

A  
DESCRIPTION  
OF THE  
SEXTRY BARN AT ELY,  
LATELY DEMOLISHED.

BY  
ROBERT WILLIS, M.A., &c.  
JACKSONIAN PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE.

---

WITH FOUR PLATES.

---

CAMBRIDGE:  
*PRINTED AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS.*  
PUBLISHED BY J. & J. J. DEIGHTON, AND T. STEVENSON;  
AND BY  
JOHN W. PARKER, LONDON.  

---

M.DCCC.XLIII.

# CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

---

## PRESIDENT.

The Rev. RALPH TATHAM, D.D. Master of St John's College.

## COUNCIL.

The Rev. Professor CORRIE, B.D.

Sir HENRY DRYDEN, Bart. M.A.

JAMES ORCHARD HALLIWELL, Esq. F.R.S., F.S.A., *Secretary*.

ALEXANDER BERESFORD HOPE, Esq., B.A., M.P.

CHARLES LESTOURGEON, Esq., M.A.

The Rev. JOHN LODGE, M.A.

The Rev. JOHN JAMES SMITH, M.A., *Treasurer*.

FREDERIC THACKERAY, M.D.

EDMUND VENABLES, Esq. B.A., *Secretary*.

The Rev. WILLIAM WEBB, D.D., Master of Clare Hall.

HENRY ANNESLEY WOODHAM, Esq., B.A., F.A.S.

## AUDITORS.

The VICE-PROVOST of King's College.

The Rev. WILLIAM BATES, M.A.

# A DESCRIPTION

## OF THE

### SEXTRY BARN AT ELY.

---

THE Tithe-Barn at Ely, which it is my present purpose to describe, occupied the south side of a large farm-yard, which joins the western side of St Mary's church-yard. This farm-yard is of an irregular figure, and there were other ancient buildings on the east and north sides, especially a gateway next to the road, which still remains. These buildings had been, however, so changed and mutilated in the course of time, as to leave little worth recording, except the barn itself. This was commonly known by the name of the Sextry Barn (or Sacrist's Barn), because in the old time, the office of collecting the Tithes, for the reception of which this building was erected, belonged to the Sacrist of the monastery.

The structure had, however, from its great age, its originally rude construction, and the patchwork of its repairs, arrived at a state which made it so exceedingly difficult and expensive to keep it together, that the Dean and Chapter were compelled to order its demolition, which took place in October. last. As I happened to be on the spot, I took the opportunity to make the sketches and measurements which form the subject of the following pages.

The sketches consist of a plan (fig. 11), a transverse section (fig. 4), a sufficient portion of the longitudinal section (fig. 10), an elevation of the eastern gable (fig. 1), and some details on a larger scale.

The building was somewhat irregular in its plan; for the eastern gable was placed at an angle of  $97^{\circ}$  to the south wall, to accommodate the figure of the field in which it stood: the mean length of the interior was 219 feet 6 inches, and the breadth between the walls, 39 feet 5 inches.

The side walls were 12 feet 8 inches high, and about 4 feet thick; the roof was supported by a double range of oak piers or posts, ten on each side, which divided the apartment into a central aisle and side-aisles, after the fashion of a church. Each of these posts was placed upon a block of stone, 2 feet square, and 1 foot 8 inches high, chamfered on the upper edges, and founded upon two courses of irregular masonry,

which raised it about 18 inches above the clay floor of the barn, (figs. 4 and 10).

The carpentry of the roof is shewn in detail in the drawings; it consisted of a series of transverse principal frames carried by the side walls and by the posts; one of which is represented in fig. 4.<sup>1</sup> These were connected by the longitudinal framing of fig. 10.

A frame, similar in every respect to the other transverse frames, was placed close to each gable, but only that the vertical posts were supported on corbels built into these gable walls. The arrangement of all these frames is shewn in the plan, by the double lines that connect the posts with each other, and with the walls. The angle of the roof at the apex was 72°. The upper portion of the roof, from the ridge to the purlin which rests on the principal posts, was thatched with reeds, and the lower portion, down to the gutters, was covered with tiles. It appeared probable, from the state and contrivance of the carpentry, that the whole building had originally parapets and gutters; but at the period of its destruction, eaves had been substituted in the greatest portion of the roof. The drawing of this part of the construction in fig. 4, was taken from a part of the building that appeared to be in its original state.

On the north wall were two segmental pointed arches (A, B, fig. 11), one of which is shewn in elevation in fig. 10. The western arch (B) (fig. 11) opened immediately into the farm-yard, but the eastern (A) had a porch attached to it, and this porch had also a segmental pointed archway (C) for the admission of the waggons, as well as a pointed doorway (D) on its eastern wall, and pointed recesses or closets formed in the thickness of its western walls (at E, F). But so much of these details, as well as the upper floor of this porch, had been disfigured by alterations, that it was not easy to make out their original state with sufficient distinctness, for the purpose of exact description.

The side-walls of the principal building were of great thickness (3 feet 11 inches), and had two windows in each compartment, which windows were externally narrow open slits, 3½ inches wide, but on the inside were expanded into well-proportioned windows, with segmental pointed heads, and were 4 feet 7¼ inches in width, 7 feet 8 inches high, as shewn in the longitudinal section (fig. 10).

The carpentry was of the rudest description. The material of all the older portions was oak, but the upper story of the framing, namely, that above the level of the line A B (fig. 4), had been much renewed, and perhaps its form altered. Also most of the rafters of the roof had been

<sup>1</sup> In this figure the scantlings of the principal timbers are marked. The measurements transverse to the paper are included in brackets.



changed; nevertheless, many of the old rafters were left in the lower portion, and were easily distinguished from the rest by their scantling. No iron-work of any kind was employed in the original framing: the ends of beams were united to the pieces against which they abutted, by mortice and tenon, and secured by pins from  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch to an inch in diameter, as usual in this class of constructions. Whenever two beams crossed each other, they were half-notched together, greatly diminishing the strength of both. The long rafter C D, is curiously employed in this framing, and by crossing and notching into the entire system of timbers, serves to bind together and stiffen the whole frame, in the absence of iron ties, in a very effectual manner.

The masonry of the building, like its carpentry, was of the plainest character. The only mouldings were upon the front faces of the corbels, some of the more perfect of which are shewn in figs. 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. The segmental arches (a section of one of which is given in fig. 3) had hollow chamfers on the edges, but the rest of the work was simply chamfered where necessary. The eastern gable, (fig. 1), which faced the church-yard, had a certain character of decoration given to it by the double window, and it was crowned by an ornamental but weather-worn capital, that plainly once supported a figure of some kind. The coping, flat at top, and chamfered on its lower edge, was in its original state, because it sprung from the block out of which the aforesaid capital was carved. This coping however finished about half-way down the wall, in the manner shewn in the elevation, extending in fact only along that portion of the gable which received the thatch. The exact original finish of the lower edges of this gable being lost, I thought it best to represent them as I found them, namely, without coping, and covered by a continuation of the tiles with which, as I have already stated, the lower part was furnished.

The upright edges of the gable-wall were ornamented with a 4-inch chamfer, headed with a short truncated bead, in the usual manner, shewing them to be in their original state; but the finish of the parapet above them had been disturbed. The western gable was nearly similar to this, but not so ornamental. The upper story in lieu of the double window, had slits only, and the whole had suffered greater dilapidation and change. Also great part of the southern wall of the barn had been entirely rebuilt, and was in a very unsettled condition, rudely buttressed. The two openings in this wall, marked in the plan G, H, and opposite to the segmental arches, were not original.

The character of the masonry, plain as it is, is yet sufficient to place the building in the Early English period, that is, about the middle of

the thirteenth century. No record however of its erection has been preserved.

These details are perhaps more interesting to the architect than to the antiquary; but there is yet one point from which I conceive the building in question to derive a more general interest.

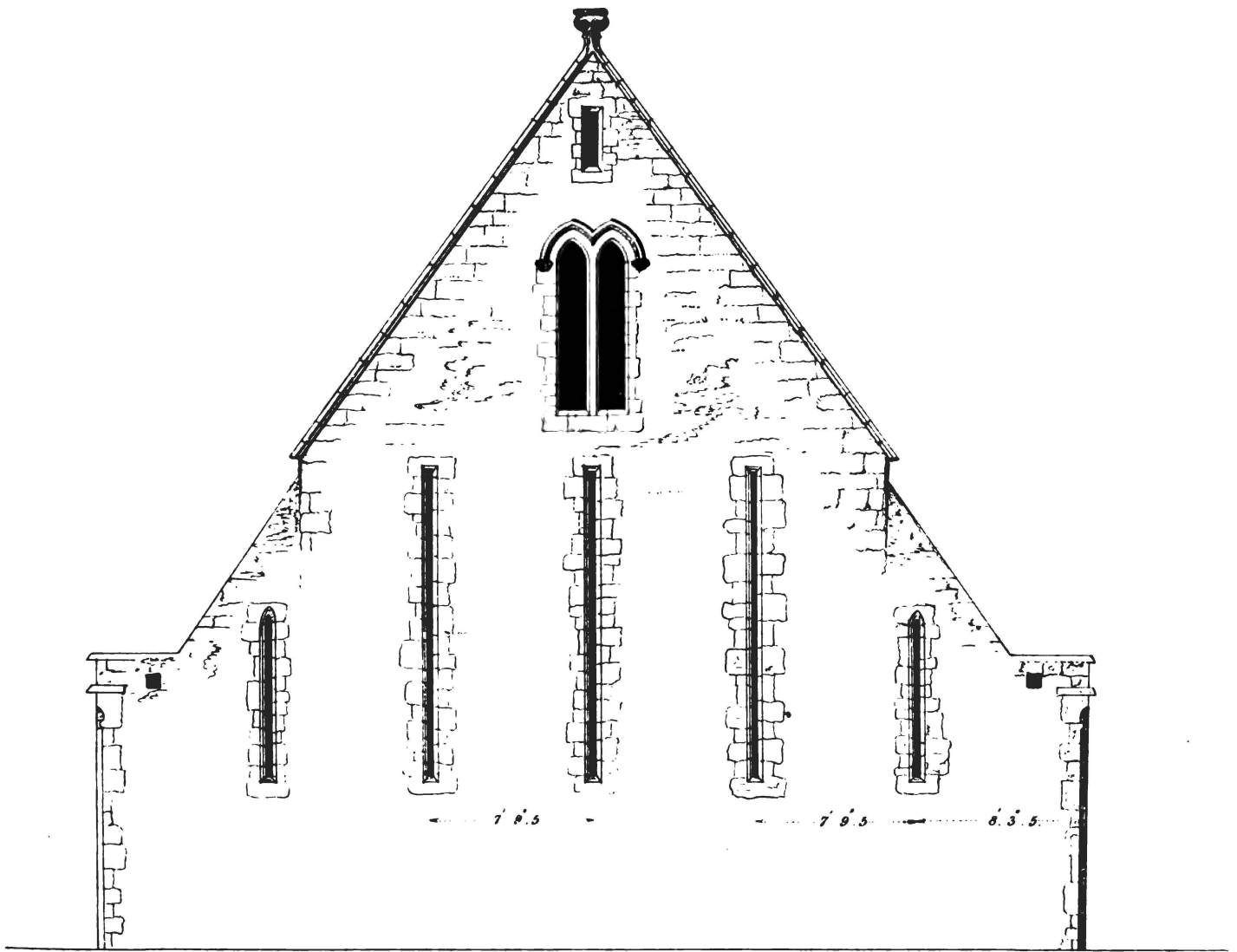
The anonymous writers of the Camden Society have insisted very strongly upon the symbolical nature of the arrangement of a church into nave and side aisles, as involving the sacred number three, and have not only endeavoured to persuade their readers that this was an original motive for this division, but that it ought to be adhered to still for the same reason. I believe the original motive to have been purely derived from reasons of construction, and indeed the history of architecture shews it to have been so; still, knowing as we do the superstitious habits of our forefathers, it might have been supposed that this triple arrangement, once adopted by the architect, was sanctified by its employment in sacred buildings. But as it can be shewn from many examples, that, even in the middle ages, the same triple arrangement of aisles was employed for large halls and other secular buildings, whenever the span was too great to allow of the absence of pillars; and also that in sacred buildings, whenever the desired span was too great to admit of three aisles alone, they never hesitated to employ four or five; we must abandon the notion that the sacred or mystical meaning was allowed to influence this arrangement.

Many examples might be adduced to prove this, but I shall content myself at present with having pointed out for one the Sextry Barn at Ely; and shall conclude by indicating its violation of another symbolical maxim of the Ecclesiologists, which it is perhaps less necessary to dwell upon, because they seem to have been at length reluctantly compelled to give it up. This barn had a triple group of windows at the east end, and also at the west. These externally were mere slits, and in the elevation (fig. 1) it seems as if there were five, but the lateral short ones belong to the side aisles. Internally the three central ones of the nave expanded into broad well proportioned windows, so that the triplet, so symbolically sacred, according to the Ecclesiologists, that it ought never to be employed even at the west end of a church, was here to be found at both ends of a mediæval barn.

ROBERT WILLIS.

MAY 1, 1843.

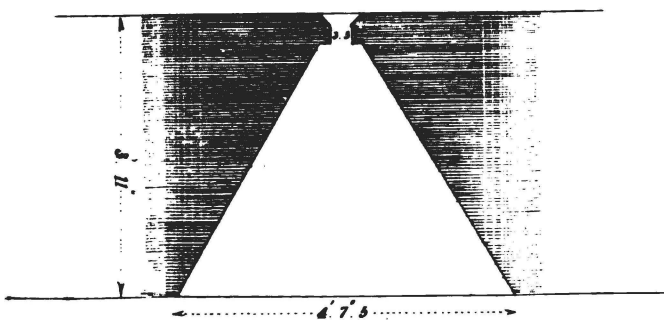
Fig 1.



Scale  $\frac{1}{8}$  in to a foot.

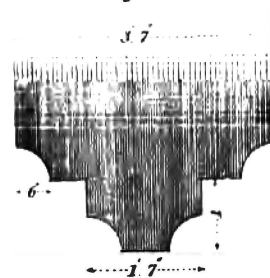
*Elevation of the Eastern Gable of City Barn.*

Fig 2.



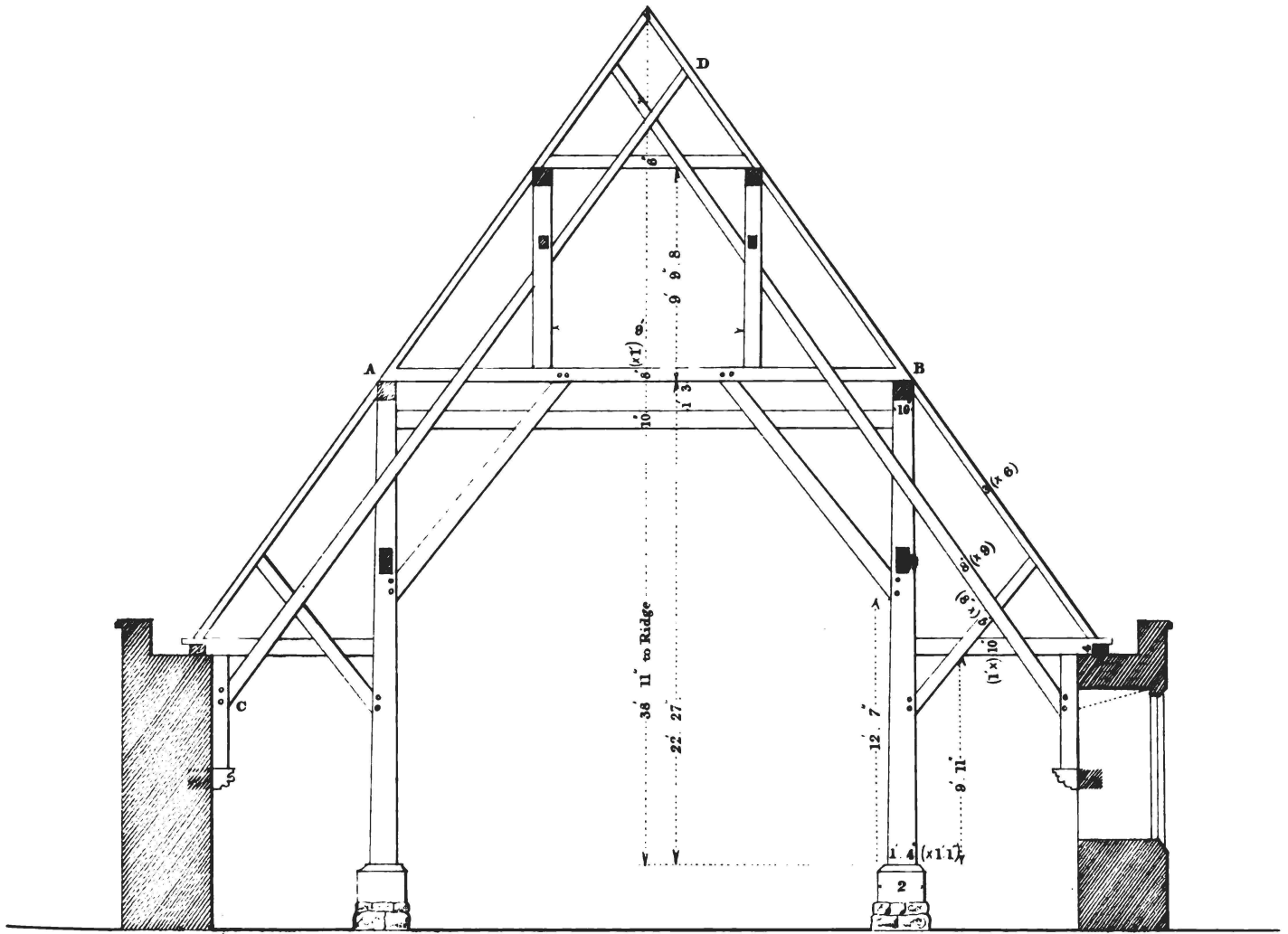
PLAN OF WINDOWS.

Fig 3.



SECTION OF ARCH. (A Fig 10)

Fig 4.



Scale of  $\frac{1}{8}$  to a foot.

*Transverse Section of Gable Barn.*

Fig 5.

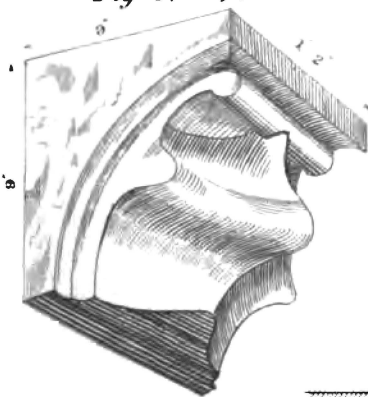


Fig 6.

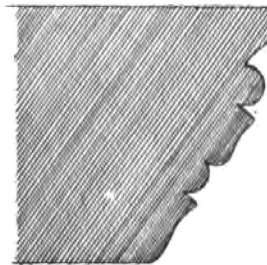


Fig 7.

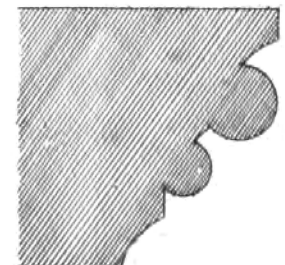


Fig 8.

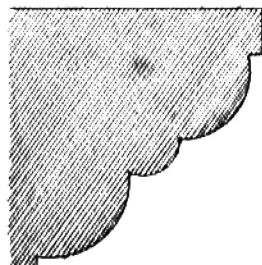
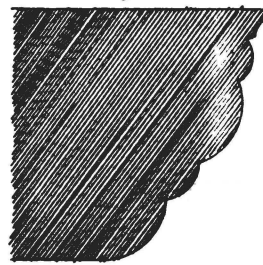
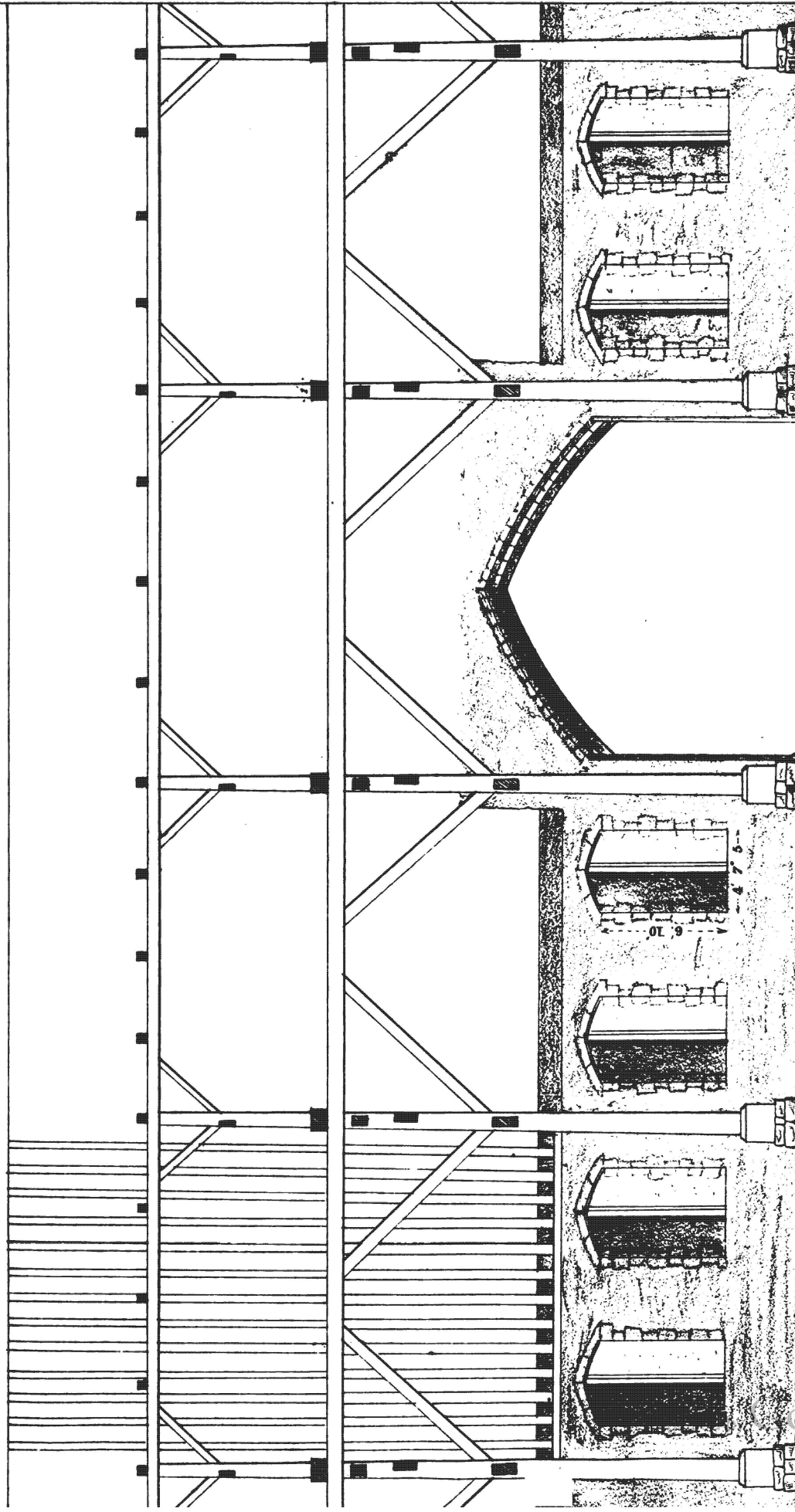


Fig 9.



CORBELS.

Fig. 10.

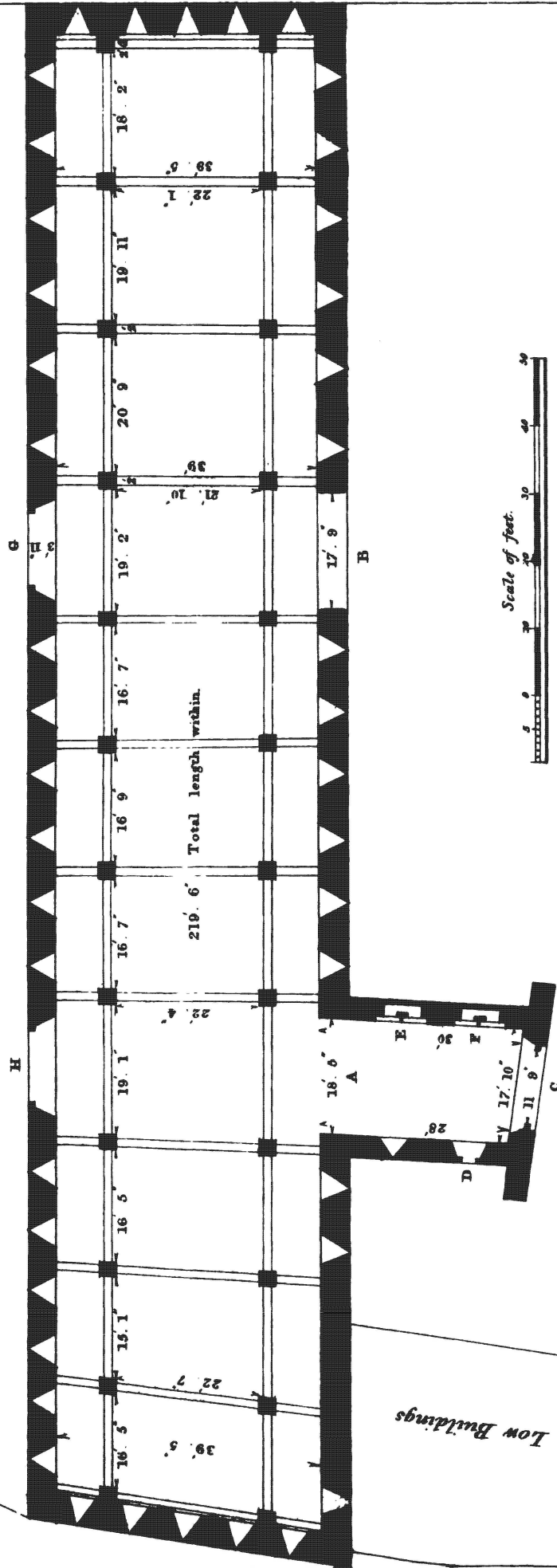


Scale  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch to a foot

*Longitudinal Section of Ely Swamp.*

Church Yard of S. Mary

Fig 11.



Plan of St. Mary's

Low Buildings