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AERIAL VIEW OF THE CATHEDRAL AND ABBEY CHURCH OF ST. ALBAN AS IT IS TO-DAY.

The Restoration of the Cathedral and Abbey Church of St. Alban

BY CHARLES E. JONES, F.S.A.

WHEN Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries in 1539 the great Benedictine house of St. Alban ceased to exist. On December 5th of that year the surrender was made by Richard Boreman, the fortieth and last abbot, to whom the king granted an annuity of 400 marks (£266 13s. 4d.). Other pensions given were £33 6s. 8d. to the prior, and amounts ranging from £5 to £13 6s. 8d. to each of the thirty-eight monks.

The church and surrounding land remained in the possession of the crown, but all the monastic buildings were given by the king to Sir Richard Lee, a military engineer and surveyor of the king's works, by whom they were demolished.

In 1553 Edward VI granted the town of St. Albans a charter empowering the erection of a grammar school within the church or in some other convenient place. Accordingly, the Lady Chapel and retro-choir were converted into the grammar school by cutting a public footpath through the retro-choir and bounding the path with brick walls on either side. The charter also ceded the Abbey Church to the mayor and burgesses, on payment of £400, to be used as the parish church.

To keep so vast a building in proper repair large sums of money were needed, but St. Albans was sparsely populated and the task was far beyond its powers. Some help was given by the civic authorities, but it could not amount to much. Thus, in 1596, it was "ordered that the market house should be finished and lofted over to make the most benefit thereof, and the rent was to go towards the repairing of the Abbey Church."¹ It was also ordered that the eldest surviving son of a free burgess could claim admission as a freeman by paying 3s. 4d. towards the repair of the church. As an example we find that in 1586 "Edward Moseley, son of Thomas Moseley, deceased, was sworn

¹ A. E. Gibbs, *Corporation Records of St. Albans*, p. 91.

a freeman of the borough, of the company of mercers, by his father's copy and on payment of 3s. 4d. to the churchwardens of the abbey for the repairs of the church."²

It became necessary to cast the net wider and seek help from outside the town. So, in 1596, the corporation agreed that the mayor should go to the lord-keeper of the great seal, Sir Thomas Egerton (afterwards Lord Ellesmere), and the knights and gentlemen of the shire to solicit their aid; the expenses of the mayor and his servant to be defrayed by the corporation.³ Possibly as an outcome of this mission the Bishop of London, later in the same year, wrote to the Archdeacon of St. Albans requesting him to enjoin all parishes in the diocese of London to collect money for the Church of St. Alban.⁴

A Brief, or letters patent, instituting collections in all the churches in England, was the sequel to a visit paid to the Abbey by King James I in 1612. This brought in some £2,000. Another followed in 1681.

In 1703 much damage was done to the building by the great storm that blew down Eddystone lighthouse, wrecked twelve warships and many merchant vessels, and caused the loss of eight thousand lives on land and sea. The great window of the south transept was destroyed, its rebuilding placing a further burden upon the townsmen, who had already spent £2,965 for repairs during the previous few years.

In the year 1721 a further brief was issued, which stated "there is a very great crack quite through to the bottom of the south wall, the north wall is gone eighteen inches from the upright with many cracks and flaws, and the timber of the roof greatly decayed; and the whole is, by length of time and want of large repairs, in so dangerous a condition that the said church must become useless and the inhabitants be deprived of a convenient place to assemble in for the worship of Almighty God, unless assisted by the charitable Alms, Benevolence and Contributions of our Loving Subjects."

The result of briefs was not always encouraging,

² A. E. Gibbs, *Corporation Records of St. Albans*, p. 16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴ *Middlesex and Herts. Notes and Queries*, I, p. 97.

as St. Albans found in 1764, when one that was read in 10,097 churches in England brought £848, of which £285 disappeared in fees and expenses, leaving a balance of £563; an average of 1s. 1¼d. from each church.⁵

The condition of the building went from bad to worse, lack of money preventing anything beyond small repairs that were absolutely necessary and could be done cheaply. The fact that forty windows were in such a bad state that they had to be filled in with brickwork is eloquent as to the whole edifice being unsafe and threatened with collapse.

In 1832 came a warning that could not be ignored. The following is taken from a contemporary report:⁶ "Time, which spares nothing, has at last taken hold effectually of St. Albans Abbey, and we much fear that the ancient building will become by degrees a mass of ruin. Yesterday week, about seven o'clock in the morning, a large portion of the wall of the upper battlement, on the south-west side, fell upon the roof below with such weight that it drove in the leads and timber, and everything in its way, into the south aisle of the building. It fell in two masses, at an interval of five minutes, and so great was the concussion that the inhabitants in the nearest houses describe it as resembling the loudest thunder. Mr. Wyatt was employed about ten years since to inspect the Abbey, when he reported that a sum exceeding £50,000⁷ would be necessary effectually to repair this building, since when it has been getting worse, so that at the present time a much larger sum than that would be required. The south transept has been for a considerable time considered in a dangerous state, and is now scarcely safe to be allowed to remain."

This disaster aroused so great concern that a survey of the building was made and submitted to a meeting held at the Town Hall on May 2nd, 1832. The report stated that many parts of the building were in a ruinously dilapidated condition and that the repairs,

⁵ Sir E. Beckett, *St. Albans Cathedral and its Restoration*, 1885, p. 12.

⁶ *Bucks. Herald*, 15th Feb., 1832.

⁷ Another newspaper puts the amount at £30,000.

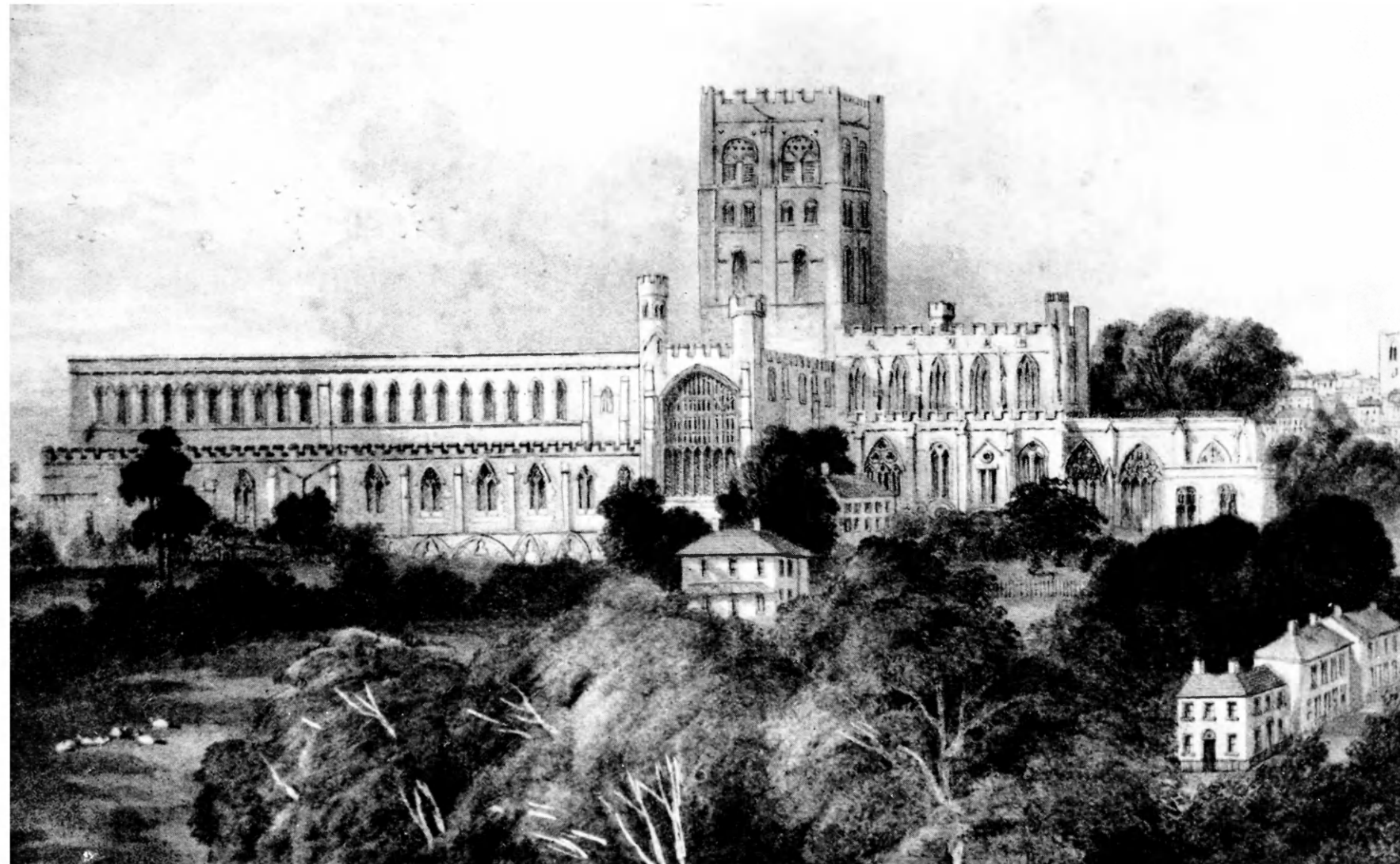
which were immediately necessary, would cost at least £15,000.

This being too great a burden to be borne locally a public meeting followed at the Thatched House Tavern in St. James's Street, London, when a national appeal was decided upon, and subscriptions and promises amounting to £1,420 18s. were announced. The strange undertaking was given that unless the sum raised was sufficient to effect the "complete repairs" of the building the contributors' money would be returned to them.

The Corporation of St. Albans promised to give £100 provided that the whole £50,000 was raised, but a year later they reduced their promise to £50, having been informed that the sum needed would be only £6,000 instead of £15,000. This reduced donation was not paid until 1835, after a delay of three years in all. It is difficult to reconcile the widely varying estimates of the cost of repairs as met with in contemporary reports. Apparently some were for much more extensive work than others, though this is not made clear, or it may have been a case of "breaking it gently" to the public on the part of some of the authorities, lest the idea should get abroad that the task was too costly to be carried through.

By August, 1832, the amount subscribed had increased to £1,874 9s., and Mr. N. L. Cottingham, the architect who restored the Temple Church in London in 1840, had offered his services to the reparation committee free of charge. With the money in hand a start was made in repairing the damage to the south aisle and removing the leaded spire, of the type known as the "Hertfordshire spike," which had surmounted the tower since the fifteenth century.

On February 13th, 1833, another meeting was held at the Thatched House Tavern, when Mr. Cottingham announced that the roof of the south aisle which fell a year previously had been repaired at a cost of £347. He further reported that the west end of the roof of the nave was in a very dangerous state, and that the roofs of the north and south transepts and the east end of the nave were extremely insecure, the ends of many of the main timbers being so rotten as to endanger



THE ABBEY CHURCH OF ST. ALBAN BEFORE RESTORATION.

From a picture of *c.* 1850 in St. Albans Public Library. By the kindness of Mr. E. W. Green.



the whole fabric. The sum required for putting the building into a substantial state of repair he estimated at £5,700, towards which the committee had in hand £2,400.

Further work was carried out, preference being given to what was most urgent, but it was limited by the slender means of the committee.

In 1835 Mr. Cottingham made a further disturbing report, saying that many of the windows at the east end of the church were in a highly dangerous state and required immediate repair, and a newspaper of July 30th said: "We cannot but lament the tardy manner in which the subscriptions come in for the restoration of this august pile of English art. Little more than £3,000 has been subscribed." In this same year the forty windows previously mentioned as being closed with brickwork were restored and re-glazed. A balance sheet of November 18th, 1835, shows that £4,499 15s. 8d. had by that time been collected, of which only £188 os. 5d. remained in hand.

During the next ten years further repairs were carried out, but were out-stripped by the progress of the decay that was going on continually. But on April 5th, 1856, an incident happened that had momentous consequences. On that day a public meeting took place in the Town Hall to consider means of raising further funds, and among those present was a casual visitor, named Edmund Beckett, who at that time had no connection with St. Albans but had been taken to the meeting by a friend.

Beckett, then forty years of age, was called to the Bar in 1841 and became a Queen's Counsel in 1854. He had a large practice, chiefly in connection with railway bills, and was famous as a severe cross-examiner. A man of great ability, he was masterful, opinionated and dictatorial, and it has been said that he was never troubled by doubts on any subject.

The meeting was a success, as £4,200 was then and there subscribed, and George Gilbert Scott was appointed architect to the restoration committee. Also from that time money came in more freely,⁸ and, best

⁸ In *St. Alban's Cathedral and its Restoration*, 1885, pp. 14 and 15, Beckett gives the receipts, tentatively, as £14,000 from 1856 to 1870 and £20,000 from 1870 to 1875.

of all, Beckett's interest had been aroused. Then "the restoration of the church, as distinguished from makeshift repairs, may be said to have been started"; the words are those of Beckett.

Scott had already become famous for his restorations at many English cathedrals, and was architect to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster. Later he was architect for the India Office (1858), carried out the Albert Memorial (1864) and designed St. Pancras Station and Hotel (1865).

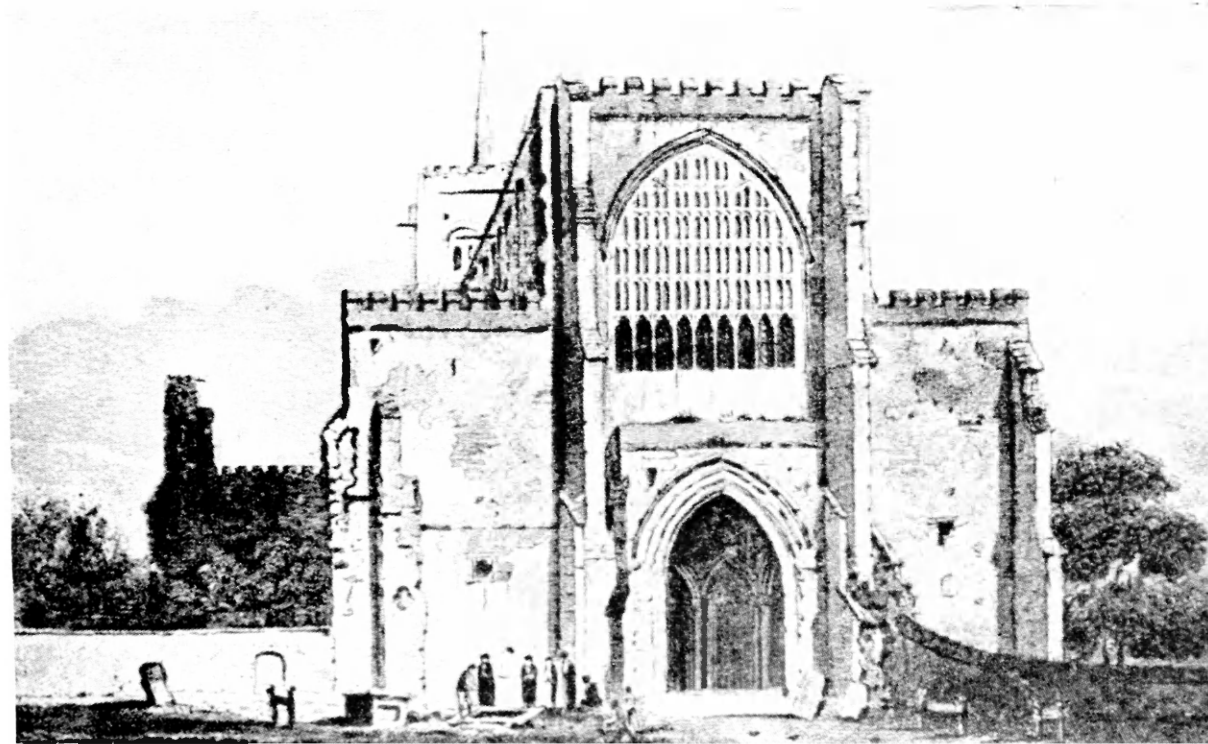
The next important date to record is 1869, when the Abbey Gateway, which had been serving as the county prison, was sold for £1,100 to the trustees of the grammar school, which was then moved from the Lady Chapel to the Gateway, so that the former came again into the possession of the church. Nine years, however, elapsed before the passage through the retro-choir was closed and the Lady Chapel joined to the church, after a separation of more than three centuries. The former state of affairs was well described by Scott as "a monstrous piece of vandalism."

Of the difficulties that confronted the reparation committee Scott said: "When we come to reflect on the fact that this stupendous building, little short of 550 feet in length, and whose roofs may almost be measured by the acre, has for more than three centuries been left for its conservation to the resources of a single parish of a moderate-sized country town, aided occasionally by the subscriptions of the neighbouring gentry, we need not wonder that its present state of repair is unsatisfactory; nor when we think of its colossal dimensions need we feel surprised that it should be a costly matter to repair its dilapidations. It is, in fact, a genuine cause of wonder that it should have stood so well against circumstances so adverse."⁹

In 1870 John Chapple, who in that year had been appointed clerk of the works, heard some ominous cracks while he was in the church, and on examination of the tower it was found to be in such a state that it was liable to fall at any time.¹⁰ Crushing had taken place in the north-east pier, so that the tower gradually

⁹ Scott, *Report on St. Alban's Abbey*, 1871, pp. 11 and 12.

¹⁰ Beckett, *St. Alban's Cathedral and its Restoration*, 1885, p. 15.



THE WEST END OF THE ABBEY CHURCH OF ST. ALBAN IN 1805,
from a drawing by G. Shepherd.

(This picture shows the "Hertfordshire spike" that then surmounted the tower.)



leaned to the weakest corner, causing rents from the crowns of the northern and eastern arches extending upward as far as the parapet.¹¹ Double shores and trusses were at once inserted in each arch of the tower, and triple trusses in the arches of the presbytery aisles.

In January, 1871, it became evident that the tower was still sinking, so arches were hastily bricked up to resist the thrust, and raking shores of heavy balks were inserted at every available point, but the tests still broke and cracks in the ceiling of Abbot Ramryge's chantry opened still further. A cluster of heavy balks planted deep in the ground as raking shores from the north-east bent under the pressure. The north-east pier crumbled until there was a continuous shower of dust and small particles dropping around it. At length, after many days and nights of anxious labour, the subsidence of the tower was arrested, and the way was cleared for repair of the piers.¹² These were strengthened and partly rebuilt, the floors of the ringing chamber and bell chamber were renewed, a new bell-frame was constructed in the south-west corner, and the whole peal refitted. Before this work was undertaken the bells had long been in a neglected state, with broken wheels and decayed timbers, resting on a floor that was rotten and unsafe, the whole weight being concentrated on the weak north-east corner of the tower.¹³

Of the tower Scott wrote: "The foundations of these piers had been a good deal weakened by the proximity of graves; and, strange to say, the southern pier had apparently been excavated beneath the floor into a sort of cave; so far as we can judge with a view to the destruction of the tower."¹⁴ Beckett went further and said: "Very likely it had been done clandestinely by that man Lee,¹⁵ who bought all the rest of the buildings as old materials, and intended

¹¹ Chapple, *The Restoration of the Abbey of St. Alban*, 1874, pp. 6-8. Chapple became a town councillor of St. Albans in 1877, an alderman in 1883 and mayor in 1879. He was also appointed a Justice of the Peace and a churchwarden of the Abbey. He died on 6 February, 1887, aged 61.

¹² Chapple, *The Restoration of the Abbey of St. Alban*, 1874, p. 7.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 8.

¹⁴ Scott, *Report on St. Albans Abbey*, 1871, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Sir Richard Lee, see above.

to have the church into the bargain, if it would only be good enough to fall. The secret was kept, and the hole never filled up again."¹⁶

The *St. Albans Times* of December 23rd, 1871, recorded the above work and its sequel in these words: "Inhabitants of St. Albans, for the first time for about forty years, on Thursday, the 21st inst. (St. Thomas's Day), enjoyed a treat which will be remembered by the youngest. For more than twelve months past the work for the reparation of the Abbey Tower has been proceeding unostentatiously, the grave object being, without exciting unnecessary alarm, to secure the main portion of the structure from absolute ruin, which in its threatened fall would have involved the whole eastern portion at the least. By the application of a system of tie-rods at four levels with right- and left-handed screws, as well as by the insertion of rent-stones and iron bars (the latter soaked in oil and bedded in cement) across the main fissures, the required object has been happily accomplished, aided during the progress of the work by the ponderous shoring in the arches. On Thursday morning, to the surprise of many, and not without anxiety being expressed by several of the inhabitants, the glorious old Abbey bells once more poured forth their joyous and melodious sounds. Eight picked members of the College Youths, London, ascended the tower at 10.30 and rang for the service peal 500 grandsire triples, and during the day also rang several touches of Stedman treble-bob and grandsires, concluding at six p.m. with three fires. During the day Mr. Wood, the manager for G. G. Scott, Esq., was present, accompanied by another scientific gentleman, to watch the effect of the ringing on the structure. We understand that the result was in every way satisfactory."

In 1872 a quantity of material from St. Alban's shrine was discovered. The following account is taken from a letter by the Rev. Edmund Venables, precentor of Lincoln and a well-known antiquary.¹⁷ "Few archæological discoveries of late years have equalled in interest that of the shrine of St. Alban, now being

¹⁶ Beckett, *St. Alban's Cathedral and its Restoration*, 1885, p. 15.

¹⁷ *The Times* of 13 March, 1872.

made in the grand Abbey Church of that name. I say 'being made' advisedly, for the fragments in which the shrine of the proto-martyr of Britain was shivered at the Reformation were built up in the walls then erected to cut off the Lady Chapel from the Church, when the former, one of the most beautiful and elaborately enriched examples of the decorative style, was degraded to the purposes of a Grammar School, and are gradually brought to light as these walls are demolished. The first portions were discovered about three weeks ago. Since then scarcely a day has passed without large additions being made to the fragments thus unexpectedly rescued after three centuries of concealment, and reasonable hopes are entertained of the recovery of the whole and the restoration of the shrine in its integrity.¹⁸ When I was there last Wednesday the workmen were continually bringing in fresh pieces of carved work, which Mr. Chapple, the clerk of the works under Mr. Gilbert Scott, was fitting together with consummate skill and a Cuvier-like discernment of the precise place in the complete design each was to occupy. Some fragments fitted together during my short visit formed a bas-relief of the martyrdom of St. Alban, representing the executioner with his drawn sword, with which he had just cut off the falling head of the kneeling saint."

At this period the tower was stripped of the plastering with which it had been entirely covered in the time of Henry I, and the beautiful effect of the Roman bricks, taken from the ruins of Verulamium, was made visible.

In 1875 Sir Gilbert Scott (he had been knighted in 1872), as President of the Royal Institute of British Architects, invited many of the members of that body to visit St. Albans. Among the guests was Sir Edmund Beckett,¹⁹ who had by then been elected a member of the Restoration Committee and was building Batch Wood for his own occupation. The visitors were shown over the Abbey Church by Sir Gilbert, who afterwards entertained them to "a most sumptuous

¹⁸ These hopes have not been realised, though a great part of the shrine has been found.

¹⁹ He had succeeded to the baronetcy in 1874.

and elegant banquet" in the assembly room of the Town Hall. In a characteristic after-dinner speech Sir Edmund said that it was the Abbey and its associations that had induced him to come and live in the neighbourhood. Referring to Batch Wood, he added that he had been described as the only amateur architect who had given architects an opportunity of criticism: he had a tolerably thick skin, and if anybody liked to go and criticise the place he was building near St. Albans they were very welcome to do so. It would not cause him the slightest uneasiness or convince him that he was in the slightest degree wrong in anything he had done.²⁰

In September of the same year Scott, Beckett and Chapple concurred in a report to the Committee which stated that the western 100 feet of the south clerestory and triforium were leaning outwards and the inclination was increasing.²¹ In their opinion the whole of that wall and the aisle roof, and probably the nave roof as well, were in such a state that "they might fall any day and the finest part of the abbey become a ruin past recovery." As the matter called for prompt action, Beckett gave instructions for internal and external shoring to be carried out immediately at his own expense. Scott estimated that the repairs referred to would cost fully £30,000, and Sir Edmund offered to give £1,000, and Lady Beckett £200, if the whole amount was promised within the ensuing twelve months.

In August, 1877, preparations were being made for raising the roof of the nave and restoring the outward-leaning wall to the vertical, from which it then diverged 2 ft. 4 ins.²² Again we will quote the Rev. Edmund Venables:²³ "A massive fabric of shoring and trusses, containing 20,000 cubic feet of timber, has been erected in the interior of the nave, by means of which the roof will be lifted from that portion of the church by hydraulic pressure. When the walls have thus been lightened the same pressure will be brought to bear

²⁰ *Herts. Mercury*, 31 July, 1875; and *Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire News*, 31 July, 1875.

²¹ *Hertfordshire Advertiser*, 4 December, 1875.

²² *Herts. Standard*, 1 September, 1877.

²³ *The Times*, 23 October, 1877.

upon the arcade with the triforium and clerestory wall above, to force them back into a vertical position. The operation will be aided by iron rods stretched transversely across the nave from north to south, which, by the action of screws, will gradually drag the southern arcade towards the northern range, that arcade being kept firmly in its place by strong shoring. To guard against the danger of the fabric giving way under the enormous pressure exerted upon it, every arch, large and small, is being filled in with wooden centering, while the triforium and clerestory passages will be built up solid at the points of thrust. When the arcade has been restored to its upright condition the roof will be dropped to its original place on the walls."

The preliminary work occupied a considerable time, but on May 2nd, 1878, five weeks after the death of Sir Gilbert Scott, all was ready and the pushing back of the wall was begun at seven a.m. and successfully accomplished in two hours and a half.²⁴ The *Builder* of May 11th gave some interesting details: "The thrusting back of the wall has brought it back to a point at which the yet solid portion of the tie-beams can find a bearing on it. The present roof timbers were cut to fit the space in the bulged state of the wall; the bearing portions are entirely rotted away, and the real bearing of most of them was on fitches of iron screwed to each side of the beams. The ends of these fitches served to mark very prominently during the operations the extent to which the wall had been sent back; the irons which were within the face of the wall in the morning being seen long before noon jutting out in a row, like so many spoutheads."

By the time this work was finished the roof and ceiling of the nave had been found to be in a dangerous condition, and it had been decided by the Abbey Restoration Committee to replace the existing flat roof with a new high-pitched one. One newspaper said:²⁵ "This very great work, renewing the form which the roof presented during the first four hundred years of

²⁴ *St. Albans Times*, 4 May, 1878. A similar piece of work had been carried out 150 years previously at Beverley minster, where the north wall of the north transept was thrust back 4 feet.

²⁵ *Herts. Standard*, 6 July, 1878. Similar announcements appeared in *The Times* of July 8 and the *Guardian* of July 10.

its existence, up to about 1440 when the then abbot (Whethamstede) lowered it to its present pitch, will require the exercise of a considerable amount of skill and caution. No one will doubt that the bringing of the roof to its original form will add dignity to the appearance of the abbey, which was somewhat lost by the cutting-down alterations made at the period alluded to."

The Committee's decision having aroused severe criticism, Beckett, writing from his new home at Batch Wood on August 2nd, sent a bitterly sarcastic letter to *The Times* dealing with those who were opposed to the Committee's scheme. But on August 8th the same newspaper had a leading article in which was advocated the low pitch and "the safe and homely principle of letting well alone." At a meeting of subscribers, held at the Town Hall on August 10th, Sir Edmund moved a resolution in favour of restoring the roof of the nave "to the original pitch indicated by the weathering on the tower." The fact that this was carried by fifteen votes to six would appear to show a small attendance and that the subscribers had no strong opinions on the point at issue; but this merely encouraged the opponents of the scheme.

The argument was carried on in the Press during the remainder of 1878 and well into the following year, and was very bitter. The courtesies of debate were thrown to the winds and the letters were so full of abuse that considerable ill-feeling was engendered. Societies and individuals vied with each other in tilting at Beckett, but it is only fair to him to state that his return blows were the shrewdest and his sarcasm and personalities the most severe.²⁶ *Punch's* comment on the correspondence was very neat:

"BETWEEN ADVOCATES AND ARCHITECTS (High and Low)—Surely it would be possible to conduct the controversy between high-pitch and low-pitch roof at St. Albans without getting into such a high-pitch of temper and low-pitch of courtesy; in short, without such a flinging of pitch by the advocates of either style of roof at those of the other."

²⁶ The letters can be found in the files of *The Times*, the *Athenæum*, the *Builder*, etc.

The Committee adhered to their decision and the work was begun.

It was in this year that authority was obtained to close the public pathway which cut off the Lady Chapel from the main building, so soon as an alternative way was constructed round the east end of the church. This work was duly carried out and, as already mentioned, the Abbey Church was once more complete.

In 1879 the freemasons of England proposed to undertake the restoration of the west front and invited subscriptions, limited to £5 from the entire craft, while the Corporation of the City of London voted a sum not exceeding £350 for the restoration of the east window of the Lady Chapel.

But much more money was needed to complete the repair of the building and the supply of funds appeared to have come to an end, partly due, perhaps, to the protracted and bitter quarrel concerning the nave roof.

At this critical time there was one man who was determined that the church should be saved for posterity. In November, 1879, notice was given that Sir Edmund Beckett had applied for a faculty to carry on the restoration of the edifice at his own expense. He stated in his petition that the Faculty Committee "with such funds as were subscribed for the purpose, proceeded to execute the repairs and restorations most urgently needed, and have exhausted all such funds and have become liable under contracts for more money than has been subscribed and have no prospect of being able to do any more at present; that the said Sir E. Beckett is willing to continue such work at his own expense and particularly to restore the western front of the church except the three porches (for which a separate subscription is being raised among the Freemasons of England) and to insert in the dark bays of the aisles, or some of them, windows similar to those now in the other bays."

In May, 1880, the faculty was issued notwithstanding opposition on the part of three objectors and on June 19th the first contract was signed with Longmire & Burge of London. From this time onward Beckett was his own architect ("the only architect with whom I have never quarrelled," as he described himself) for

his work in the Abbey, as he had been in building Batch Wood.

A letter from the Bishop of St. Albans (Thomas Legh Cloughton)²⁷ gives a clear account of what had so far been accomplished in the way of restoration: "Twelve years ago the Grammar School was located in the Lady Chapel. A public footpath ran through the building. A garden, ten feet deep in earth, rose up to the sills of the windows of the Lady Chapel. The roof of the nave was in a rotten and dangerous state. The western end of the south wall was two and a half feet out of the perpendicular, and would have ceased to support the roof had not the ends of the beams been lengthened and strengthened with iron frames. All this has been remedied now. The Grammar School is held in the ancient gatehouse of the Abbey, purchased from the magistrates of Hertfordshire, whose property it had become. The garden which abutted against the wall of the Lady Chapel has been purchased at a very high price, and the public footpath turned outside the Abbey through that very garden, or where that garden formerly was. A new roof has been placed over the nave, of the beauty and fitness of which I leave anyone to judge who will pay a visit to St. Albans. The southern wall of the nave has been restored to the perpendicular under the direction of the late Sir Gilbert Scott—a very marvel of engineering skill. But this is not all. In the midst of these operations the central tower of the Abbey, sapped at the foundations by the construction of vaults around and even beneath it, began to be in imminent danger of falling and was only saved, through energetic and timely effort, by being propped up and underbuilt. All this has been done at vast expense—partly before the creation of the See of St. Albans and partly since. For what has been done since, under the direction of the Faculty Committee appointed for the purpose, a debt of between £3,000 and £4,000 remains to be paid; and this debt, it is most earnestly hoped, will be defrayed by public liberality. For the future, the munificence of Sir Edmund Beckett has relieved all immediate anxiety. He has undertaken the restoration

²⁷ *The Times*, 21 July, 1880.

of the west front, under a faculty, at his own expense. But he is not content with this. He is now rebuilding the northern wall of the nave at its western end, which had been discovered to be in a dilapidated state, and doing other important work, after having already expended large sums both on the Abbey itself and in the erection of the new rectory house."

On September 30th, 1881, the east window of the Lady Chapel was unveiled. This was a gift from the Corporation of London, who had voted £350 for its restoration, as previously mentioned, and had later paid for the glass.

In April, 1882, the Freemasons of England decided that their help should take the form of providing the pulpit in the choir at a cost of about £700. Their first suggestion, for the restoration of the west front, had been found impracticable.

From the time when Beckett obtained his faculty work was carried on steadily. Having decided that the west front was past repair and its window "thoroughly good for nothing," he rebuilt it at a cost of £20,000²⁸ to plans of his own which again evoked fierce criticism. He rebuilt the north wall of the north aisle of the nave, the three western bays of the north aisle, made four new windows on the north side and four on the south in the "previously dark bays," rebuilt the windows of both aisles, repaved the nave and provided for it the present pulpit, besides other work. And so the nave was re-opened for service on October 21st, 1885, having cost Beckett £50,000.

After the service a luncheon was served in the assembly room of the Town Hall, when Sir Edmund characteristically stated that "no architect should set his foot or hand there while he had any connection with the Abbey. He had had enough of architects and they had had enough of him."²⁹ In the same year he wrote: "at my age I must not speculate how much more I am likely to do, working eastward."

But age (he was then sixty-nine) was no deterrent to his energies, and he proceeded to place high-pitch roofs on the transepts and to rebuild the end walls of each, placing in them entirely new windows.

²⁸ Chapple, *A Short History of the Abbey Church*, 1882, pp. 35-36.

²⁹ *St. Albans Times*, 24 October, 1885.

Working eastward, he concluded his task by restoring the Lady Chapel in a way which, it is pleasant to record, has evoked nothing but praise.

The restoration of the high-altar screen was done, at his own cost, by Henry Hucks Gibbs (who, in 1896, was created Baron Aldenham). Under a faculty he began the work in 1884, but it was 1899 before the screen was completed and dedicated.

Sir Edmund Beckett, who in 1886 was raised to the peerage as Baron Grimthorpe, lived to see the completion of the task he had set himself at the Abbey Church, which is believed to have cost him £150,000, and also to carry out at his own expense the restoration of St. Peter's and St. Michael's churches in St. Albans.

He died at Batch Wood on April 29th, 1905, a fortnight before attaining the age of eighty-nine, and was buried to the north-east of the Cathedral for which he had done so much.

Lord Grimthorpe's munificent share in the restoration of the Abbey Church is often lost to sight in the bitter criticism he has evoked. There is no doubt that he did a number of things which many regret were not done differently. But if each critic were to produce an alternative to the piece of work of which he disapproves, is it likely that unanimity would ever be reached? He came upon the scene at a time when there seemed little or no prospect of sufficient money being found to save the building from becoming a ruin, a fate from which it was saved by him alone.

He once made the jocular remark that he was "a vicious character, and perhaps that had something to do with the restoration of the Abbey." In all seriousness, his peculiarities were of the greatest value in the circumstances then prevailing; his assertiveness, obstinacy and self-confidence enabled him to overcome obstacles that would have daunted lesser men and caused an abandonment of their willingness to help.

All honour, then, to the restoration committee which worked so hard and did so much; to the ladies' committee which collected £2,676 for structural repairs to the Lady Chapel; but chiefly to Lord Grimthorpe, whose generosity has resulted in our still having the glorious Abbey Church instead of a mass of ruins.