

A Picture in St. Albans Cathedral.

BY WILLIAM H. FAIRBAIRNS.

IN St. Albans Cathedral there hangs a picture of The Last Supper, and this is what is said of it by one of the most authoritative guide books: "Over the door from the Presbytery is an oil painting of the Last Supper said to be by Sir James Thornhill, which was presented to the church by Captain Polehampton at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and hung for many years over the High Altar." In a footnote there is added: "This has been said to be the famous picture that Dr. Welton commissioned James Fellowes to paint for an altar-piece in his church at Whitechapel, in which Judas, who formed the most prominent figure, was a portrait of White Kennett, Dean and afterwards Bishop of Peterborough, a violent opposer of Sacheverell. A print of this picture exists at the Society of Antiquaries which has been carefully compared with the picture here, and although there are points of similarity, the whole arrangement of the figures, the background and foreground is different." So Mr. William Page, F.S.A., in his "St. Alban's Cathedral and Abbey Church." The name of the donor is given by Peter Newcome in his "History of the Abbey of St. Alban" (1795) and by Robert Clutterbuck in his "History and Antiquities of the County of Hertford." Subsequent writers have all followed their lead.

Nowhere, however, do we find the exact date of the gift, and nothing more about the giver, Captain Polehampton, than that he was "a gentleman of this town who purchased the picture as a present and decoration to this church." So let us see if we can find out something about Captain Polehampton and his gift.

The most important note is in the Guildhall Library. There is to be seen a collection of MSS. (1786) entitled, "Churches of London and Environs," by one Arthur Tiller. Fortunately for us he visited St. Albans and he tells that "Over the Communion Table is a Painting of the Last Supper. The Gift of Captain Polehampton



CAPT. EDWARD POLEHAMPTON.

about the year 1703." Here then we get the date, the importance of which will presently be seen. But we learn nothing more about this Captain Polehampton. Who was he? Newcome says "a gentleman of St. Albans." An examination of the church registers might perhaps disclose where he lived and died, and the following note may throw some light on the quest.

On September 21st, 1713, one Anne Polehampton, of the parish of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, was married to William Hall, of the parish of Mortlake, Surrey. Was this the daughter of the donor of the picture? If so, the family had apparently left St. Albans.

Turning now to Musgrave's Obituary we find in the Naval Class of Period VII. the death of Captain Polehampton, 1710, *aet.* 58, and that his portrait had been engraved. In the Cheylesmore Collection of the Print Room at the British Museum this portrait is to be seen. At all events there is an engraving of Captain Polehampton, dated 1701, which figure has been corrected to 1710. It is not unreasonable to suppose that this is our man, and in John Chaloner Smith ("British Mezzotint Portraits") commenting on Henry Bromley's "Engraved British Portraits," we get some interesting facts. Bromley calls Captain Polehampton "Colonel." Here then we get him out of the Navy into the Army. On the engraving has been written "of trainbands" "Coach painter," but we are left to guess if he was an artist or a finisher of stage coaches. Another Bromley note describes him as a publisher of Cow Lane. Evidently then he retired from Service, may possibly have interested himself in the Trained Bands and, being an artist, turned his ability into commerce.

Some transaction may in due course have brought the picture of the Last Supper into his studio, and his generosity being greater than his taste, he bought it "as a present and decoration" for the Abbey Church of St. Alban. These are, of course, mere guesses. What seems to be clear is that he died in 1710. Musgrave says "about 1710." Tiller says the gift was "about 1703." These "abouts," safeguarding and perhaps necessary, are naturally very tiresome.

Having disposed of the donor we may turn next to the picture itself. Of this we have been told it may

have been the altar-piece of Whitechapel Church, painted by James Fellowes, which created no small flutter in ecclesiastical circles when it was painted. The circumstances under which the Fellowes picture was painted are as amusing as they are instructive.

White Kennett, Dean, afterwards Bishop, of Peterborough, was in early life a Tory and High Churchman, but there is no record of his having read the Declaration, and apparently he not only disliked the ecclesiastical policy of James II. but, being an author and a distinguished antiquary, he wrote against it as well as against Atterbury on the history of rights of Convocation. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that he supported the Revolution and became a strong Whig—a course of things by no means singular. Opposition to Dr. Sacheverell naturally followed. White Kennett, after a succession of sinecures in Kent, became a popular London rector, and promotion came in due course: the Deanery of Peterborough in 1708, the Bishopric ten years later. Between these dates comes the incident of the Whitechapel altar-piece.

A man of quite a different description, a strong Jacobite, was Dr. Richard Welton, in 1710 Rector of Whitechapel. About the end of 1713 he thought of a new altar-piece for his church, and commissioned James Fellowes to paint it. It was to be The Last Supper. When the picture was finished it was seen that the Apostle John, depicted as a mere boy, was singularly like Prince James Edward, while Christ Himself was identified by some with Sacheverell. His patron had told Fellowes to give Judas the features of Bishop Burnet, but the artist, fearing the consequences, suggested White Kennett. "The very thing," no doubt said Dr. Welton, and White Kennett went into the picture, which was hung and attracted crowds. Among the visitors came Mrs. Kennett, who recognised, with indignant astonishment, her husband in the picture. Kennett obtained an order (April 26th, 1714) from the Consistory Court for the removal of the picture. It is by no means clear that this was effected. Amid conflicting accounts it may reasonably be gathered that the Apostle John and Judas were altered (the painter sitting up three nights to finish the work), and that the picture



THE LAST SUPPER.
(Whitechapel Church).



THE LAST SUPPER.
Painting hanging on North Wall of Presbytery, St. Albans Abbey Church.
(Photograph by Ernest Woolley, F.S.A.)

was restored to Whitechapel Church. In Granger's Biographical History of England, published in 1806, "it is still there."

Then what happened? Was the picture removed and did it come to St. Albans? The dates alone prove this to be a perfectly absurd suggestion (*pace* Mr. Newcome). Whitechapel Church was rebuilt in 1875 and destroyed by fire in 1880. One is inclined to think that if the picture survived the first ordeal it perished in the second.

A few more words about Dr. Welton may be of interest. He was naturally a nonjuror and was sheltered by Queen Anne, but on the accession of George I. measures were taken to punish him. In 1715 he was deprived of his livings. He then set up a chapel in an upper room in Goodman's Fields within the parish of Whitechapel, where in 1717 he was cruelly raided by soldiery and his goods sold to pay the fine for his offences. In 1722 he was irregularly consecrated a bishop for America, went there, and died (at Lisbon) on his way home in 1726.

The story of the Whitechapel picture has often made a paragraph in the daily press, the journalists telling that an engraving was made of which the Society of Antiquaries has a copy. The fact that the British Museum also has a copy appears not to have been known, but in the Library (1418, K.34) there is a most interesting collection of papers referring to this story. There is little or no resemblance between this engraving and the St. Albans picture, but there is one very singular and common note. White Kennett, as the result of a shooting accident, bore on his forehead something between a lock of hair and a patch. This appears in the Whitechapel picture and is very marked. It, or something like it, is in the St. Albans picture. It is a very interesting point. Does it in any way connect the two pictures?

And so we come to the question of the painter of the St. Albans picture. Thornhill? Fellowes, or who?

We may perhaps dismiss Fellowes at once. There seems to be no evidence to connect him with it. His name is distinctly on the engraving of the Whitechapel picture, and between this and the work at St. Albans

there is but the slightest resemblance.

Can we as easily dismiss Thornhill? The subject of the Last Supper had commanded his attention, and from his brush we may see two important renderings. One is in Hanover Square Church and the other in the Church of St. Mary, Melcombe Regis. These pictures make it absolutely sure that the very commonplace work at St. Albans cannot be by the same master hand. Had he then nothing to do with the picture? His name has become attached to it, and we want to know why. Let us see if we can gather anything helpful from his career. Thornhill, as a young fellow of about thirty, was employed by Queen Anne, and in 1713 was presumably a Tory, with a Royal mistress to please. But he was Sergeant Painter to George I., was knighted in 1720, and two years later was M.P. for Melcombe Regis. Apparently then he managed to keep in with both parties. Redgrave, in his "Dictionary of Artists," says that it was Queen Anne who made him Sergeant Painter, and he adds, "by some intrigue he was removed from office." When? Why? He held the office in 1719 and, as he was knighted in 1720, it may be supposed that he was a Whig. Was he then confronted with some Tory dealings?

Did Thornhill inspire the theme of the picture? Did some poor artist carry it out very roughly as we see at St. Albans, and taking it to a gullible Polehampton sell it as a Thornhill? Then, later, did Fellowes from this work make his Whitechapel picture? All this is pure imagination, and as such is to be valued.

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