



MONUMENT TO FRANCIS BACON, ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH, ST. ALBANS.

The Bacon Monument.

BY SIR EDGAR WIGRAM, BART.

THE monument of Francis Bacon, Baron Verulam and Viscount St. Albans, is unquestionably the most celebrated in St. Michael's Church and perhaps in St. Albans itself. It was erected, as the inscription informs us, by his cousin, Sir Thomas Meautys, his friend and private secretary, and might still be thought notable as a work of art, even if it did not commemorate "one of the greatest men, and most worthy of admiration, that hath been in many ages."

The great Lord Chancellor was disgraced in 1621; but the "Light of Science," who "had taken all knowledge for his province," had still five years of life remaining to spend on "studies more worthy of such a student," and did not "fulfil Nature's law" till 1626. His retirement was spent at Gorhambury,—or, to speak more strictly by the book, at his own newly-built summer house at the Pondyards;—and though he found here no refuge from the persecutions of his despoilers, yet he may well have found some relief in the Society of men like "rare Ben Jonson," whose "conceit of his person had never been increased towards him by his place and honours," and who still continued "to reverence him for the greatness that was only proper to himself." Even such a time-server as Gil Blas (if his creator Le Sage is to be credited) was not so mean as to desert the fallen Olivares; and we know that a finer character, Diego Velasquez, did not. Prince Charles of Wales betrayed some irritation at the state still maintained by the discredited Minister, and seems to have resented the unwelcome discovery that a breath could not unmake him, "as a breath had made;" but an abler despot than Charles had a truer understanding of the limitations of despotism:—"Of seven peasants I can make seven lords," quoth Henry VIII. truculently to his courtiers, "but not one Holbein!"

Bacon now laboured nevertheless under crushing financial embarrassments, and at his death it is recorded that his debts amounted to £22,000, while his assets were not a third of that sum.

Some of Bacon's most notable works were produced in the thick of these troubles, his "Natural and Experi-

mental History," his "Digest of the Laws," and his "History of England under the Tudors." His "Novum Organum," his "Instauratio Magna," and his "De Augmentis" had indeed been completed previously, but his famous essays were revised and considerably extended at this time. He died in pursuing his researches, for he contracted a chill one cold winter's morning through stopping his coach to conduct an elementary experiment in the practicability of cold storage, by stuffing a fowl with snow with his own hands. And after about a week's illness, he expired on Easter Day, April 9th, 1626, in Lord Arundel's house at Highgate. It is characteristic of him that, in the last words he wrote, when he could hardly hold his pen steadily, he noted that his experiment had succeeded "excellently well."

A new reign was just opening, and England "knew not Joseph." Bacon's death passed almost unnoticed among the news of the day. His funeral was conducted so privately that, in the total absence of all record, modern sceptics have even questioned whether he was buried at St. Albans at all. But his will unquestionably directs that his body should be buried at St. Michael's, "because his mother was buried there, and because it was the only church within the precinct of ancient Verulam;" and seeing that his death occurred no further off than Highgate there is no valid reason for doubting that his wishes were carried out.

His body was no doubt laid in the Gorhambury vault beneath the pavement of the Sanctuary, but, if Fuller is to be credited, it did not rest long undisturbed. In October, 1649, his grave was re-opened to admit the body of his faithful friend and disciple, Sir Thomas Meautys; and a certain Dr. John King, a true "crop-eared knave" of the period, is said to have rifled his coffin and made his skull a subject of cheap "ridicule." Perhaps this may help to explain why, when the vault was last opened about 1865, Bacon's coffin could not be identified.

With regard to the monument itself, this seems to have been certainly reconstructed in 1866. Mr. Cook, who was Clerk of the Works under Sir Gilbert Scott when the church was restored at that date, informed the Rev. C. V. Bicknell (the then Vicar), in 1897, that the whole of the North wall of the Chancel had been then rebuilt (prac-

tically from the foundation), the monument taken down and re-erected, and the statue lowered and replaced. The late Mr. Charles Woollam and his brother John also informed Mr. Bicknell that in their boyhood (i.e. about 1850) they had often been told that the statue had once been "stolen" and brought back again. It appears to have been lowered on to the Chancel floor during the night (probably by tomb breakers who had been looking for buried treasure) and to have been found in this position in the morning. No further damage had been done, however, and the statue was immediately replaced.

During our own generation, from 1866 onwards, the monument consisted of an altar-like base with a width of 5ft. 6ins. and a projection of 1ft. 3ins. from the face of the chancel wall. This was raised on a 6 in. step and a 9½ in. stone plinth, and was capped by a black marble slab 3 ins. in thickness with a moulded edging. Its total height from floor level was 4ft. 9ins. Above, in an arched recess, was the life-sized statue of Bacon, seated in a chair in an attitude of meditation "as he was accustomed to sit." This was raised on a second small pedestal, flush with the face of the wall, and only the toe of the figure projected in front of the pedestal. The well-known Latin epitaph, composed by Sir Henry Wotton, who was Provost of Eton at the time of Bacon's death, is engraved on three black marble tablets, one of which forms the front of the upper pedestal, while the other two are let into the front of the base.

The statue is of white Sicilian marble, marked here and there by faint grey veining, and is commonly supposed to be the work of an Italian. It should be recorded, however, that in 1899, Mr. Goscombe John, the English sculptor, told the Rev. C. V. Bicknell that he was confident that it was the work of an Englishman.

In the summer of 1921 the late Mr. C. H. Ashdown called attention to the fact that the black marble tablets were becoming considerably mildewed, and that the inscription upon them (which had never been deeply incised) was in some places almost illegible. The stonework of the base also was becoming much injured by damp, and in some particular places was beginning to moulder away. The cause of this mischief was obvious. The chancel walls had no damp-proof course, and the

moisture sucked up from the ground by capillary attraction had saturated the masonry to a height of six or eight feet above the floor. The same cause had badly affected the more modern marble dado beneath the sill of the east window; and it was agreed that the only sure remedy was to remove the monument entirely from the niche in which it was ensconced, to line the niche throughout with a coating of asphalt, and then to re-erect the monument in a sort of damp-proof nest.

The necessary permission for this work was obtained from the Earl of Verulam as lay Rector, and from the Rev. Canon the Hon. R. Grimston as Vicar of the parish. Funds were generously provided by the Ladies' Guild of Francis St. Alban, through the zeal of Miss Alicia A. Leith, their honorary secretary; and the St. Albans Archæological Society, and the Baconian Club of St. Albans, promised to guarantee further funds if further expenditure had to be incurred.

The question next arose as to whether the original design of the monument had been in any way modified by subsequent alterations, and whether, if it were proved that the original design had been departed from, it might not be possible to take this opportunity of reverting to it.

The earliest representation which we possess of the Bacon monument is an engraving by W. Hullar, published in the year 1670. This does not show the base, but only the niche and statue. Yet it is valuable as proving that the statue stood always entirely within the niche and never projected in front of it. Other similar engravings of later date all concur in supporting this inference; and though they differ as to the dimensions of the niche, and the form of the arch over it, yet it may be fairly assumed that these differences are attributable to carelessness of draughtsmanship and not to any alteration in the form of the niche itself.

The earliest drawing of the base is found in a sketch by T. Trotter, dated 1799, and preserved in the British Museum. This shows neither step nor plinth, and consequently tends to prove that the base stood then about 15 inches lower, and that its total height from floor level was about 3ft. 6ins. It also seems to indicate that the projection of the base from the face of the wall was considerably more than 1ft. 3ins, but its evidence on this

point is not entirely conclusive. More definite evidence, however, is supplied by a coloured print published by Leighton Bros. in 1844, one copy of which is preserved in the Herts County Museum, and another in the vestry of the Church. This shows quite distinctly that the base then had a projection of about three feet from the face of the wall, and that there was room at either end of it (as the stonework remaining still testifies) for an inset marble panel corresponding with the panel on the front. No step is shown under the base, and only a low plinth course about four inches high, so that the full height of the base would be about 3ft. 10ins.

So far as Lord Verulam could remember the monument had not been altered, but was re-erected in 1866 on precisely the same lines as before. There is no mention of any change in the contemporary account of the restoration published in the "Herts Advertiser," and the omission of any such mention may be held to confirm his remembrance.* On the other hand, Mr. H. J. Toulmin, who was Churchwarden at the time of the restoration, declares that the base was then set back, at the express desire of the Vicar, the Rev. B. Hutchinson, in order to free the floor space within the Altar rails; and a note by the Rev. C. V. Bicknell, on the back of the Leighton print in the Vestry, not only confirms this testimony, but adds that the back portion of the marble slab, which forms the top of the base, had to be sawn away to admit of the setting back. Mr. Bicknell's authority for this statement was Mr. Hutchinson himself, and notes of the information were taken by him at the time.

The weight of evidence seems strongly in favour of the theory that the base was originally designed with a projection of about three feet and a height of 3ft. 6ins. or 3ft. 10ins., that it remained practically unaltered till the restoration of 1866, and that it was then re-erected with a projection of only fifteen inches and a height increased to 4ft. 9ins. The evidence on this point, however, was not regarded as conclusive by the Diocesan Advisory Committee; the Parochial Church Council opposed any alteration which should further obstruct the limited floor space in the Sanctuary; and, on the advice of the Royal

* No faculty was obtained for the work carried out at this period, so the Diocesan Registry furnishes no evidence on this point.

Society of Antiquaries, it was resolved not to press for the original projection to be restored.

The point was yielded somewhat reluctantly, for there can be no question that the original design, with its lower and more projecting base, was much more artistic and better balanced. It was felt also that the Monument of Bacon—an object which may be revered for centuries—should be preserved as a trust in its authentic condition, and not pared and trimmed to suit the ephemeral convenience of a constantly-varying ritual. As the chancel is now arranged, the projection would certainly be obstructive, but it is to be none the less regretted that, when the Chancel was rearranged at the restoration, a plan was not adopted that would have avoided interference with the tomb.

The Monument was taken down in October, 1923, in the presence of the Countess of Verulam and Mr. H. E. Asprey representing the Earl, Miss A. A. Leith, Captain Gundy and Mr. Henry Seymour representing the Ladies' Guild of Francis St. Alban, and Mrs. C. H. Ashdown and Sir Edgar Wigram, representing the St. Albans Archæological Society. The interior of the base was found to be built up solid with modern brickwork in Portland cement, and (like most of the walling around it) evidently dated from the restoration of 1866. This brickwork was saturated with moisture, and was evidently the cause of the mischief which the work was undertaken to obviate. No coins or other records or relics of any description were found in removing this filling, nor even any broken stone which might have formed part of the casing. The back of the marble capping, however, was found to have been sawn away as Mr. Bicknell's note described.

When the niche had been completely cleared it was lined internally with asphalte, floor and walls being covered equally, and the asphalte being dressed round the angles of the opening to a width of 6 ins. on the face. As an additional security against damp the base was rebuilt hollow, with a pair of brick piers in the centre to bear the weight of the statue, and before the cavity was covered over a sealed bottle was deposited in it, with a record of the date of rebuilding, the names of the wit-

nesses present, and a brief explanatory statement of the nature of the work carried out.

The inscription was incised so slightly that a finger passed over the surface could in some places hardly detect the roughness caused by the lettering. It was not however, deemed advisable to recut the original letters, and it was thought a preferable alternative to preserve their legibility by painting them. Indeed it is far from improbable that they had been thus treated originally, and the restorers were merely renewing what the builders of the monument had done.

The $9\frac{1}{2}$ in. plinth course which has been already mentioned was found to be so much disintegrated that it was impossible to move it without breaking. A new plinth course was substituted, and advantage was taken of the opportunity to reduce its height to $3\frac{1}{2}$ ins. as shown in the 1844 engraving. The height of the monument was thus lowered by about 6 ins., securing rather better lighting for the statue, and bringing it nearer the level of the eye. The statue was found to be coated with a yellowish film of dust particles, which appeared to have settled on the marble in the course of the three centuries which have elapsed since its erection, and to have become firmly compacted by the moisture caused by condensation. This had already occasioned some clogging of the minute interstices in the lacework of the ruff and cuffs and the curled locks of the hair and beard. The film was removed, with some difficulty, by diligent scrubbing with soap and water, and the surface of the marble restored to its pristine whiteness. It was found in the course of this work that the right forearm of the figure, the toe of the right foot, and a fold of the mantle falling from the left shoulder, had at some time been broken away (probably by the robbers who lowered it from its niche at the beginning of the last century) and had been restuck so insecurely that they parted again when moisture was applied. These jointings have now been renewed with more reliable cement.

It is hoped that the Monument has now been secured from further serious decay for some generations.

[The writer's thanks are due to Mr. Arthur Cherry for permission to reproduce his photograph.]