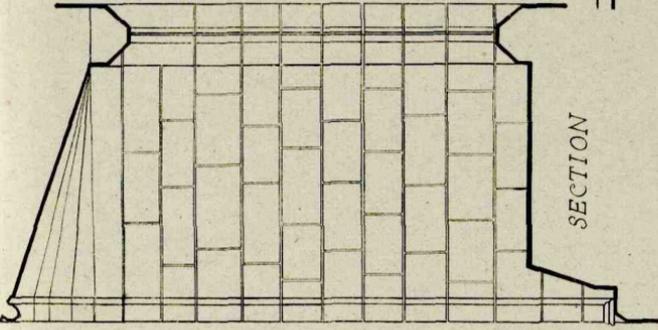
ASTBURY EXTERIOR



EXTERIOR



INTERIOR



SECTION

HCTON TOWER WEST

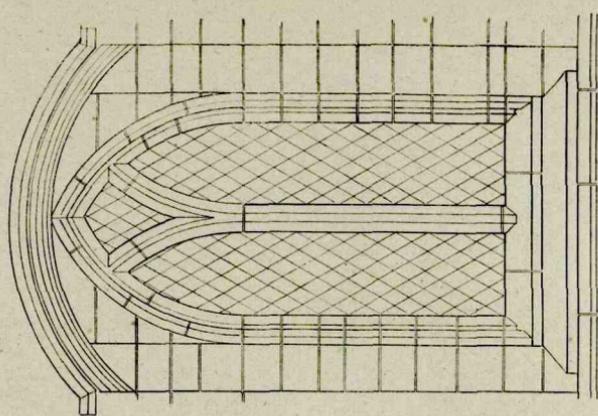
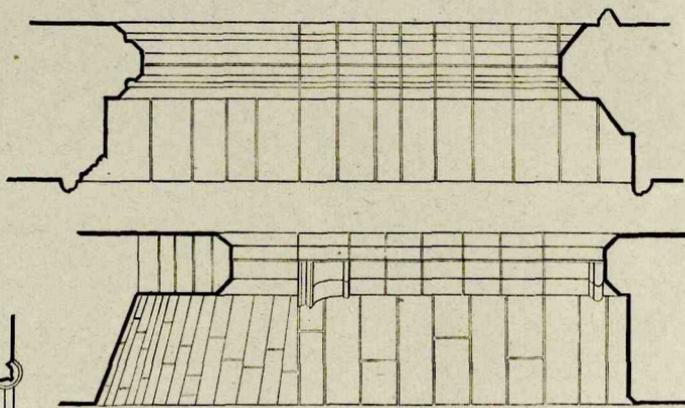
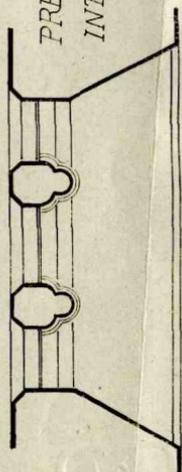
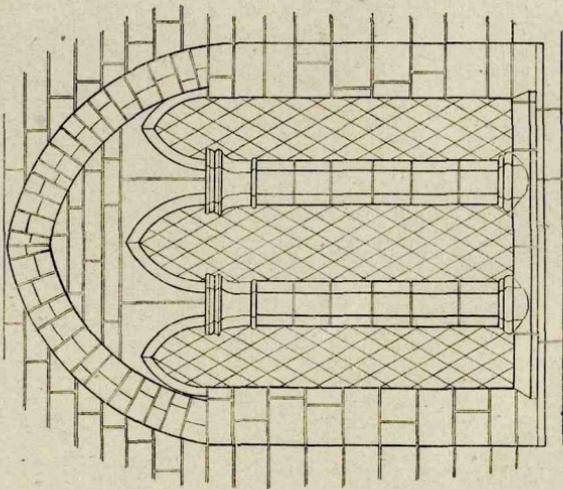
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THIRTEENTH CENTURY WINDOWS

CHESHIRE

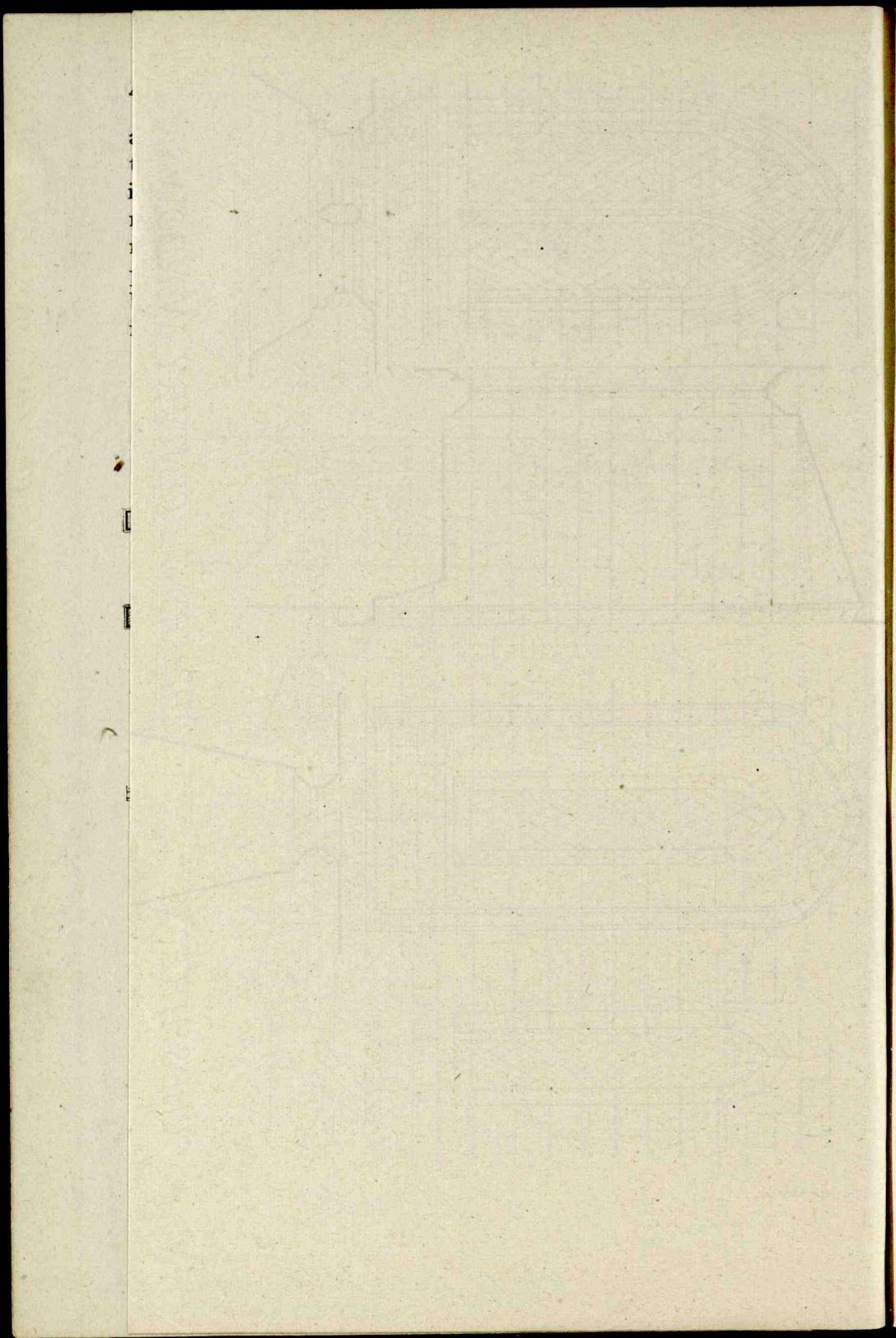
CHESHIRE

THIRTEENTH CENTURY WINDOWS



PRESTBVRY CHANCEL
INTERIOR & SECTION

ASTBVRY NORTH HISEL CHAPEL
INTERIOR SECTION



work to the early masons. The Lady chapel has been entirely refaced, new windowed, and many liberties taken with its form and comeliness. The Street-like pinnacles are in themselves enough to give it away. Inside, however, a little more survives, the inner walls in part and the vault in particular belonging to the thirteenth century. The chapter-house has been less man-handled, but outside again is not to be trusted. Inside it retains its vaulting and windows. The windows are arranged in even triplets, with a passage way at cill level in the thickness of the wall. This has necessitated the beautiful arrangement of separate shafts on the inner side connected by annulets to the exterior wall. It is in fact a double arcading, the outer one glazed. The vaulting ribs come well down the wall between the windows and rest upon short shafts with foliated caps, the shafts corbelled off at cill level. The vestibule to the chapter-house is a charming piece of work, with a low vault divided into nine compartments springing from four piers or shafts without caps, the mouldings of the shafts continuing above as vaulting ribs. The same scheme was used in the fourteenth century in the chapter-house at Valle Crucis, stouter in construction, lacking the slender delicacy and grace of the Chester example.