

The Completion of St. Albans Abbey.

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IT is one of the principal charms of our great Christian churches that they are so seldom the work of a single generation or the conception of a single brain. Individual effort has played its part; but it has been no such "star" part as was assumed in earlier epochs by a Rameses or a Nebuchadnezzar; and the impulse given originally by the piety of a penitent or the pride of a conqueror has been soon merged in the long-sustained and concerted efforts of a host of miscellaneous supporters, born perchance in different ages and actuated by different motives, but all working together in this instance for a common end—" *ad majorem Dei gloriam.*"

It is seldom that one man's lifetime has sufficed for the erection of any noteworthy monument. When the Jews boasted that their temple was forty and six years years a-building they were claiming no unusual distinction even for so small a structure; and it is a significant testimony to the extraordinary abundance of talent that must have been at the disposal of Pericles and Pheidias that the Parthenon at Athens was completed in so few as eighteen. But in both these cases (as at our own St. Paul's) the work was carried through continuously and uninterruptedly; and, in the case of St. Paul's, we can hardly maintain truthfully that its furnishing and decoration have been completed even yet.

It took two hundred years and seven successive architects to erect the fabric of St. Peter's at Rome, and much of its decoration is still but a makeshift or a sham. In how few instances have wealth and taste and talent run together so long and so amicably that they have succeeded in turning out a real chef d'œuvre—a King's daughter worthily apparelled—like the church of St. Mark's at Venice or the interior of the Cathedral of Toledo?

Our own Abbey Church of St. Alban may be said to have been never yet completed. The same Abbot who added its crowning glory was responsible also for its first

disfigurement; and several of the features which we now prize most jealously might also perhaps rank as blemishes if we realised what they had replaced. And yet for a fairly long period—say perhaps from 1350 to 1500—it must have been as nearly finished as any great mediæval Gothic Church ever could be; and furnished with such magnificence as no great English Gothic Church now knows.

Time has dealt hardly with our Abbey. Many of its treasures were lost in the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, and in the Wars of the Roses in 1455 and 1461. Some are recorded to have been sold by the Abbots for the relief of the poor in times of dearth, and others "for necessary purposes" of a less legitimate kind. And all the residue that was removable (including, alas, the materials of most of the ancillary buildings), were swept away at the dissolution in 1539, and in the Great Rebellion in 1631. The fabric suffered grievously from sheer neglect during the ensuing three centuries; and though we may gratefully confess that the work of restoration, begun in 1871, was performed with more than princely munificence, it is vain to deny that it was marred by a display of bad taste and perversity which alienated most of the gratitude which such munificence deserved. But this tale of woes is not exceptional. Accident, decay and destruction have been taking toll unceasingly on all great national monuments, and unhappily will continue to take toll on them—as so lately at Salonica and at Rheims. There will always be need for renewal, and always some room for embellishment, and we must still face our obligations as our forefathers faced them in the past.

I have often amused myself at idle moments, and (*sub sigillo confessionis*) occasionally beguiled the tediousness of a dull sermon, by considering what might yet be done to perfect the Abbey Church of St. Alban, and so realise some of those grand conceptions which still remain but partially achieved. It is a Utopian dream, no doubt, and I am committing a most rash act even to put the vision into writing, for I am fully aware that my own theories are not in the least likely to win more than very partial acceptance, and I can foresee that, long before I have finished stating them, many of my most esteemed friends will be clamouring hotly for my scalp. But nothing can

be lost by ventilating them, and "toujours l'audace" is not a bad motto to work from. The Chapter of Seville had at all events the root of the matter in them when they coolly resolved to plan their temple on a scale of such magnificence "that future ages should deem them mad for having undertaken it." Given then, unlimited time, and an unlimited command of money, what should we aspire to accomplish at St. Albans Abbey Church?

THE NAVE.

And my first point of attack would certainly be the earliest disfigurement—not merely because it is the earliest, but because it is one of the most obvious and inexcusable—the blinded perpendicular windows that have been inserted in the triforium gallery of the Norman nave arcades. Paul of Caen's rude and massive old arches strike the keynote for the whole interior of the edifice, but their true design is preserved in two bays only—the two now masked by the organ cases—and, much as we owe on other counts to Abbot John of Wheat-hampstead, it is hard to forgive him for blocking the upper range of openings, with their telling masses of shadow, and breaking the continuity of the string course to make room for the splaying of his cills. A simple and effective design could hardly have been more simply and effectively spoiled.

The arches should, of course, be re-opened, and the broken string course reinstated, in a rude and mediæval style of workmanship to match the original work. If the faces and soffites are plastered, as the original builders intended (for the practice of showing the brickwork, though a good one, is of modern date), then the lines of construction should be indicated by painted voussoirs similar to those which are now in best preservation in the main arches of the tower; not, indeed, in their original colours, which when new must have been crude and barbaric, but in the faded tints given to them by the kindly hand of time.

Next in this portion of the building, though not perhaps next in point of urgency, we might proceed with the work which a few years since was being so strenuously advocated by Mr. H. J. Toulmin—the vaulting of the North aisle of the Nave. This is beyond doubt in

accordance with the intention of the original builders, and would add much to the dignity of the whole edifice; but the improvement will lose half its value unless it is supplemented by another—the removal of the Vestry enclosure which blocks the whole vista down this aisle.

Where the Vestries should be placed is a problem. There is no room for them in the building, and it is difficult to suggest a convenient site outside it where their erection would not prove an eye-sore. But personally I would incline to the site of the old Parochial Church of St. Andrew, against the North wall of the aisle at the extreme Western end. We do know quite certainly at all events that a building of some size did stand there, and there a new building could be erected without interfering with any old landmarks or traditions.

Perhaps it may fairly be contended that the Abbey nave was never more impressive than in those early days while it still preserved the form given to it by its original builders, and Paul of Caen's arcading was continuous from end to end. But this aspect is now past recovering. No one could now advocate the demolition of the arches which John de Cella and William of Trumpington substituted for those of their predecessor. They are far too intimately a part of History, and far too beautiful an example of Early English Architecture in themselves. Yet most of us would like to see William of Trumpington's conception carried a little further than the point at which he himself abandoned it. It is manifest even to the most casual observer that he intended his nave to be vaulted, for he actually prepared the vaulting shafts, and notched the hood mouldings in his triforium so as to leave room for the shafts to be carried up. But he had curtailed his ambitions before he reached clerestorey level, and had obviously decided by then to be content with a wooden roof.

I would not reconsider his judgment, but I wish he had given us the vaulting shafts. They are emphatically the one thing needed to give an air of completeness to his design. They should be carried up through the triforium, and at least as high as the springing of the clerestorey arches, where they would be able to justify their existence by supporting the roof principals above.

And for the wooden roof which he contemplated I

cannot believe that he ever intended to rest content with the present flat Norman type of ceiling. No doubt it was the type that he found there, and it is a type which harmonises perfectly with the Norman arcading further eastward, but it does not, and never can have harmonised with his own Early English design. Even if we ignore, for the moment, the defects of the present modern ceiling, if we think of it as remodelled so as to reduce the disproportionate size of its panels (which is its most conspicuous defect), and as painted, to follow the model set by Thomas de la Mare's ceiling over the choir, I should still believe that the roof which William of Trumpington would have put over the nave, had his means kept pace with his wishes, would have been an open timber roof of the typical Early English "wagon-tilt" form, with tie-beams and king posts over the piers and intermediate principals between them.

Such a roof I should now like to see substituted for the present modern ceiling, as far eastward as St. Cuthbert's Screen, but no further. No one could contemplate tampering with Thomas de la Mare's ceiling over the choir. We may indeed feel some regret that we no longer have there the original ceiling, painted by Walter of Colchester himself "with his own hand." But nothing less than the recovery of the original work of that greatest of early English artists (a recovery that is utterly past praying for), could justify anyone in discarding the masterpiece that now occupies its room.

The greater height given to the nave by an open roof, such as I have described, would decidedly improve its proportions, and the drop in height from the open roof to the ceiling over the Choir, and again from the flat Choir ceiling to the vaulted ceiling over the presbytery, would greatly enhance the apparent length of the building as viewed from the western end. The exterior appearance of the roof will not be affected at all.

And here let me utter a heresy which, of all the rash opinions I am promulgating, is the one which must most inevitably draw the fury of purists on my head. The problem which was constantly exercising mediæval architects, and which they never succeeded in solving, was how to make their buildings fire-proof. Schooled again and again by disaster, they were constantly endeav-

ouring, as far as their means permitted, to reduce the use of timber to a minimum. It was very largely this motive which prompted their development of vaulting; but even vaults were no remedy, for vaults needed timber roofs over. They could find no material to replace wood.

But we now have such a material, a material which the mediæval architects would have joyfully adopted had they known of it, and why should we deny ourselves the use of it when we come to carry on their work? Accordingly, while keeping the form of a timber roof, my material throughout should be ferro-concrete. It is practically everlasting, it is fire-proof, it is impervious to the death-watch beetle, and to painted decoration (which should provide the final finishing in either case), it is even more adaptable than wood.

THE CHOIR.

There is much to say about the western end, but it may be said more conveniently in dealing with the exterior, so I will turn next to St. Cuthbert's Screen and the Organ loft, which form a sort of group by themselves.

Of the Screen I will say but little. The need for repairing the broken canopy work and replacing the demolished statuary is too obvious to need any advocacy—so obvious that some day it will get done. And I would only suggest that when that day comes, and Michael of Mentmore's chef d'œuvre is restored to a worthy rivalry with William of Wallingford's, then the replaced statues would be very effectively set off by a little painted decoration in the four flat panels over each door.

That (modern) wing of the screen which extends across the North aisle should be demolished when the vestries are removed, and, in both aisles alike, the wing screens should be of light open woodwork, more in harmony with the central portion than the screen which forms the south wing now!

But there is more to say of the Organ, for, though it may please our ears, it is the root of a whole crop of eyesores, and its conspicuous position accentuates every flaw. In the first place its pair of cases have far too great a projection, reducing the width of the nave to something little better than a wicket gateway, and throttling the effect of a

vista which should be one of our chief prides. In the next place their form, both on plan and in profile, is much too square and angular, and projecting (as they do) from the sides of an uncompromisingly square opening, this fault greatly aggravates a stiffness which they ought to do something to relieve. They should be dressed back much closer against the walls, even though this should entail spreading them over a much wider surface; and the grouping of some of the pipes should be circular on plan, so as to get rid of a few among so many right angles.

But the chief disfigurement for which the organ is responsible is due to the great width allowed for the flooring of the loft. That mirky cavern of darkness under it, in the very centre of the body of the church, severing the choir stalls from the screen, and converting one whole bay of the choir into a lumber hole, is an outrage which could only have been perpetrated in the darkest epochs of churchwardendom!

Alas! the standard of accommodation demanded by modern Church organists is very much larger than any old cathedral can legitimately afford to spare. The organs contemplated by the mediæval builders were quite diminutive instruments, and even as early as Renaissance days the increasing requirements of the musicians could only be met (as at Bois le Duc) by ceding the whole west end. A transept may serve in some cases, but not in ours, where the organ has to serve for both choir and nave equally; and if the instrument cannot be permitted altogether to smother the architecture, it must spread its tentacles rampantly in back regions where they are not seen.

However the conditions of our problem predicate unlimited money, and the vaulting of the north aisle, and the opening of the triforium arches, will give a good deal of room for expansion in the triforium gallery itself. The ideal scheme, then, which I am dreaming of, would remove the existing return stalls and the existing organ loft, and restore once more to the choir that third bay of which it has been so long deprived. The side stalls would be prolonged westward, but not far enough to block the side doorways through St. Cuthbert's screen. These doors were originally intended, no doubt, for the passage of processions, and it would be good to see them so used again. Between the doorways, with their backs

to the Screen, and directly facing the High Altar, would be placed the Bishop's throne and the stalls for the Dean and Archdeacon. This would be in effect a reproduction of the primitive Basilican arrangement, though in those days the throne was placed behind the Altar and not in front of it, an arrangement which our local conditions do not allow to be literally reproduced.

And where would room be found for the Organ? The loft, containing only the keyboard, would itself form the canopy of the new return stalls and would be incorporated in its carved canopy work. It might be on a lower level than at present, and then there would be height enough behind it for the shorter visible pipes to be ranged along the back of St. Cuthbert's Screen. The taller visible pipes would be ranged on the side walls north and south, and the residue would be relegated to the triforium galleries.

I admit that the scheme is Utopian, but I am not pretending to advocate it as being "within the range of practical politics"—only as being the best arrangement that the structure of the building admits.

Eastward of the intersection the most crying need beyond question is the remodelling of the clerestorey windows in the north and south walls of the Presbytery. I feel that in their present form they are the worst blunder that Lord Grimthorpe perpetrated. They are so gratuitous a blunder. The original tracery was still there to copy. It was decayed, no doubt, but not so much decayed as to leave any uncertainty as to the design, or to render it impossible to take templates of the mouldings. What excuse can be urged to justify him for substituting his own coarse and bloated parodies? Oh! that we might see them replaced by faithful reproductions from the drawings of the originals which we still happily possess!

I always regret the blocking of the arches in the main arcade beneath them in the two bays east of the tower. If it were possible to open them it would be a most notable gain. But the blocking is original, of Norman date, and it could hardly be removed without imperilling the stability of the Tower piers. One can only suggest that so great an area of plain walling affords a fine field for a fresco artist's work.

Lord Grimthorpe's restoration of the Lady Chapel was carried out, we must admit, with more restraint and good taste than his restoration of the main building, and, though his heavy hand is visible, it is to no unbearable extent. But the Ante-chapel begs for re-vaulting; and the Shrine of St. Amphibalus should be restored, and re-erected in it on the site which it occupied originally. And the wooden screen at the end of the North aisle should be abolished, whether we find another to replace it or no.

And here perhaps I may venture to advance an original suggestion. The three arches between the Saints Chapel and the Ante-Chapel always appear to me to wear an unfinished air. Would they not look more effective if cut open down to pavement level, with a broad flight of steps leading up to them from the level of the Ante-chapel floor? The apertures should then be filled with open-work screens and gates, and would give a fine view from the Lady Chapel of the Shrine of St. Alban within. It is quite impossible at present to view the Shrine from any distance, and the chance of a distant glimpse of it is just the supplement it needs.

EXTERIOR.

I have stigmatised the windows of the Presbytery as the worst of Lord Grimthorpe's blunders, but undoubtedly his biggest are the North and South transept facades. Whether viewed from within or without it is still disputed by most of us which of the two is the ugliest, and I own it is with some diffidence that I incline to give the North the palm.

It is true he has blundered here rather more venially than in the Presbytery, for most of the work that he demolished was not much better than his own. The great windows inserted by John of Wheathamstead were very debased and ugly Perpendicular, intended probably to give scope for a great display of stained glass which was just then becoming "all the rage." But when Lord Grimthorpe took up his work there were (had he been willing to be taught) quite enough indications of the original design still remaining *in situ* to teach him, and these indications are still preserved for us in the drawings

of Buckler and Neale, so we may hope that some day they may serve to procure a restoration.

Like all Paul of Caen's designs, these facades were very simple and impressive, and in the western wall of the North transept we have all their chief features still preserved. Flat Norman angle buttresses, with a single similar flat buttress carried up to eaves level in the centre. Two windows at the height of the main arcading (as still preserved in the North Transept), and two more at clerestorey level immediately above. The gables of steep pitch, with a single range of plain Norman arcading carried across the base line at eaves level, and a round turret on each angle, finished with four little two-light balustered windows and a conical roof.

Lord Grimthorpe would no doubt have contended that the transepts were inadequately lighted, but to my mind the more subdued lighting would have been a positive gain.

The reversion to the high-pitched roof is a point which deserves to be recorded emphatically to Lord Grimthorpe's credit—the more so because his judgment was vehemently criticised at the time. But his heavy, dumpy, stone parapets are most unpleasing substitutes even for the brick battlements which were their immediate predecessors, and their ponderous horizontal lines are very disagreeably emphasised both on the eastern end of the Lady Chapel and the low-pitched gable of the Chancel.

This is why I wish that some one would (though I rejoice that Lord Grimthorpe didn't) restore the flying buttresses which once spanned the Chancel aisles. Structurally they are quite superfluous, and were probably never very first-class articles, but they were a pretty conception and would help to re-animate the view.

What form we should give the West Front is a subject which almost needs a Monograph. Many designs must have been made for it, but perhaps none was ever completed before the present one. And the fact that the present work embodies some fragments of John de Cella's porches is its only ground for claiming to be a sprig of the original tree.

Perhaps it may be plausibly urged that therefore we have no cause for supplanting it. It was not Lord Grimthorpe but John de Cella who demolished Paul de Caen's

handiwork, and all that John de Cella was able to accomplish towards replacing it, Lord Grimthorpe might claim to have conserved. He did, indeed, destroy John of Wheathamstead's later West window, but that was a piece of destruction which even archæologists might condone. Has not his work then as good a title to its position as any that his predecessors built?

Ancient work has a claim on our respect even though it be an ugly encumbrance, but new erections are parvenus, and have still to make good their claim either by usefulness or good looks. And unhappily there is no denying that Lord Grimthorpe's West Front is ugly. Not indeed such a prodigy of ugliness as either of his Transept facades, but ugly enough to cause us some regret that its most conspicuous feature should have recently acquired a certain sentimental value by being adopted as the frame of the Diocesan War Memorial.

No drawings or descriptions are extant of the designs of the original builders, but we can infer something of Paul de Caen's intentions from the records that we have of his transepts; something of John de Cella's from the surviving fragments of his work. And it is clear that in one at least, and perhaps in both of these designs, a pair of flanking towers was intended to be the dominating feature---towers placed not at the ends of the aisles as at Lincoln and Lichfield and Canterbury, but outside them as at Peterborough and Wells.

These towers, had they ever been completed, would have been a most valuable addition. Viewed from the South they would have been just the feature needed to give an emphatic and appropriate termination to the long level line of the Nave roof. Viewed from the West they would have given a height and breadth to the facade which would have immensely enhanced its dignity. And internally, at ground level, they would have provided us with a Baptistery, and a Chapel for private devotions---two additions which we now need acutely, and for which in the existing building it is most difficult to find a really suitable site.

We may infer then that in its general outline, and in the proportions of its towers, the design of the West Front contemplated by John de Cella would have been very similar to the design of the West Front of Wells

Cathedral. And I suppose it is generally agreed that there does not exist in all England a more unexceptionable model than Reginald Fitz Joceline's chef d'œuvre.

We still keep John de Cella's porches, albeit somewhat marred by restoration, and no one could dream of suggesting any radical departure from their lines. But I feel that he failed rather grievously in allowing those porches to be erected at a level five steps lower than the general floor level of the Nave. That pit into which they give entrance is a most disconcerting and inconvenient feature, and altogether ruinous to the effect of the general coup d'œil. At all costs the general floor level should be continued right through to the entrances, and the steps placed outside the building, where the increased height which they would give to the facade would add immensely to its dignity.

This of course involves raising the porches, but they have already been once reconstructed, and that fact may condone the archæological misdemeanour which this improvement involves.

For a reconstruction of the design above porch level we have absolutely no data available. The make-shift front of John of Wheathamstead, with his big Perpendicular window, was perhaps the only form in which completion was attained. But, from the analogy of Wells, we may conclude that the original conception was a central group of three great lancet windows, framed together in range upon range of arcading and niches and statuary.

SUBSIDIARY BUILDINGS.

After such an extensive programme for the completion of the Abbey Church itself, it may well seem a work of supererogation to allude to the appurtenances thereof. Yet much has been lost here also which we now would be fain to recover, and for which we may still well execrate the memory of Sir Richard Lee.

Perhaps that fragment of the Chapter House foundations that still lies buried under the pathway beside the Slype might enable us, with the assistance of other disjointed fragments, to effect a tolerable reconstruction of Robert de Gorham's noble hall. And a hall 90ft. in length and 38ft. in width, as large as the Chapter House at Canterbury, would be a very valuable acquisition in a

City which is not now too well equipped with great halls. It is true there is no good approach to it, and it would be difficult to arrange its exits and entrances to conform to the requirements of modern bye-laws. But perhaps even this could be managed if the cloisters were also rebuilt.

And the cloisters themselves, a perfect masterpiece of the most graceful style of English architecture, must have been so incomparably beautiful that their fate must be ever deplored. Possibly a day may come when they would again serve some useful purpose. It would not need much to justify the re-embodiment of such an idea.

However, there remains one improvement which perhaps is not beyond attainment—the conversion of the graveyard in Romeland into something more of an “open space.” The obstruction caused by its walls and trees—and in a lesser degree by the wall of the Abbey graveyard—spoil what would otherwise be one of the finest views of the Abbey; and laid out and planted as a garden it might become one of the chief ornaments of the town.

I fear that few of my suggestions have been so modest and practicable as this one, but even in the most impracticable there is perhaps a germ that may bear fruit. Their accomplishment would take centuries, but what are two or three centuries in the lifetime of such a building as the Abbey? And such problems need much weighing and appraising before they can take practicable form.

Moreover, in any event, criticism is a salutary exercise—a sport from which even the best work can never demand to be exempt. And even the least enlightened and most self-opinionated of critics may succeed, if his criticism is honest, in at least educating his own taste.
