A REPORT ON THE PRESENT CONDITION OF ST. WINIFRED'S WELL AND CHAPEL, HOLYWELL

ST. Winifred's Well and Chapel are within the churchyard of the Parish Church of Holywell. They are approached by a steep hill known as Welsh Street (*Plate* 1), which leads from the High Street. There is also another road, flanking the west end of the Chapel, called Greenfield Street. The Churchyard is entered through very fine iron gates (*Plate* 2) of eighteenth century date, probably the work of the Davies Brothers of Bersham, near Wrexham. These, at present in a deplorable condition, are well worth careful restoration. Our immediate concern, however, is with the Chapel itself.

This rare building, one of the most important ecclesiastical monuments in Wales (*Plate* 4), was erected in the last quarter of the fifteenth century by Margaret, Countess of Richmond, and occupies the site of an earlier chapel. It is a notable example of late Perpendicular work elaborated with rich carving. The building consists of a nave of four bays, a north aisle of three bays, and a chancel apse of pentagonal shape. The nave and aisle are built over the well, and the chapel is supported on fine stone columns which rise from the rock base of the well chamber.

The well chamber is remarkable for the elegant stone groined roof and the elaborate carving of the bosses (*Plate* 16). The piers are richly moulded (*Plate* 18) and, considering that little or nothing has been attempted in the way of restoration, the masonry is remarkably sound and free from mutilation. It will be necessary to examine the piers (*Plate* 15) carefully to ascertain if any weaknesses have developed, particularly as there is a possibility that the chapel above was a later addition. If this is the case the well chamber cannot be more than a quarter of a century anterior to the chapel. Beyond cleaning and pointing of the stone, and the replacement of broken tracery (*Plates* 16 *and* 18), the amount of restoration work required is not extensive; although much tracery and carving has been lost, sufficient remains for a competent architect and sculptor mason to make a careful follow on. As may be expected, the walls and piers within easy reach of the ground are defaced with countless names and dates cut

into the stone (*Plate* 17). The accumulation of crutches and disused aids to walking placed against the south wall is a disfigurement, but beyond harbouring dirt and mould would appear to be no great detriment to the fabric as a whole. When the work of restoration is put in hand, the Holywell Urban District Council as the owners of the well and the well chamber should, with the assistance of their tenants, the Roman Catholic Church, work in association with the Church in Wales, the owners of the chapel. The fact that the chapel is solely dependent upon the structure of the well chamber for its safe survival encourages the hope that one architect will be entrusted with the restoration of the fabric as a whole. It is reasonable to presume that the owners of the well chamber and their tenants, both of whom derive financial benefit from the well and its building, will raise sufficient funds to defray the cost of restoration without being involved in a heavy capital outlay.

As regards the chapel above, the position is totally different; nothing appears to have been attempted in the way of restoration or preservation since the building was completed. Later generations have mutilated the mediaeval splendour of the chapel, and within comparatively recent times much hurtful damage has occurred. No architect in my opinion could give a reliable estimate of the repairs required. The reparation of the chapel must obviously be a labour of love entrusted to the hands of capable masons and one or two competent carpenters under the direction and supervision of an able architect. The masonry is much weathered, and considerable replacement is inevitable. Restoration will call for individual examination of each stone, and although extensive recasing would simplify the work, this Victorian expedient is quite unthinkable.

The carvings on the string courses (*Plates* 4 *and* 5) have survived surprisingly well, and the only new embellishment required is the replacement of the animals on each face of the caps which surmount the octagonal buttresses of the nave (*Plate* 5). Skilful dressing and hardening of the stone will greatly benefit the building, and pointing is centuries overdue. For some reason difficult to explain, the original roof was removed *circa* 1700, and the present unsatisfactory gabled and slated affair substituted (*Plate* 5). As this is in dire need of immediate restoration, it is recommended that the existing erection with the offending brick

gables be stripped down and a new roof erected to conform with the original plan. Possibly the chapel was formerly surmounted by a moulded parapet—the comparative smallness of the nave and the delicacy of the strings would, I think, rule out the possibility of a battlemented terrace.

The South Porch has entirely disappeared (*Plate* 8), and as the South Doorway is the only entrance into the chapel if the east end is restored to its original levels the advisability of a suitable new porch may be considered.

As a result of many centuries of disturbance in the churchyard, the level of the ground at the south and east end of the chapel has been raised fully six feet, and if practicable this accumulation should be removed (*Plate* 4). If objection is raised to the moving of the old graves which abut on to the east end of the fabric, the only other suggestion—although not nearly so effective as the entire removal of the earth—would be to dig a trench away from the walls of the sanctuary and the south side of the nave, and shore up the bank with a strong retaining wall. This procedure would assist the fabric of the building, but would not restore the yard to its original level, or disclose the true beauty of the building. If the entire accumulation were removed, however, proper drainage to take the water away from the walls could then be effected, and a greatly improved perspective of the building could be obtained. In its present form the yard is raised to the sill levels of the chancel windows, and the east window of the apse actually serves as a doorway giving access to the chapel (*Plate* 6). Of the original five windows of the chancel, only two remain admitting light (*Plate* 4), and one of these is fitted with wooden tracery. On the north side of the chancel apse there is an appalling modern structure which contains the heating apparatus for the adjacent Parish Church (*Plate* 7). The removal of this example of the degradation to which the chapel has been subjected will enable the northern windows to be restored, and the entire east end immeasurably improved. Similarly the east window which now serves as a doorway (*Plate* 6) will require new stonework and tracery, all conforming to the original pattern.

The interior of the chapel is still remarkably beautiful despite the neglect and mutilation inflicted upon the mediaeval work. The chancel arch (*Plate* 9), indeed the entire east wall of the nave, gives the impression that this work is earlier in period

than the chapel as a whole, and it is quite probable that this part of the building may be work of a previous chapel. The floor of the Sanctuary (*Plates* 9 *and* 10) has been raised some four feet above the original level which, when constructed in the late fifteenth century, would be approximately two feet above the level of the nave and probably divided from it by a low stone screen surmounted by a rood (*Plate* 10). The raising of the chancel floor to its present level was probably completed about a hundred and fifty years ago if the existing protecting rails and pulpit (*Plates* 9 *and* 10) are a reliable guide. When the appalling brick division (*Plate* 10) is removed and the levels corrected, the whole will be greatly improved.

There are three windows on the south side of the nave (*Plate* 4) and one on the north, each of three lights with transom and pleasing head tracery. The mullions and transoms are much weathered, but with care replacement could be avoided. New glass is needed in the majority of the lights. The large west window (*Plate* 5) of five lights with transom is comparatively new and a fairly satisfactory follow on to the mediaeval work. The north aisle contains three windows which overlook the bath of the well, each of three lights and elaborated with excellent tracery. Similar windows are at the west and east ends of the aisle, the eastern one having been ruthlessly filled in to serve as a wall for the wretched boiler house (*Plate* 11).

The extreme east pier of the north aisle, adjacent to the chancel arch, is slightly chamfered off (*Plate* 11), giving access to a round-headed doorway which may originally have led to the Well. On the other hand, it may possibly be the original doorway which led to the Rood. This doorway (*Plate* 11) penetrates approximately two feet, veering to the south, where a secondary doorway is blocked up with a miscellaneous collection of brick and stone. If this is opened out, the original intention will probably become clear.

Of the three clerestory windows over the north aisle arcade, only the centre one (*Plate* 13) of three lights remains. The glass is lost and the window is filled in with wood. Replacement of the two missing windows should present little difficulty, and the piercing of the clerestory wall, by disposing of the later offending masonry, will restore the north wall to its original appearance.

The chancel, nave, and aisle roofs (*Plates* 12, 13 *and* 14) are

coeval with the building, and, although in a deplorable state of neglect and decay, sufficient remains to indicate that they were formerly of great beauty. The nave roof is divided into four bays. It is of panelled camber-beam construction with a ridge and four purlins, with an intermediate rafter, forming twelve panels to the bay (*Plates* 12 *and* 13). The ridge is heavier than the purlins and the boarding, partially modern, is longitudinal. All the main and secondary timbers are well moulded, and the whole was embellished with delicately carved bosses of which only five remain. I have it on the authority of the vicar that in former times it was the custom in Holywell, when a marriage took place between manorial parishioners in the neighbouring church, for a boss to be removed from the roof of St. Winifred's chapel and presented to the bridegroom. The persistency with which bosses have been removed lends considerable support to this assertion. An appeal for the return to the chapel of the bosses remaining in private hands may perhaps provide satisfactory results. The wall plates, carved with quatrefoils (*Plate* 13), have with one or two exceptions entirely disappeared. The wall posts, springing from stone corbels and carrying the main camber beams, are a pleasing feature of the roof construction (*Plates* 12 *and* 13).

The aisle roof (*Plate* 14) of eighteen compartments is in worse condition than that over the nave, much decay being apparent and the timbers impregnated with water. At some time the roof appears to have been lowered and the fine hood mouldings of the arcade arches have been savagely cut away to permit of this re-arrangement (*Plate* 14). Carved stone brackets secured by clamps fixed into the masonry serve as corbels to bear the weight of the principal western beam, the arcade mouldings being complete behind the carved stone brackets (*Plate* 14). In the process of restoration it is to be recommended that the aisle roof be altered to its original pitch and the hood mouldings made good.

The longitudinal boarding is rotting in places, and one of the bays is covered by a piece of corrugated iron sheeting which has also largely rusted and perished. This improvised roofing occupies the place of the original boarding which was apparently removed to accommodate the flue pipe of a coke stove which stood immediately below.

The chancel roof is in reasonably sound condition, although

some decay is apparent, particularly on the wall plates (*Plate* 19). The compartments of the roof are plastered, and some recent renovation is discernible. All the bosses have been removed.

When the outer roof is removed, a careful examination of the beam roof will be possible. The suggested new roof, with a much lower rake or pitch, should permit of a suitable space between the two to allow periodic examination of the mediaeval work. All the flooring will require renewing, also probably many of the joists, as the tread feels decidedly unsafe in places. A new system of electric lighting will be required, as the present arrangement is both dangerous and a disfigurement. Electric radiators would admirably serve for heating the building.

St. Winifred's chapel, disgracefully neglected since the Reformation, can by sympathetic restoration again become a magnificent example of the last phase of mediaeval art. A building of such beauty cannot be allowed to decay further; when the fabric is made secure and the chapel suitably refurnished, I can envisage no lovelier chapel in the whole of Wales.

RAYMOND RICHARDS.

Plate No. 1. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL: The approach from Welsh Street.

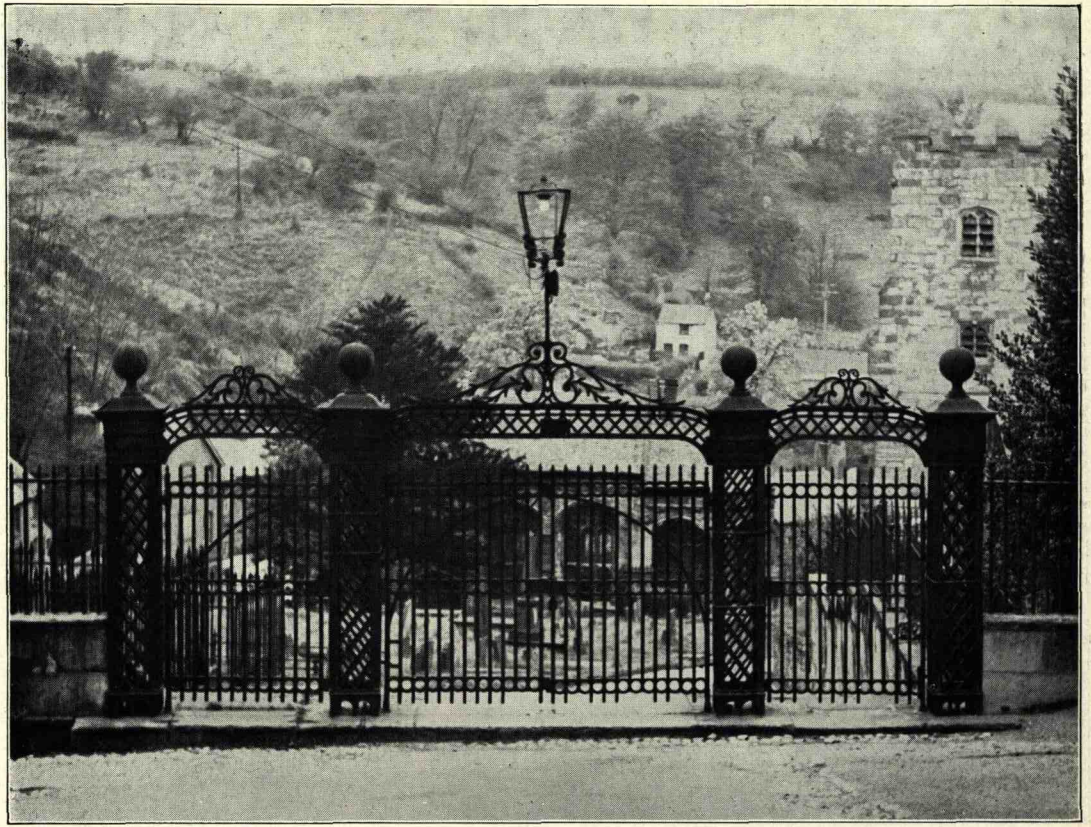

Plate No. 2. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL Eighteenth century wrought iron gates.

Plate No. 3. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : The chapel and parish church from the South.

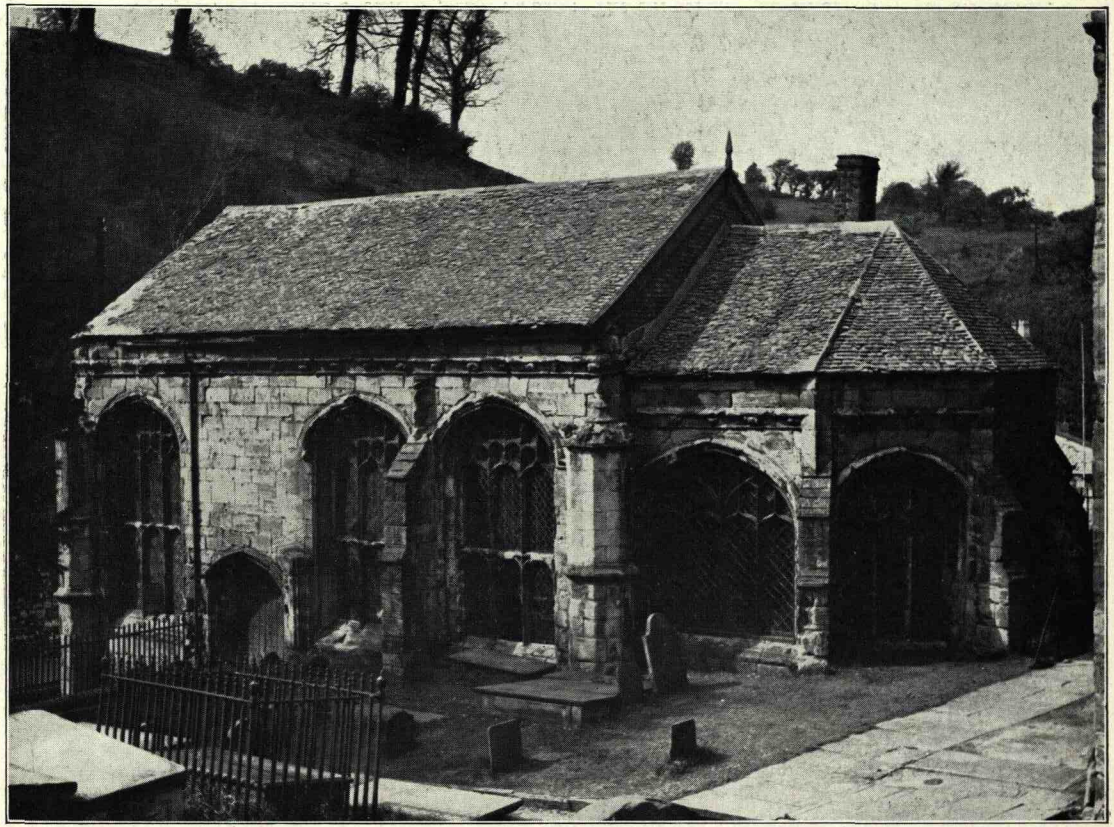

Plate No. 4. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Exterior from the South-East.

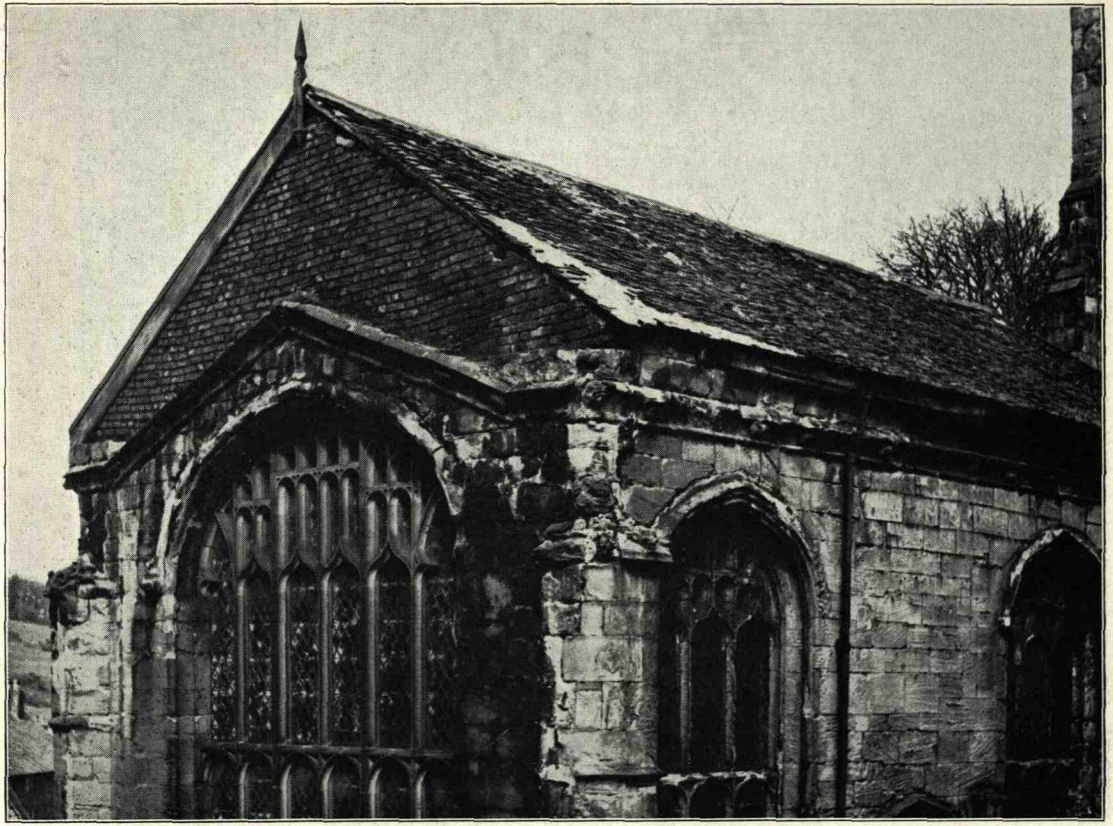

Plate No. 5. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Exterior from the South-West.

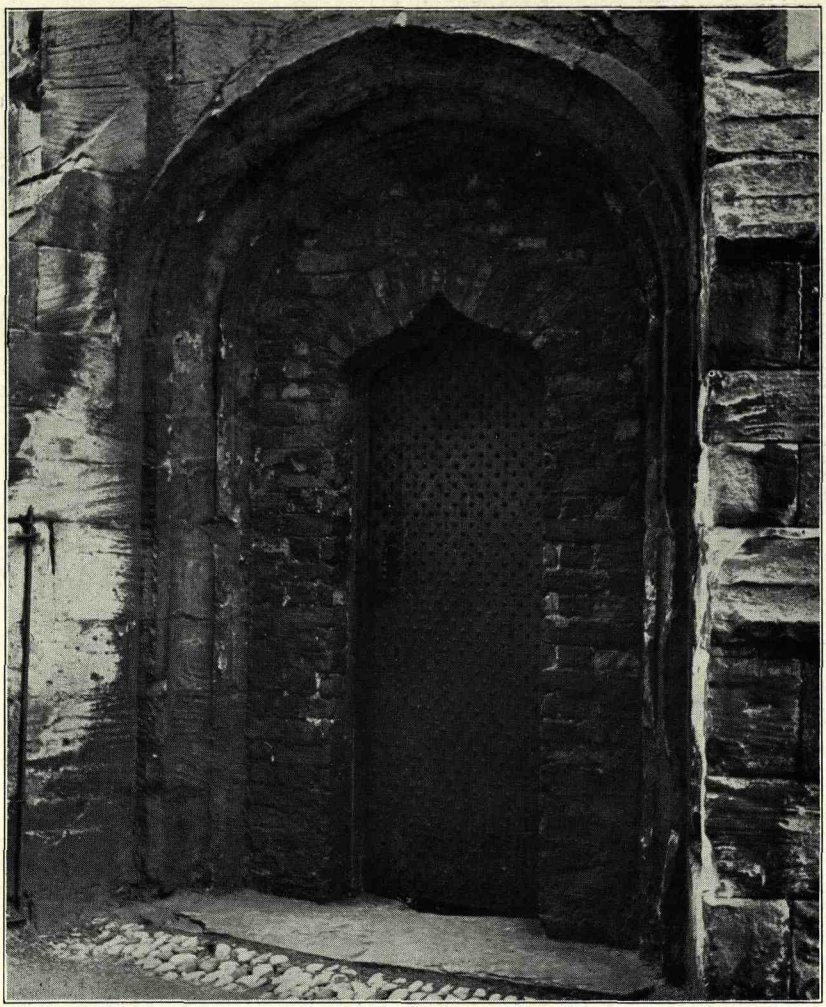

Plate No. 6. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Bricked-in east window of apse, now serving as a doorway.

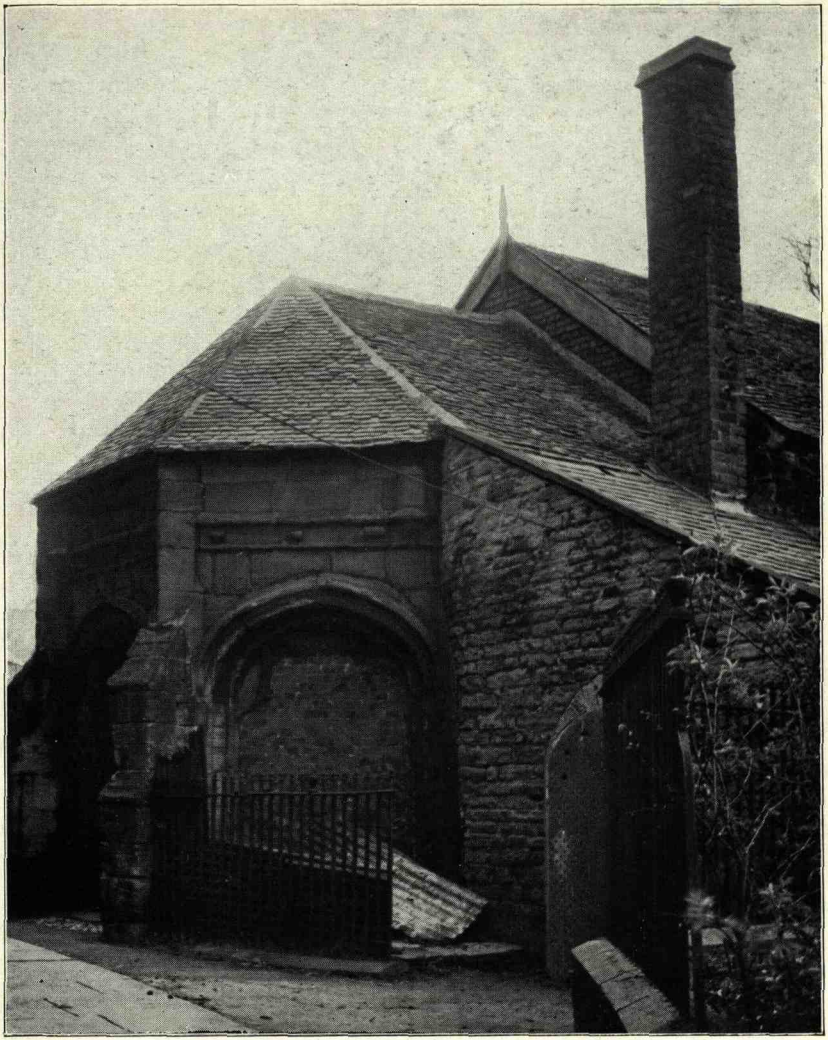

Plate No. 7. St. Winifred's Chapel, Holywell : Nineteenth century boiler house and mutilation at the North-East of the chapel.

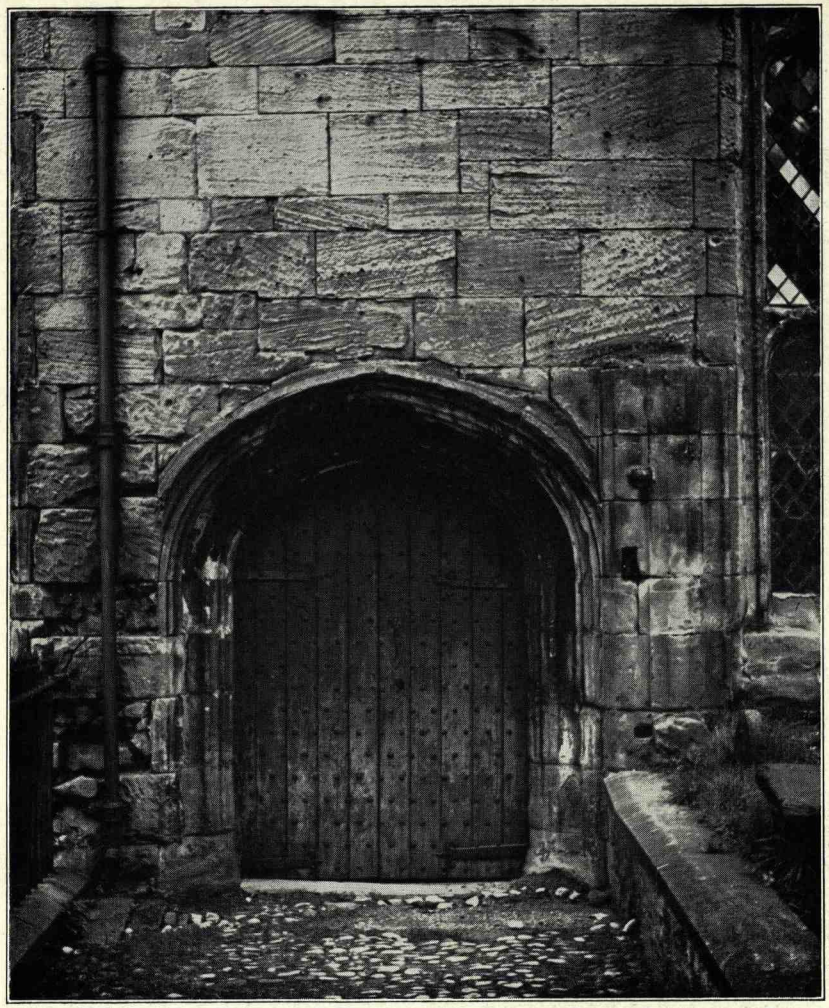

Plate No. 8. St. Winifred's Chapel, Holywell : South doorway and site of former porch.

Plate No. 9. St. Winifred's Chapel, Holywell: Interior, looking East.

Plate No. 10. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Interior, looking East and showing raising of the chancel floor.

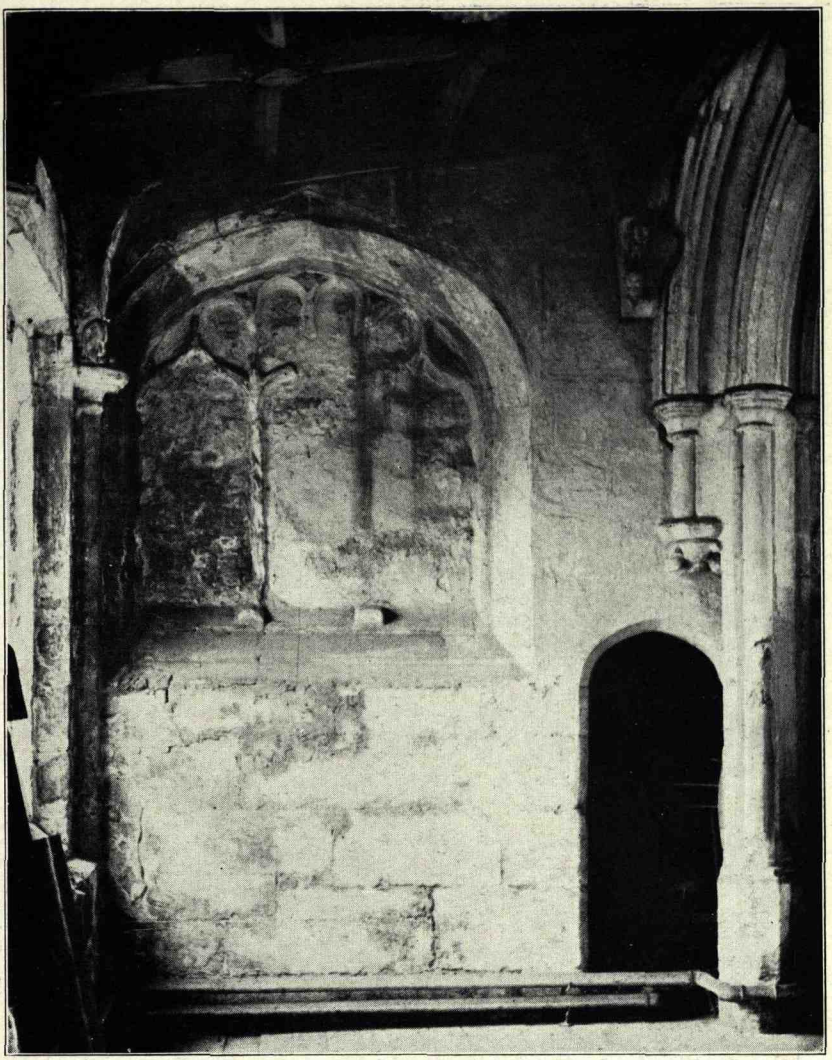

Plate No. 11. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : East end of the North Aisle.

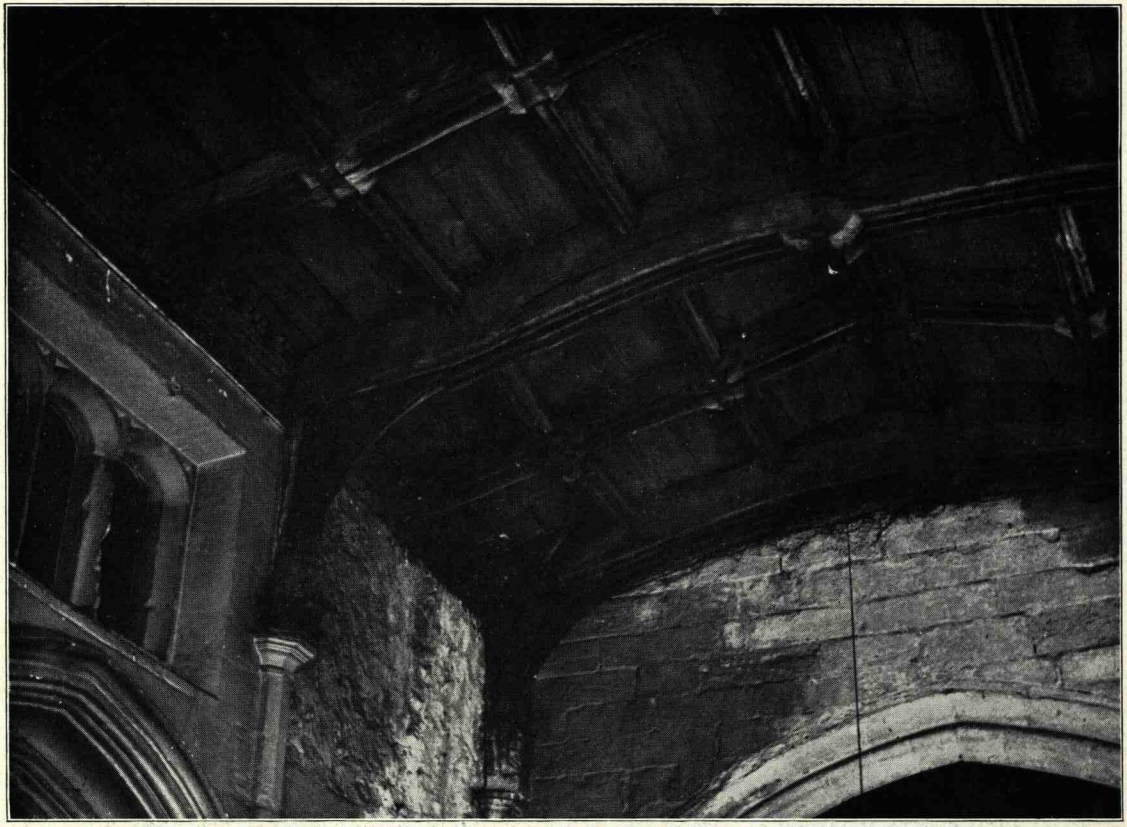

Plate No. 12. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Nave camber beam roof.

Plate No. 13. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Details of nave roof.

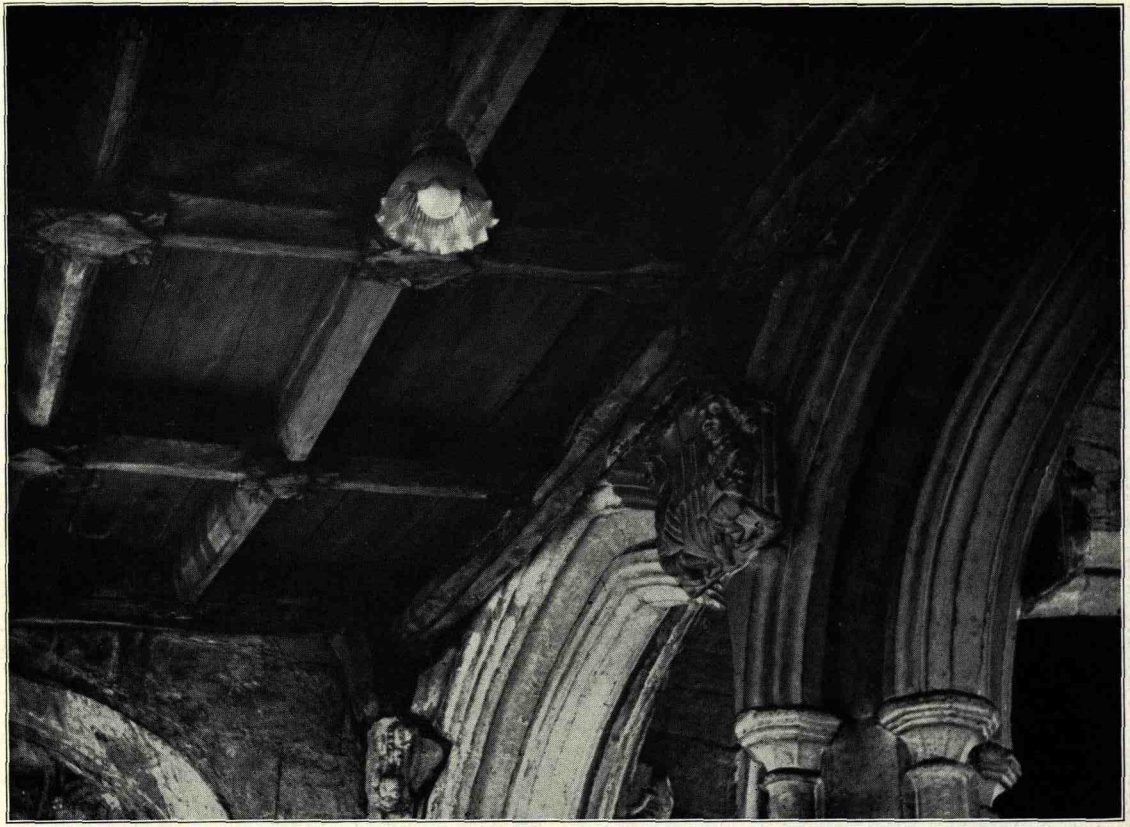

Plate No. 14. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : Aisle roof, showing damage to the hood mouldings of the arcade.

Plate No. 15. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL (The Well Chamber) : Looking South.

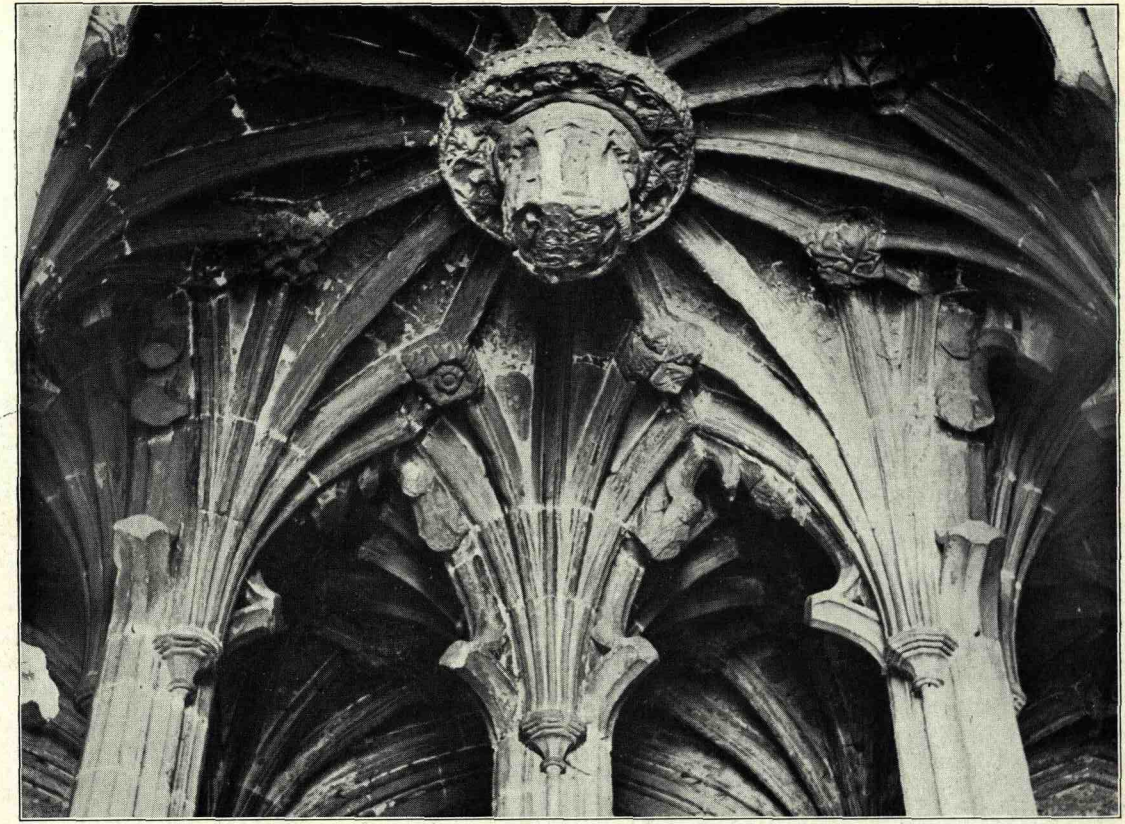

Plate No. 16. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL (The Well Chamber): Groined roof and main boss over the well spring.

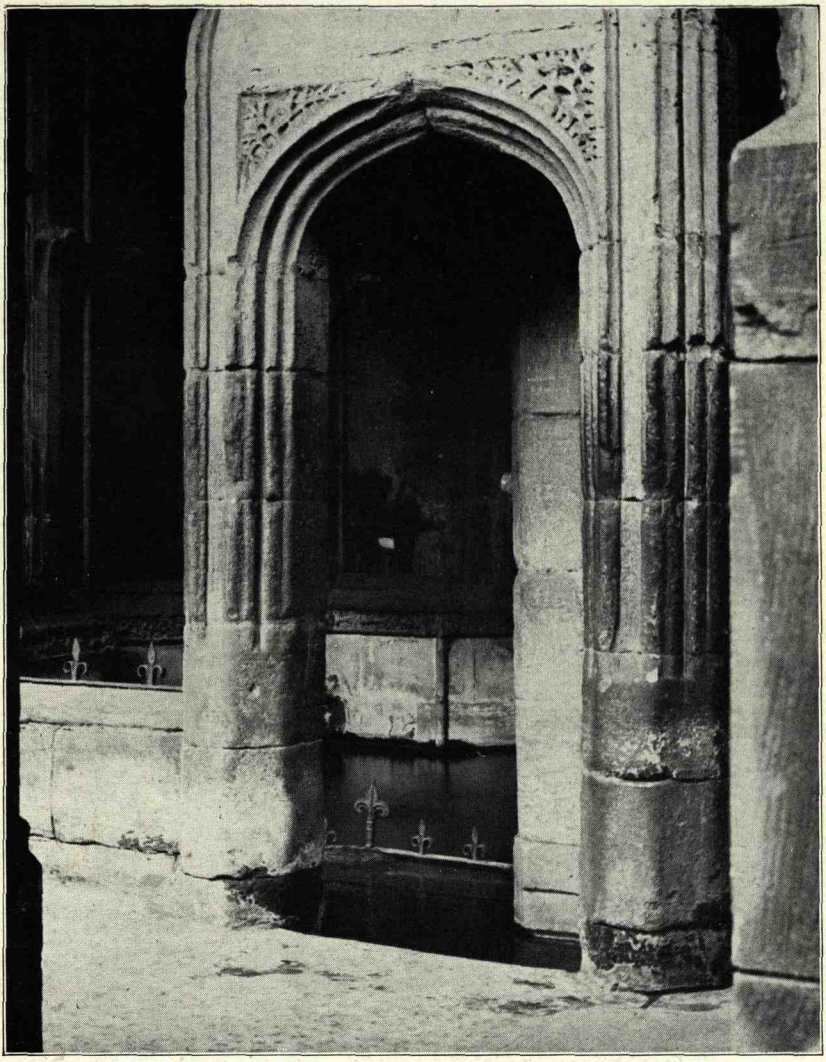

Plate No. 17. St. Winifred's Chapel, Holywell (The Well Chamber): The Well Spring.

Plate No. 18. St. Winifred's Chapel, Holywell (The Well Chamber) : The vaulted ambulatory.

Plate No. 19. ST. WINIFRED'S CHAPEL, HOLYWELL : The Chancel roof, looking East.