

III.

THE RESTORATION

OF THE

Abbey Church of S. Alban.

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ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY, FEBRUARY 22nd, 1876.*

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THE
RESTORATION OF THE ABBEY CHURCH
OF S. ALBAN.

TWO years ago I had the honour, and certainly the great pleasure, to read to this Society a Report on the progress made up to that time in the repairs of the Abbey of S. Alban. I now resume my narrative. The works had then progressed as far as the restoration of the Presbytery and Aisles, which were in the hands of the contractor. These have since been thoroughly and substantially repaired in strict accordance with their ancient features.

I mentioned in my former Report how that a doorway and screen had been discovered in the south wall, the one of which leads to an extra-mural Chapel of Abbot Whethamstede, and the other formed a partition between the Aisle and the Chapel. Since that time the wall-arcading at this place has been repaired and reinstated, the old carved caps having been entirely destroyed, their places have been filled by new ones, on which the carver has bestowed great labour and skill, and which will bear the test of comparison with the early decorated work in other parts of the Abbey. The wall-arcading in the north Aisle of the Presbytery has been extensively repaired; many large fragments, such as springers, invaluable in the work of restoration, having been found buried in this Aisle. These were reinstated with great success. A curious feature, also discovered in the north wall, was an earlier doorway, east of the perpendicular one now existing, which had been carefully filled with rubble work, the floor considerably raised, and a later doorway of nondescript style inserted over it, thereby destroying the arcade and also two-thirds of a decorated window above. We were so fortunate as to find the whole of the beautifully moulded inner arch of this doorway, forming a portion of the arcade. It was distributed in fragments more or less all over the Abbey, and, when put together, formed the entire missing structure; not a stone was wanting, and, although some were much mutilated, they were all carefully repaired and restored to their original

positions. The carved spandrils over this doorway are well worth inspection. The ancient arch having been thus reinstated, it naturally followed that we should repair the window over it. This has been successfully accomplished, and the missing tracery inserted, together with new jambs, mullion, and cill. Tiles have been manufactured, all from ancient designs peculiar to the Abbey alone, and laid in these Aisles, together with all memorial stones as found. A beautiful pavement has been laid in the sacrarium at the High Altar, the marble used being Purbeck, found there, of various colours, and of great beauty when polished.

I now turn westward to the Choir and its Aisles. As in the other parts of the Abbey, described in my former Paper, we here found that the levels of the floors had been disturbed and altered, in all probability to match with greater ease the modern fittings introduced.

I am happy to say that all these monstrosities have been swept away, and the floors altered to their original levels. This work required the greatest care and thought, especially as in the course of excavation we found the original tile and stone foundations of the Choir stalls, showing their exact longitudinal position, together with the return stalls at the western end for the Abbot and Prior.

Fortunately, although the work of demolition of these foundations had been great, more especially by reason of interments, there remained sufficient evidence to mark the exact position of each row of stalls. There was also a patch of herring-bone pavement which had been undisturbed, thereby giving the exact levels. The various features showed that the floor between the stalls had been raised one step, then another step under the western arch of the tower, continuing at this level eastward to the fine flight of five marble steps in the eastern arch leading to the Presbytery (these latter were the gift of the Rector from the proceeds of the sixpenny ticket fund), and rising eastward by a single communicants' step to the Sacrarium, terminating with another noble flight of four marble steps to the High Altar. A visitor, standing by the screen of the Holy Cross, and viewing these flights of polished marble, backed by the magnificent Wallingford screen, and canopied by the 13th century vaulting, erected as is supposed by Abbot Berkhamstede, and so beautifully painted by Abbot Whethamstede, has indeed a sight before him which might be equalled, but certainly not surpassed in any ecclesiastical edifice in this country.

At present we are laying tile paving in the Choir and Aisles, and this section will shortly be ready for Divine Service to be celebrated therein, if required.

The Reparation Committee have not yet been able to spare funds for the erection of stalls. This without doubt will be done when the other parts near receive their internal fittings. The south aisle of the Choir had become sadly dilapidated, and, by reason of the removal of the Cloisters, the south wall had an outward inclination, which opened the Norman groining in the centre, and in it caused a serious depression. This groining has now been lifted as near as possible to its original position, and the structural repairs thoroughly carried out. The south wall has been underpinned, and a new roof of English oak, covered with 7lb. lead, placed over the Aisle, so that we may confidently hope it is secure from danger for some centuries to come, although the repairs do not compensate for the removal of the Cloister, which in its place served as an abutment.

In scraping from the walls of the Choir the whitewash of two centuries, four colossal figures in fresco have been discovered, at the clerestory stage, near the ceiling; three being on the north wall, and one on the south.

A painting of the Trinity has also been brought to light on the western face of a pier on the north side.

But a yet more important discovery remains to be alluded to, which is no less than the magnificent painting on the ceiling of the Choir, so elaborately described by Mr. Lloyd. I may be permitted to mention the circumstances which led to its discovery. It was a part of the Choir contract that this ceiling should be substantially repaired, and during the time the necessary works were being executed by carpenters, it was ascertained that the panels of this ceiling were loose, or, in other words, each panel could be lifted out. This having been done, and while workmen were carefully screwing strengthening-pieces on the backs of the panels, it was seen that some of these had had a former coat of colour. I should mention that the whole surface of the ceiling had evidently been repainted in a very indifferent manner in the 17th century. A clever artist, whose name deserves to be recorded, Mr. Cobham, from the firm of Burlison and Grylls, Newman Street, London, being at work at the Abbey, suggested the cleansing of one panel by the removal of the latter paint. This was a work of some difficulty, and required much skill. However, it was by him successfully accomplished by peeling off the outer skin, when underneath the comparatively modern surface was exposed to view a painting of exquisite beauty, revealing the "Shield of Faith." So signal a success attending our first efforts at renovation, I directed that five other panels should be similarly treated, and, on that being done, each presented a new subject of similar artistic value. Feeling it would be an act of barbarism not to present to the world such a fine example of ancient art, I retained the scaffolding in its position, hoping that some kind friend would come to our aid with the necessary funds. I had not long to wait, for the Rev. Mr. Lawrance again came to the rescue, and expended 300 guineas from the ticket fund before alluded to. The result of such expenditure being the saving from oblivion of a fine work of art of the 14th century—a painted ceiling not to be surpassed in England for its beauty or historical associations. The works I have hitherto described have been executed, except otherwise mentioned, under the orders of the Reparation Committee, and, on the completion of the Choir, the labours of these noblemen and gentlemen will for a time cease.

I alluded in my former paper to efforts then being made to save from ruin that noble building the Lady Chapel of the Abbey, and the Ante-chapel attached to it at its western end. I cannot better describe its condition two short years ago than in the language of Sir Gilbert Scott, in his report to the Marchioness of Salisbury, which I beg permission to quote. Sir Gilbert says—"When we come to consider the present condition of these charming Chapels, once resplendent with architectural beauty, and replenished with objects of the highest interest and richness of decoration, their ceilings glowing with colour, and rendered instructive by the sacred subjects they illustrated, their windows filled with stained glass, their floors enriched with encaustic tile and marble, and made venerable by sepulchral brasses, while in the midst stood the beautiful Shrine of the Protomartyr's friend, of rich stone work below, and jewelry above, and around it, in the Ante-chapel, at least five altars with their accompaniments, and further on, in

the Lady Chapel, the High Altar of S. Mary, with a smaller altar in the Vestry, dedicated to the Saviour, and His Transfiguration; when, I say, we come to consider the present condition of this once lovely group, how melancholy is the contrast. The Ante-chapel is a mere ruin, excepting only that its roof has been preserved and cared for, its stone work externally, in almost the last stage of decay, and rudely repaired with brick, while internally, in addition to this, it has suffered wherever within reach from deliberate mutilation. Nor is this all, for as if to pour out the last vial of insult upon the humbled structure, a public footway has for centuries been opened through it. This was during days of carelessness; but, it would seem, that some of the inhabitants still love to have it so, and unmindful that the Abbey is the sole glory of the town, they are not ashamed to proclaim the higher value they place on the right to prolong her desolation, than on the honour it would do them to say that they 'take pleasure in her stones, and it pitieth them to see her in the dust.' Happily, however, such ill-feeling is very limited, and the last-named sentiment prevails. The state of the Lady Chapel proper, differs a little from that of the Ante-chapel, for, though it looks more neat within and without, this mainly arises from the groined ceiling within being plastered and whitened, and the floor boarded, while, on examination, the beautiful wall-arcading is found to have been almost wholly hewn away, and the niches mutilated."

Such is the picture of desolation, with the miserable features of which so many of you must have been familiar. I will not dwell on this, but point to what we have accomplished through the aid and exertions of the Ladies Salisbury, Verulam, Essex, and Cowper, and their friends, and what efforts have been made in order to wipe away that reproach.

The whole of the Ante-chapel roof has been stripped; all pieces of unsound timber removed, new oak beams and rafters supplied wherever necessary, and strong bars of iron screwed in every requisite direction, in order to keep the roof together. This, in turn, has been boarded all over, and covered with new lead. Internally, new panels and tracery have been added to the ceiling of the centre aisle, and the north aisle has been groined anew with stone springers, oak ribs, panels, and carved bosses. The ruin of the wall-arcading of the Ante-chapel was complete. We have now completely restored the three northern bays, and I am happy to say that for every such bay we have discovered some fragments which gave us the proper sections of the ancient mouldings, and every small piece so found has been made use of in its place; indeed, so particular have we been in this matter, that if a new piece had been inserted, and an old one afterwards discovered, we have never hesitated to cut out our new work and reinstate the old. Most of my hearers will be able to call to mind the ruined state of these noble windows, how they had gradually disappeared under the influence of time, weather, and spoliation. Look at them now, and see if the efforts of these noble ladies in aiding the restoration have been in vain. Nothing in my life has ever given me greater pleasure than the circumstance of my being selected to assist in this grand work of restoration—to assist in the saving from oblivion of these works of art which were rapidly and too surely disappearing from amongst us. In addition to the funds obtained by the Ladies' Committee, other ladies gave their material help by each selecting one window for repair at her own expense. Those who have so assisted, and are now so doing, have aided the good work in a considerable manner, and the benefit arising from such examples of self-denial and rendering of assistance has been very great.

In excavating the floor before the Altar of S. Mary of the Four Tapers, in the Ante-chapel, a heart-sepulchre was found in the shape of a cylindrical hole sunk in a stone. This still remains *in situ*, but, when discovered, it contained a box of thin wood in the last stage of decay. I produce a fragment of it on this table, together with what remains of the lid or cover. Some Arabic characters are distinguishable in an annulet on the latter, and these were partially deciphered and translated by the late Bishop of Brechin as being the word "God." It has also been examined by that distinguished traveller and scholar, Sir Henry Rawlinson. I have furnished Sir Henry with a drawing of it, but have not yet learned his opinion as to the translation. I believe this discovery has been alluded to before by Mr. Lloyd; but I will briefly add that the heart buried was that of Abbot Roger de Norton, who died in 1291.

We are now restoring some of the windows of the Lady Chapel for individual ladies. On the completion of these, I fear that our efforts in this direction will come to a close, unless further funds are forthcoming.

Having given an account of the works carried out under the auspices of the Reparation Committee, and also by order of the Ladies' Committee, I come to the noble work started by a gentleman about to reside in this neighbourhood (Sir Edmund Beckett.) Some of my audience may recollect, what is now a matter of history, the fall of the south parapet of the Nave in 1832. Extensive repairs were then carried out, having for their object the immediate temporary preservation of the building. To a certain extent these were successful; but, notwithstanding the precautions then taken, a certain slow movement has been for some time going on in the south clerestory and triforium. It has been such a movement that to have disregarded it would have been an act of extreme folly, if the Nave had to be preserved. No funds were at the disposal of the Reparation Committee to attack such a formidable work, when, as I have said before, Sir Edmund Beckett most generously came to the rescue. After a personal inspection made by the worthy baronet, he became fully aware of the certain impending danger, and the result of his examination is that by his aid we have been able to strongly shore this great mass, thereby rendering it perfectly safe for the time being. I need not say that this is a preliminary measure only, carried out as a matter of precaution.

A greater sum than has hitherto been subscribed will have to be found before the Nave and its Aisles, together with the three beautiful western Porches, forming distinct entrances to this portion of the Abbey, can be repaired in order to render those parts fit for the due celebration of Divine Service.

I have no doubt that a considerable sum will be raised immediately on a certain long-expected and much-wished-for event being decided on. I allude to the appointment of the first Bishop of S. Albans, and I believe not a few will hail with much satisfaction the day when announcement is made that such is an accomplished fact.

I will conclude with a slight reference to the shrine of S. Alban. Fragments are found from time to time in many parts of the Abbey. These are jealously preserved with the view of inserting them in their proper places at some future period.

It is a fact that the workmen employed at the Abbey—I allude particularly to those whose duty it is to perform unskilled labour—readily recognise a fragment of this structure wherever found. I mention it as a very gratifying circumstance, at once showing the development of high intelligence, quickened by the refining influence exercised on their minds by reason of their daily lives being passed amid such a profusion of objects of artistic skill.

Lastly, I thank you all for your patient attention to my imperfect effort to give an outline of our labours in attempting to preserve, to the glory of God, and for the delight of future ages, that noble structure which we all so love and venerate.