

THE CIRCLE AND THE CROSS

A STUDY IN CONTINUITY

BY

A. HADRIAN ALLCROFT, M.A.

Author of 'Earthwork of England'

ὁ θεὸς ἔχρησε, Μεγαρέας εὖ πράξειν,
ἦν μετὰ τῶν πλειόνων βουλευσῶνται.

Pausanias, *Attica* xliii, 3.

Sunt aliquid manes ; letum non omnia finit.

Propertius V, vii, 1.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.—THE CIRCLE

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1927

CHAPTER I.

THE CIRCULAR CHURCHYARD.

The Circular Churchyard a neglected fact—Probably the original form—Disguised by encroachment and enlargement—Influence of (a) Latin Christianity ; (b) growth of population—Earlier attempts to explain the Circular Garth—Not due to pre-existing roads—Nor to moats—Nor to pre-Christian earthworks—The Circular Plan an inherited tradition—Derived from the Round Barrow—Hence the mounded elevation also—Gradual disappearance of these features—Possible connexion of the Circular Garth and the word 'Church.'

The following pages are the outcome of the attempt to solve the problem of the true derivation of the word *church*. It is as odd as it is true that this problem should still await solution, and that the theory advanced by the Saxon writer Walafrid Strabo¹ (*obiit* 849) that the word represents the Greek κυριακόν, though admitted to be unsatisfactory, should still hold the field. Even the editors of the *New English Dictionary* admit that it holds only until a better be forthcoming.² Clearly therefore there is room for further enquiry, and no one will anticipate that it will prove a short and easy task to dethrone a theory which has reigned without serious challenge for close upon eleven centuries.

No one will dispute that the ground upon which stands a sacred building must be older than such building.

¹ *De Rebus Ecclesiasticis*, pt. i, 7 (Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, nos. cxiii, cxiv).

² *N.E.D.* s.v. CHURCH.

As the *τέμενος* antedates the *ναός* and the *templum* antedates the *aedes*, so must the churchyard, its name notwithstanding, antedate the church. Yet save that Elias Owen briefly noticed¹ the circular plan of one or two Welsh churchyards and as briefly sought to find a reason for it, the subject appears to have been wholly ignored. 'The occurrence of such churchyards in England does not seem to have been studied' wrote Walter Johnson in 1912,² and the sentence might have been written to-day.

It will be understood that by a 'circular' churchyard is not meant such an exact circle as a modern surveyor would lay out. There is indeed quite a large number of such exactly circular garths to be found within the confines of the British Isles, others again which are exactly oval or elliptical, or very nearly so. But vastly more common are those of a plan which, though not geometrically regular, was yet unquestionably intended to be circular by those who first constructed them. Their irregularity may sometimes be original, due to some accident of topography ; in far the greater number of cases it is not original, but the result of subsequent alterations. With those other very numerous cases where there is evidence, documentary or otherwise, that no circularity was intended, these chapters are not concerned : they are probably without exception creations of late date, and from the point of view of this enquiry anything subsequent to the tenth century is late. It will be shown in the sequel that throughout the centuries preceding that date the normal form of the Christian burial-ground throughout the British Isles was circular or sub-circular ; that the old churchyards of this form which still subsist are not mere eccentricities, but genuine survivals from the earlier days of British Christianity ; and that even in those remote days the fashion of a graveyard was already an immemorial tradition, inherited indeed from prehistoric times. The churchyard in fact goes back as it were to the Eocene of history, whereas of all the multitude of those grey and time-worn churches which are the peculiar grace and interest of this England,

¹ *Reliquary* 1895, p. 136 ; *ibid.* 1896, p. 154 ; Andrews' *Antiquities and Curiosities of the Church* (1897), pp. 229-235.

² *Byways of English Archaeology*, p. 99.

not the oldest goes back beyond a date which by comparison may be called Pliocene.

The precise position of the structural church in relation to the surrounding graveyard is immaterial. Of English churches at any rate the vast majority have been so often altered, enlarged, or entirely re-built, that the existing edifice cannot possibly stand in the same relation to its precinct as did the original building, even if the precinct itself has not also been altered. An original church of any date before 1000 standing within an original garth, is probably not to be discovered. Thus both factors in the problem—the church and the precinct—are alike extremely variable. Of the two the churchyard is the less likely to be a constant factor. Builders and surveyors have for so many centuries been bred up to feel that walls and fences should rightfully follow right lines, that they have again and again interfered to alter the original plan of the precinct, without any suspicion that in so doing they were destroying the evidence of centuries. As modern fields are distinguished by their severely rectangular forms, so ancient enclosures are betrayed by their less rectilinear design ; and if that design shows anything like circularity, it may be taken—in default of very good reason to the contrary—as proof that the enclosure belongs to a date when the strictly rectangular methods of this age were not yet inveterated. Nor must it be thought that the *religio loci* was always the safeguard which now it mostly is, and which it certainly always was in the earliest days. Between those two terminals lie all the centuries in which, not sentiment, but hedge and wall and fence were literally all that demarcated the sacred from the profane ; and these were shifted and re-shifted at the will of parson and squire, lord of the manor and churchwarden. There are to-day in these islands hundreds of ancient graveyards which have suffered partial secularisation, whether to provide some adjacent householder with a few more rods of ground, to furnish space for a new rectory or vicarage-house, to bring the tiresome circular line of the original precinct into better accord with the rectangularity of the surrounding enclosures, or for any one of twenty other reasons more or less sufficient. Roads have been driven straight through 'God's acre,' so that there may remain

on either side the segment of a circle, the one still sacred ground and including the church itself, the other desecrated.¹ Or again, when the Enclosure acts furnished excuse, the road which had erstwhile wound reverently outside the precinct has been straightened, perhaps even widened, at the expense of the graveyard. Doubtless in the case of many a country village excuse was to be found in the shrinkage of the population, which no longer required so large a space for the burial of its dead. In the case of towns this excuse could not be urged, yet it is in the towns that such encroachment has most frequently occurred. Every one can recall instances of churches, ancient and beautiful, which to-day stand so closely beset by the surrounding buildings that it is impossible to obtain a view-point which may show to proper advantage, not their entirety indeed, but even part only of their graceful proportions; while of their once spacious graveyards there remains nothing at all, unless it be a few unregarded tombstones that serve to pave the churchgoer's path to the door.

On the other hand enlargement has done quite as much to alter the original design. Within towns an understandable land-hunger has commonly prevented this in any form, but in the villages it has had freer scope; and as such additions to the original graveyard date almost wholly from a period when all memory of the significance of the circular plan was lost, they are naturally more or less rectangular. And a very small alteration will wholly obliterate most of the traces of circularity. It would seem at one period to have been quite usual for parson or squire to annex a portion of the precinct, removing its ancient rounded boundary and substituting a rectilinear wall, and by way of compensation perhaps adding an equivalent area on the opposite side. This new annexe being of course likewise rectilinear, the double alteration forthwith changed the original circle into something almost exactly rectangular. Where there was simply enlargement without encroachment, the result is very commonly a graveyard which has the plan of a semi-circle inscribed upon one side of a rectilinear figure. In

¹ This has been done at Newchurch, Carm., since the making of the Tithe map in 1846.

such cases the original form is sometimes recoverable, if not from such documentary evidence as that of the Tithe map or some older plan, from faint indications in the soil along the line of the original boundary, or from the survival of old trees which once grew along that boundary, or from the different level of the newer annexe. In too many cases, however, every trace of the earlier design has vanished.

The prime agents in destroying the circular precinct have been first the triumph of Latin Christianity, and secondly prosperity and consequent progress. Latin

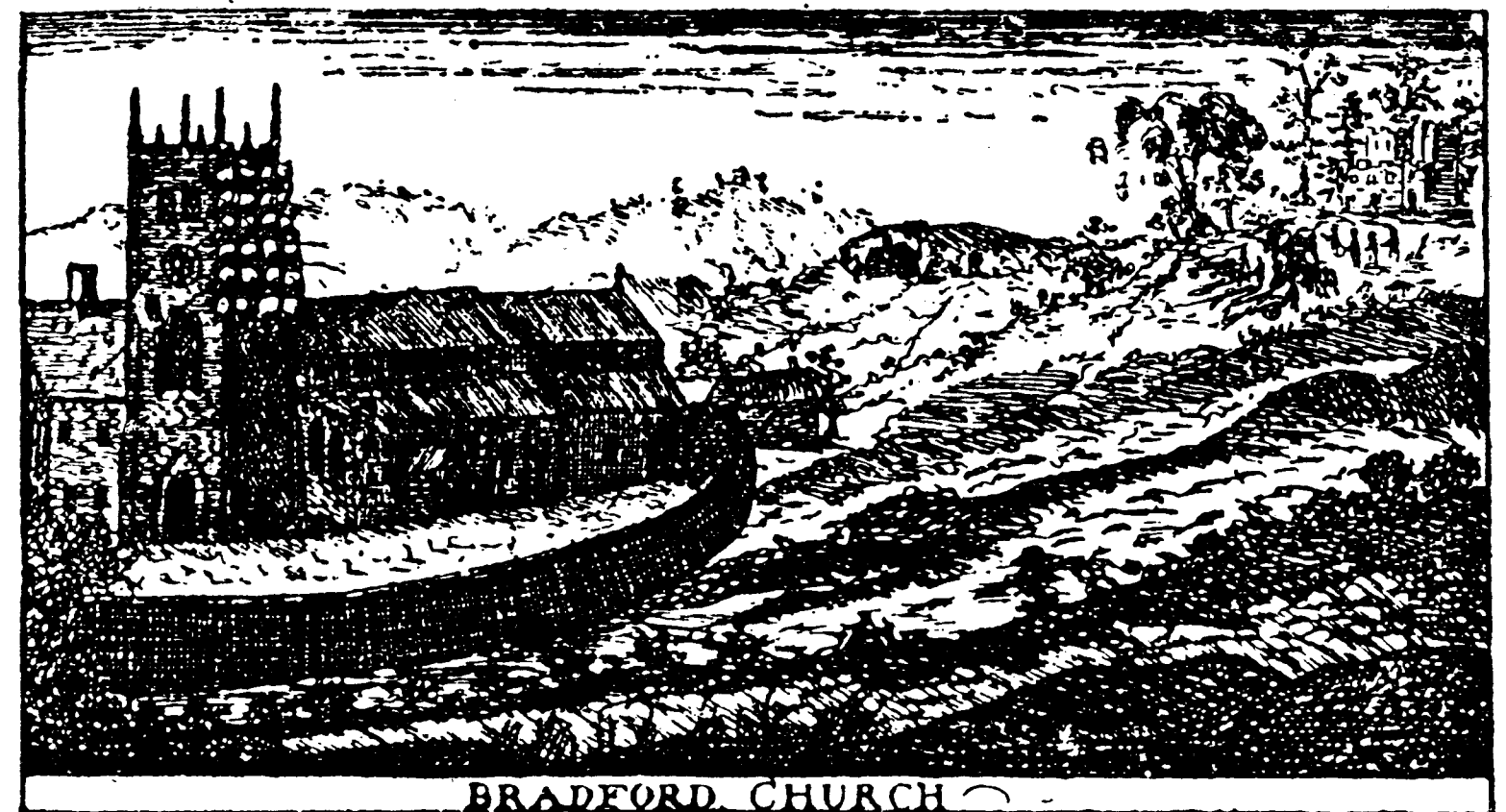


FIG. I. PARISH CHURCH BRADFORD, YORKS.
(From *The Old History of Bradford*, 1776.)

Christianity made little of the burial-ground, very much of the church. Prosperity reacted in two chief ways. In the first place the piety of a prosperous community naturally sought expression in enlarging or reconstructing its place of worship. As the original churchyard was commonly of small area, frequently very small, the church came at last to occupy so large a share of the garth that it was necessary to enlarge the latter also; and this usually occurring at a date when all knowledge of the significance of the circular form was lost, the enlargement was almost always of rectilinear plan. At the same time the repeated reconstruction of the fabric entailed other interference with the original features of the precinct, and what had

been recognisably mounded up has gradually lost all or most of its mounded form, one generation of builders after another having levelled always a larger portion of it for their new foundations. In the second place the growth of the population in progressive communities led to the need of further space for burials, and again the original circular area was first distorted, then destroyed, by the necessary enlargements. It follows that the circular churchyard is now to be found most frequently in those parts of the country which have been less progressive; and these happen to be mostly the Celtic districts, *i.e.* Cornwall, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

Nevertheless the fact that the plan of the earliest churchyards was originally circular is easily demonstrable. How is their shape to be explained? One or two suggestions which have been advanced must be briefly examined, although they mostly suffer from the defect that they deal with individual cases only, those who made them not realising that an explanation was needed which should be of general application.

The suggestion most usually made is that a circular churchyard assumed that shape because of the shape of the roads about it. That graveyards owe something of their shape to pre-existing roads may be true of those consecrated within the last few centuries, but can scarcely be true of genuinely old examples which date back to a time when roads other than the derelict survivals of the Roman system scarcely existed. Roman roads, however, with the rarest exceptions avoid those small sinuosities which envelop many old graveyards; they intersect mostly at abrupt angles, and a graveyard of which the plan was determined by the lines of Roman roads could so far have had rectilinear bounds only. The so-called roads of the thousand years following the departure of the Romans were for the most part mere trails, demarcated by no very fixed boundaries, and winding in a fashion as abhorrent to the modern as it was to the Roman engineer; but inasmuch as the object of a road is to get there, and to get there by the most convenient way, it is clear that those perplexing deviations must have been due to the presence of obstacles which prevented a more direct course. Rivers and smaller streams, pools, boggy or broken ground, trees

and rocks and abrupt descents, are all admittedly reason enough for the vagaries of an old roadway. So too is the presence of a barrow or other artificial mound. It will be shown that the Christian graveyard was itself originally a barrow, and to argue that it was round because the winding roadway made it so, is as if one should maintain that the shape of Silbury Hill was determined by the great Roman road beside it, or that the multiplex series of dykes which envelop certain barrows on the Yorkshire wolds¹ were themselves the cause of the formation of the barrows. The more reasonable view is that old roads and lanes wind about old churchyards because the latter were there first, so many obstacles in the way of a more direct course. The feeling which until comparatively recent years forbade any interference with God's acre is precisely the same as that which led the peoples of an unknown date to respect the resting-places of the dead upon the Yorkshire hills, led the Romano-Briton to spare an unknown something on the site of Church Barrow in Cranborne Chase,² and led even the *terrarium domini* themselves and their *curatores viarum* to leave intact Silbury Hill. Indeed the presence of a roadway, so far from destroying, has in recent years prevented the disfigurement of many a circular churchyard, for when the need arose of enlarging the precinct, this could not be done where a roadway existed, and so far therefore the original form has remained unaltered. Where no road was in question, additions might be made to any extent, and the original plan destroyed.

Elias Owen,³ remarking that the circular churchyards of his acquaintance were 'usually encompassed by a road for which there is no obvious requirement,' surmised that the road represents an ancient rampart separating the churchyard from common ground. It will be shown presently that such a rampart was in fact a feature of very many early churchyards, and the reason why it took the circular form will also be explained. Owen leaves unexplained the circular shape, and his theory does not

¹ Mortimer, *Forty Years' Researches*, pp. 365-380, 134.

² Pitt-Rivers, *Excavations in Cranborne Chase*, i, pp. 24, 124.

³ In Andrews' *Antiquities and Curiosities of the Church* (1897), pp. 229-235.

account for the many instances where, though no surrounding road exists or seemingly has ever existed, and though there is no rampart discernible or presumptive, the precinct is still circular.

Arguing from the single case of the churchyard of Efenechtyd in Denbighshire, the same writer suggested that here the encircling road was originally a moat containing water. There are scores of similar circular graveyards so situated that water can never have stood within any ditch or moat surrounding them, and again there is no explanation why the presumed moated area should be circular rather than of any other shape.

Walter Johnson¹ hazards the surmise that in these

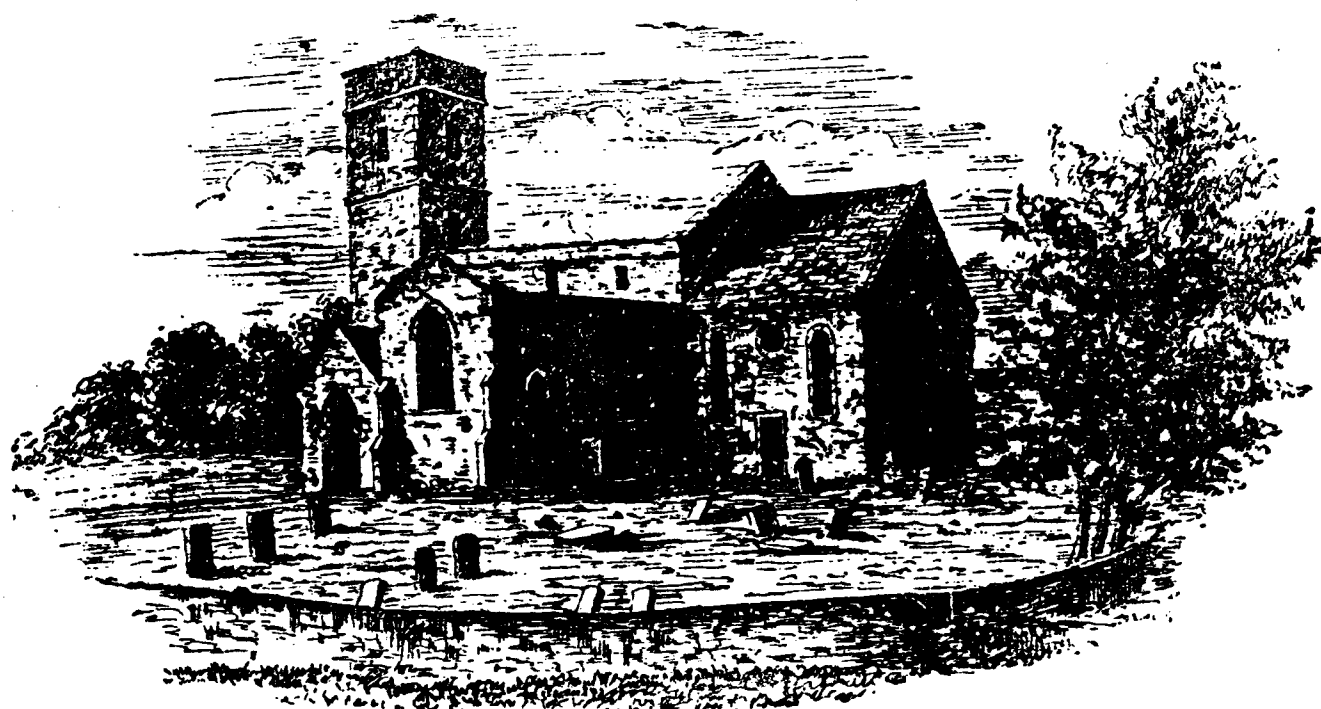


FIG. 2. WHITTINGHAM CHURCH BEFORE 1840.
(From D. D. Dixon's *Whittingham Vale*).

circular ramparted churchyards 'we may have small ringworks belonging to the pre-Christian period, though not necessarily of a defensive character.' This comes near the truth in a limited number of cases. It can be shown that some circular churchyards actually do occupy an-historic ringworks; but the number of cases in which we have no evidence at all for any such origin is vastly greater, and on the other hand the number of those in which the pre-existing ringwork can reasonably be thought to have been also pre-Christian is, in England particularly, very limited. In a very large number of cases the topography

¹ *Byways*, p. 99.

is such as to exclude entirely the theory that the sites had once been those of secular fortresses.

Circular graveyards situated upon knolls or hill-tops of more or less circular contour might very well be due to the form of the hill, although, where an ancient site is in question, the writer would not allow that to be the correct explanation, but would rather maintain that the site was selected because, amongst other reasons, it was naturally more or less circular. In other words it is the circularity of the position which explains the choice of that position, rather than *vice versa*. But no such reason can be advanced to explain the many cases of circular graveyards which lie upon ground to all intents level or featureless. How are we to account for the laying out of circular churchyards in such localities? Caprice can hardly be urged, for in the far-away times with which we are concerned caprice must always have been a dubious element in connexion with matters so momentous. Even in modern times it is rare in England to find a case of the kind,¹ albeit there are many cases where a churchyard previously rectangular has been altered to a circular or oval figure to form the central feature of some open space or a road-centre within a town. But the occurrence of the circular plan in almost every part of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, and in places where no excuse can be found in the lie of the ground or otherwise, points not to caprice but to custom, not to the exception but to the rule. The form was awkward, utterly at variance with all the customary practices connected with the division and enclosure of land for 1500 years in England,² giving rise to numberless awkward forms in the fields and the holdings adjoining. Yet the evidence proves that for long centuries this form and no other was the rule. Why?

¹ There is an example in the churchyard of St. Edmund, Vobster, Somerset, which dates only from 1849. It stands upon a knoll, and the yard is perfectly circular. In Wales, however, there appears still to survive a predilection for churchyards without angular corners: if the circumstances would otherwise require such an angle, the apex is usually rounded off. The churchyard of Builth Road (Cwmbach Llechrhyd), made only in 1889, takes the plan of an incipient quatrefoil or double

ancile, although there existed no recognisable reason for the fact. Such a case proves clearly that, while the tradition still exists as a force, its origin and significance are alike forgotten.

² The circular enclosure was the Celtic way. It ceased therefore so far as concerned secular matters, when the Roman came in. It was unknown in the Saxon's partition of land, excepting in this matter of his graveyards.

The answer is, because within circular precincts had been buried the dead of uncounted centuries before the introduction of Christianity. From the days of the arrival of the first Celtic people in Britain the dead were buried within the sign of the circle. The first Christian missionaries of the Scotie Church, accepting this as they accepted so many other basic facts of pagan life, made their own graveyards likewise circular ; subsequently there were built churches within such circular precincts. Only the consecration was changed—in many cases one should perhaps rather say that the new consecration was charged upon the old, so that what had before been consecrated by the circle, thereafter bore also the further symbol of the cross which stood in every Christian burial-ground. The cross has triumphed and yet abides ; the circle has been forgotten, but up and down the country it is still to be found in round barrows of every variety, in stone circles, in Irish *killeens*, and in the graveyards of many hundreds of our village churches.

Let it be assumed for the moment that the first Christian converts of these islands were buried, like their forbears for a thousand years, under barrows ; that in course of time here and there one such barrow became the general burying-ground of a Christian community ; and that finally there was built thereon a building which, through many vicissitudes of reconstruction and enlargement, came to be a parish church. What would be the probable outward semblance of the churchyard in such a case ?

In the first place the churchyard, originally circular like any other Celtic barrow, would so remain unless deliberately altered by additions or otherwise.

In the second place the churchyard would show much the same section as a barrow : it would show either the familiar heave of the commoner ' bowl ' or ' bell ' barrow, or the level surface of the ring-barrow girt with its surrounding vallum.

In the third place the provision of a permanent fence about the graveyard would reduce it to the semblance of a sort of circular ' island,' with or without a revetment wall, standing considerably above the level of the surrounding soil, so that the pathway to the church would

require to be approached by steps, or to be sunk like a sloping holloway upward to the door.

These are precisely the features which characterise any churchyard of a sufficient age, where later alterations have not destroyed them. If the theory here advanced provides a natural and consistent explanation for the circular form, the humped elevation, and the raised ' island,' it is surely worth examination.

Those who have heretofore noticed the raised form of old churchyards have mostly accepted the explanation offered by William Cobbett¹ a hundred years ago, that it is the result of a vast number of interments. This explanation is utterly inadequate, for the human body in decay is reducible to but a handful of matter, and even if the bones, as happens in certain soils, defy decay, the residuary weight of matter is on the average but 10 lbs. Coffins need not be taken into account, because coffin-burial was rarely practised until quite recent years ; and the same applies to vaults and brick-lined graves. The average weight of a cubic yard of soil is one ton, or the weight of some fifteen living adults of average proportions, and it is a small churchyard which measures only 50 yards across. If a circular churchyard of that size be raised as much as 6 feet above the surrounding soil, it means that the mound contains some 3,750 cubic yards of material, and the same number of tons in weight, that is, the weight of 56,250 average adults, male and female ; and if we assume the graveyard to have been in use for the fullest possible span of some 1300 years, it means that, *had their bodies suffered no decay*, there would have been demanded the deaths of more than forty adults every year to raise the mound. There are few villages to-day which could stand so great a drain upon their population ; there could have been few towns to do so in days when the whole population of the British Isles was less than three millions. It was little more than that in the sixteenth century, and it cannot have been much greater at any earlier period since Christianity came hither. If churchyards were to be built up by this means, Christianity must have buried the entire population within fifty years !

¹ *Rural Rides* (1853), p. 330, *Petersfield to Kensington* (12 Nov. 1825).

Others have calculated that the soil of churchyards rises—it is not explained how—by 3 inches in a century. Assuming this to be correct, it follows that a churchyard which is raised as little as 5 ft. represents the growth of 2,000 years; which is some 700 years longer than Christianity has been here. It assumes also a density of population and a death-rate alike invariable, and common sense precludes any such assumptions. There are plenty of churchyards which are mounded nearer 10 ft. than 5 ft. in height, and how shall these be explained?—occurring,



FIG. 3. WINWICK CHURCH, NEAR DAVENTRY, NORTHANTS.
(From a drawing by G. Clarke, *circa* 1840).

many of them, in remote parishes where nowadays the population is counted by 200 or 300, and there is no jot of evidence or any likelihood that it was ever much more numerous.

There are those who maintain that the constant breaking of the soil for new burials tends to raise the general level. But by breaking the soil, no matter how frequently, one adds nothing to it, and in a few years it settles back to its original level.

There is no explaining these mounded garths except as mounds purposely built up to serve their purpose, and

the sufficient proof of it is the fact that the floor of the church, albeit commonly sunk into the mass of the mound, is yet commonly several feet above the natural level of the soil surrounding the garth.

There is abundant evidence that, all edicts and injunctions notwithstanding, the fences of graveyards were constantly liable to be neglected, and this to such an extent as frequently to disappear entirely. In the course of centuries any barrow would waste considerably, and whenever it was decided to erect a fence about it or to reconstruct a fence which had decayed, there would be very considerable difficulty in re-tracing the original limits of the barrow. If a church had arisen within the area, it would be no longer possible without very great skill to demarcate it as a true circle. The work would be done largely by eye, and in such a matter the eye is a very unreliable guide. This explains why amongst garths which are yet circular many, when tested by the surveyor's tape, are found to be very considerably out of the true circle; and the very large number of decidedly oval garths, as for example in Cornwall, may perhaps be due to taking the radial measures, not from the actual centre (which was inaccessible), but from the walls of the building which then stood upon the centre. Moreover, the whole significance of the circle becoming forgotten, as the years went on there would be less and less care employed in any repairs from time to time needed to the fence. The modern workman, when ordered to rebuild a circular wall, prefers to do it in rectilineal segments, and so helps to blur the original figure. If there had grown up a considerable village in the vicinity, the need for ampler burial space would again tend to further deviation from the exact limits of the original barrow.

The favourite form of fence was a revetment wall of dry stone. It was more durable than any hedge, it required less upkeep, and it was better calculated to keep out cattle. When the time came for providing such a revetment, the outer edge of the now greatly spread barrow was cut steeply back and faced with a dry stone wall. This explains why the surface of an ancient churchyard is commonly flush with the surrounding wall. It explains also how there might arise, in the case of a church-

yard occupying the summit of a rounded hill, features which have been mistaken for the traces of old entrenchments about the churchyard. The dry-built wall was liable to constant falls, and after every such fall there was likely to be yet further modification of the original line, for with the wall would fall also more or less of the mounded soil within. The barrow stood the best chance of preserving its original plan if it were one or other of the 'ring' varieties, which, as will be shown, were the ultimate form in the evolution of the barrow, and the form in fashion in the more advanced parts of the British Isles at the time when Christianity came permanently upon the scene. In not a few circular churchyards there remain the visible traces of the surrounding ring-wall, commonly mistaken for that of a secular 'camp.'

So far as the writer is aware the circular churchyard does not occur in any Christian area outside Europe. The circular *enceintes* of some of the churches of Southern Abyssinia¹ have an accidental resemblance only: they are obviously defensive in their origin and purpose, they are used as graveyards by exception only, and their plan would seem originally to have been determined by the circular church which they still occasionally surround. But the circular churchyards of Europe did not originate in any defensive purpose: they were above all else the burial-grounds of their communities, and they belong to a Christianity (Scotic) which knew nothing of any circular churches.

Within Europe the circular churchyard is to be found everywhere in the British Isles and the adjoining islands. It occurs not infrequently in the northern departments of France, in Holland and Frisia, in Scandinavia, in Switzerland, in Germany and in Hungary. But, so far as the writer can learn, it is not discoverable in Southern Europe. The fact at once raises the question whether the circular churchyard and the name of *church* may possibly be connected, and whether there may not at last be forthcoming a reason for the fact, hitherto unexplained, that the word *church* and its congeners divide with the

word *ecclesia* and its derivatives the map of Europe. For while the circular churchyard is very rarely to be found where prevail the *ecclesia*-words,¹ it is discoverable over most of those areas where prevail the *church*-words.

¹ Copiously illustrated by Theo. Lupke in *Deutsche Aksum-Expedition* (Reimer, Berlin, 1913), iii, pp. 50, foll. See also Bent, *Sacred City of the Ethiopians* (1893).