

Lewis Evans

A BRIEF REVIEW
OF THE
RESTORATION WORKS,

SINCE 1877, IN

S. Albans Cathedral.

A PAPER

READ BEFORE

The S. Albans Architectural & Archaeological Society,

On Thursday, June 30th, 1881,

BY THE

REV. OWEN W. DAVYS, M.A.,

Rector of Wheathampstead, one of the Secretaries of the
Society, and Canon of S. Albans.

93
The Property of the
Hertfordshire County Council



The County Museum
Saint Albans

with the author's best regards.

A BRIEF REVIEW
OF THE
RESTORATION WORKS,

SINCE 1877, IN

§. *St. Albans Cathedral.*

A PAPER

READ BEFORE

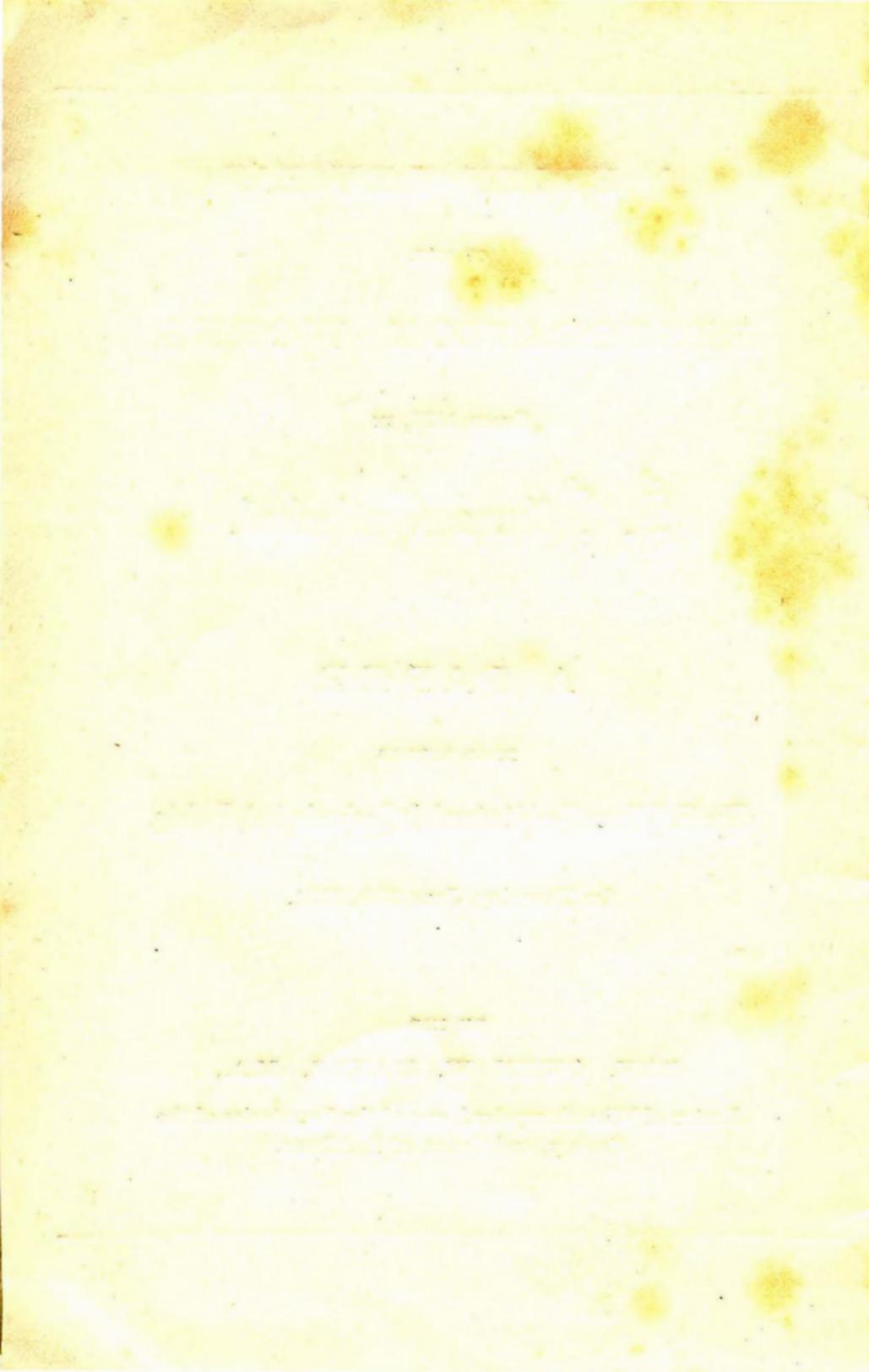
The S. Albans Architectural & Archaeological Society,

On Thursday, June 30th, 1881,

BY THE

REV. OWEN W. DAVYS, M.A.,

Rector of Wheathampstead, one of the Secretaries of the
Society, and Canon of S. Albans.



A BRIEF REVIEW
OF THE
RESTORATION WORKS,
SINCE 1877, IN
S. Albans Cathedral.

On the 11th of October in the year 1877, I read a paper on "The Restoration Works in St. Albans Cathedral, finished, in progress, and to come," some portions of which may be in the recollection of the members of this society, and of others then present; my paper to-day will be in some sort a continuance of the same subject, for, as I formerly stated, it seems to devolve upon a secretary of the St. Albans Architectural Society, founded as it originally was, for the especial study, and care of a church, which in interest (as one of my oldest architectural friends, Mr. Stewart, the historian of Ely, well wrote to me lately) "has not a companion," to report from time to time on its condition. It also seems the duty of such an officer to comment on the means taken for the preservation of so important a fabric, and the measures accomplished, or in contemplation, for the restoration of the several parts of the most vast of our existing Abbey Churches, and their adaptation to new uses in the Cathedral of one of the dioceses, the establishment of which will take a foremost place in the Church History of England, during the reign of Her present Majesty. It may be asked why so long a period as four years has been suffered to elapse, during which so much that is important in the modern history of our Abbey has taken place,

without any official report being made to this society; the fact has been that several "burning questions," as they have been called, have arisen in the course of the restoration works and we thought it better to let these burn themselves out before commenting upon them here. On a subject of very deep general historical and architectural interest, namely, the design of the west front, or rather the west fronts, of St. Albans, as they were planned by the Norman, and Early English architects, I read a paper before the Royal Archeological Institute, at their Lincoln meeting last year, which has since become generally known through its publication in the *Building News* and other papers. I thought it better to read that paper before the most important architectural society we have in England, for two reasons, first, because the subject was one of far greater than local interest, and next because special circumstances made it better just then to take a view of our west front from a distance. In that paper I endeavoured to show, first what the west front of Paul of Caen, the great builder of the whole Norman structure, probably looked like when completed, and secondly how on the same ground plan, which is nearly a fac-simile of the noble west front of Wells, John de Cella began and William de Trumpington continued a grand Early English front containing, what no other English west front contains, the three magnificent porches seen in the great west fronts of France. I was able from remains both of ground plan, and elevation, assisted, as I had been, in some of my earlier researches, by Sir Gilbert Scott, to trace that west front up to the belfry stage of the side towers, which was probably as high as the work of the Early English architects rose. So far my paper dealt with matters of *discovery*, not of "invention" as they were called in a subsequent article in the *Building News*, which accompanied a drawing of the proposed new front of which the foundations are now being laid; the upper portions of the towers were perforce conjecturally drawn, as the Early English architects would probably have completed them if they could; but they appear to have been

short of money then, as those, who would see them restored now, have found themselves lately. I may here mention that, in very many notable instances, the builders of our great Early English Churches had to stop at their towers; the marvellous builder of Early English Salisbury, Bishop Poore, was translated to Durham, before he had completed his wondrous Cathedral of New Sarum, further than the supports of the central tower, and the tower and spire, which now rest on Poore's sub-structure, form, as you know, the grandest of the magnificent steeples of our Decorated period. Westminster Abbey had no towers completed till Sir Christopher Wren tried his hand at fancy Gothic at the west end. The towers of Lincoln are in their upper stages Decorated in the grand central tower, on an Early English sub-structure, and Perpendicular at the west front on the Norman towers of Remigius. Wells, our parallel west front as to ground plan, has its towers at the west front Perpendicular, and most skilfully are they set on their lower Early English stages, the central tower of the Cathedral being somewhat earlier in date, while at Peterborough we have Decorated spires on the side towers of the Early English west front, and at Ely a Decorated octagon upon an Early English square western tower. It was for the benefit, upon the whole, of future generations, perhaps, that this delay in completing the steeples of our earlier churches took place, for there can be no question that, as decorative art, and mechanical skill, progressed, we got far more magnificent, better proportioned, and more stable towers and spires erected. I should have been content then, and so probably would have been the majority of architects both professional and amateur, if, in the restoration of St. Albans West Front, the lower stages of the side towers alone had been re-erected, leaving the super-structure to follow, if at all, at some future date, we should thus have got the glorious breadth, which our original architects intended, without striking the sky line with any new forms till after a long period of deep consideration. I was naturally,

before the Archæological Institute, reading a paper which dealt more with the antiquarian than the practical question of the restoration of this beautiful front, but I was attacked, in the discussion which followed, on two sides. A well-known architect asserted that though you might be able to trace the form and details of this front with perfect accuracy, though shafts and mouldings might be found, many of them *in situ*, yet, since so much new work must be executed, that you could only get a new front after all; to which my natural reply was, that, if this principle was to have so great weight, no restoration of a decayed building on the old lines was possible. Another gentleman flew off in a tangent at the horror of entrusting a restoration like this to one man, however generous, but the general sense of the assembly was evidently with the principles I had laid down, and their anxiety was to see as accurate a restoration of one of the finest of our English west fronts accomplished as possible. I trouble you with this reference to my paper on the west front, because that must in many ways form a connecting link between my reports to the society of 1877 and 1881. I will now ask you to review with me the principle restoration works, which have been proceeded with since I last addressed you, and let me observe that those works have been both extensive and costly. We have been credited, I fear, by the outside public with being very highly talented in the art of quarrelling. Prose has not been spared to ventilate our grievances, nor poetry to celebrate our triumphs. I little thought, when, in my last paper before you, I spoke of the sunken roofs of our Cathedral, and a discussion subsequently took place on the question of elevating them, in which no less a member of our society than our present High Sheriff took part, that the first notes were being heard of the trumpet call to the great future "pitched battle of the roofs"; there seemed, at that time, no immediate prospect of those roofs being touched but events have moved rapidly. When that great mechanical work, to which I four years ago alluded, of forcing, by hydraulic pressure, the southern Early English com-

partments of the nave, which were leaning dangerously southward, into the perpendicular, and sustaining them in position by the erection of massive buttresses against the south aisle, and the completion of the vaulting within, was in progress, the decayed condition of the great nave roof became apparent, and measures had immediately to be taken which led in their result to the completion of the high-pitched roof of the nave, which we now see. Now that "the hurly-burly's done," which arose about that matter, I may mention some important discoveries, which that work disclosed; first, it was found that there had been two high roofs over the nave of St. Albans, one oversailing, erected by Paul of Caen, the Norman builder, and another with parapets, most probably constructed in the Decorated period, presumably in the time of Abbot Mentmore, when the fall of some Norman compartments led to large re-constructions in the nave. The marks of both these roofs had been discerned, by the careful eye of Mr. Chapple, on the western face of the tower, when its reparation was under his hands, and as we could not, and would not, destroy the later parapets, though such a course had been suggested by no less an authority than Mr. Street, the new roof was laid within them, on the Decorated lines. I may mention as a parallel instance of a second high pitched roof, during the mediæval period, a fact, which our discovery at St. Albans led me to fully investigate at Peterborough; that noble church had once a lofty central tower, the work of Abbot William de Waterville between the years 1155 and 1175; it was three stories high, and of very rich late Norman work. The tower of Castor Church, four miles west of Peterborough, a parish closely connected with the Abbey and Cathedral (my father was its last Rector in right of the Bishoprick), has been thought to have been a copy of the great tower of the neighbouring Abbey Church, which, in that case, must have been splendid in the extreme, Castor being perhaps the most beautifully-rich Norman tower in the kingdom. This great tower at Peterborough became so insecure that it either fell, or was removed, most probably the latter,

or there would have been a greater crushing of the work below than now appears, and a Decorated tower, some few years later perhaps than the St. Albans Decorated parapets, was built in its stead; at that time parapets were added to the nave at Peterborough, and precisely the same kind of roof was erected, which we now see at St. Albans, the line of the original higher, and oversailing roof being still to be distinguished on the back of the central gable of the Early English west front, which was arranged to accord with the older form of the roof which it terminated. A second discovery at St. Albans was that the ceiling, which looked so well at a distance, was a very inferior imitation of a paneled roof discovered beneath it, sufficient of which was left to give authority for the ceiling, with its singular oblong rectangular panels, which has now been restored in oak, and only awaits the skill of a L'Estrange, or a Gambier Parry, to re-produce effectively its ancient colouring. A third discovery was that on a corbel, which formed an integral portion of the low roof, the probable date of which had been so much discussed, were found the initials "I.W.," marking it as the work of Abbot John of Wheathampstead; so it is now clear that when he lowered the aisle roofs, in order to fill the Norman Triforium arches with tracery, and stained glass, he also lowered the great roof correspondingly. At the earnest desire of Mr. John Scott, and some others, a part of the roof, so lowered, has been preserved over that portion of the constructive nave, which forms the choir, and it can now be conveniently seen by those who wish to examine it. During the last four years then the great work of raising the dangerous portion of the nave to the perpendicular, which will always have a deep interest as the last great mechanical work of Sir Gilbert Scott, and restoring all around it, has been accomplished; the nave roof has been restored; the Lady Chapel has greatly progressed towards completion, the horrible pathway through its neighbouring chapels has been abolished, and a vast improvement affected by the acquirement of the property at its east end; now, through the

munificense of one of our great benefactors, some beautiful arcading destroyed, and cut away, is being restored, and replaced, while the Corporation of London are restoring, and will, I understand, fill with stained glass, the wonderful window at extreme east, the side windows having been already restored by the kind exertions of Lady Salisbury and some "ladies of Hertfordshire." The Freemasons of England offered to provide a reredos below the great east window, but there were difficulties in the way of accepting the gift, which will now, I believe, take the form of a cathedral pulpit. All we can hope is that the Lady Chapel will soon be so far completed as to serve the purpose of a Morning Chapel, an adjunct, which no Cathedral Church can well dispense with, and that it may soon be opened to the rest of the building, and be floored with suitable paving. I have but little time left; already I have found that I have had more to say than most audiences would have the patience to hear, but I must refer for a moment to a very important work now in hand, the preparation of the stalls for the cathedral choir. These are being worked from a very beautiful design by Mr. John Scott in oak, the material which Edward II. granted from the royal forests for the construction of their predecessors. When the return stalls are completed, one side will form a memorial to the late Archdeacon Mildmay, and the entrance doorway, and its surroundings, will be provided as a memorial to Captain Campbell, our good Bishop's lamented son-in-law, while the other stalls will be the liberal, and valued gifts of some generous benefactors. Let us hope that the side stalls, and all that is needful to get the Choir into cathedral working order, may shortly be provided. I need hardly say now, after all that I have spoken, written, and published on choral arrangements generally, and those of St. Albans particularly, that I am not the architect of the plan just undertaken for placing and working the large organ. It has been put, I believe, where we shall see it, from the pressure of that necessity which knows no law; I regret that an opportunity has been let slip for

making some satisfactory permanent arrangement of this organ, such as I have often recommended, but I am assured that we shall have before us, or rather behind us, only a temporary arrangement, to preserve, and restore to its use in the choir, our very fine instrument. I can hardly call the opportunity, which has been lost, a golden opportunity however, for that has not been of late a very appropriate epithet in describing our opportunities at St. Albans, in fact, so serious has been the unlooked-for pecuniary embarrassment of that committee of which I have the honour, and pride of being a member, that had it not been for the timely assistance of some generous subscribers, who have been friends to us in our need, I could only have hoped to have addressed you to-day by an application to appear through a writ of Habeas Corpus. I was able to assert, without I trust vain boasting, when I last addressed you, that, up to that date, no mistakes had been made in our works of reparation, and I think I may say that the same sound, and careful principles of restoration have guided our committee in their deliberations, and their orders, during the past four years. We are however now witnessing for good, or for evil, a new departure. I am myself very sanguine that the balance will be largely in favour of the good, but two archæological proverbs may here be quoted, namely, "that you must not look a gift horse in the mouth," and that the "proof of the pudding must be in the eating." A large share of responsibility will now be shifted, so far as the restoration of the west front, and its surroundings, are concerned, from the shoulders of that "multitude of councillors" in which a still older proverb tells us "is safety," on to the shoulders of one of our number, one, however, whose generosity we must all admire, one, who, among the army of amateur architects, stands in the foremost rank, one, who, through evil report, and good report, will do the great duty he has so nobly undertaken for the Church of England, and for this County and Diocese, with all the patience, skill, and care that is possible in man. Already we have an earnest that the noble design of John de Cella will once more be

partially seen, in the exact restoration of those three grand porches, which were its most glorious and unique feature. If our faculty committee are to be blamed then for allowing so great a work, and the opportunity of so great fame, to pass from their care generally; if the noble president of this Architectural Society, and myself, are reproved for severally proposing, and seconding, in that committee, the resolution which handed over this work to the purse, and to the care of Sir Edmund Beckett, our apology, if one is needed, must be that other benefactors failed us in the day of necessity, and that, if mischief befall, our committee must plead that their poverty, and not their will, consented. I might perhaps conclude with a funeral oration over John of Wheathampstead's Perpendicular west window, but it is better to hope for its resurrection, if the means, that great difficulty at St. Albans, can be found. It might now well form the eastern window of a building to be used as a library, Chapter House, and vestries, to be hereafter erected in the place of the ancient sacristaries, on the south of the Presbytery. This would look much like the arrangement of the Chapter House at Exeter, and would be a most valuable, and necessary adjunct to our cathedral. If then the defenders of the fallen window would lay down their arms, and lay down the dust besides, we might see our deeply interesting, and historical window restored to its dignity, and to us, once more.

THE END.

