On the Perpendicular Towers of Somerset.

BY THE REV. F. WARRE.

OF all the varied beauties of the county we inhabit, well worthy as it is of its Celtic name, which Hearne translates "the laughing summer field," none perhaps is more striking to the eye of the traveller, or more essentially connected in the mind of the native with its scenery, than the church towers,—Dundry crowning the peak of its lofty hill; Backwell relieved by the wooded side of Mendip; Hutton nestling among its elms; Yatton, Brent, Lympsham, Bridgwater, North Curry, Lyng, the two splendid towers of Taunton, Norton, Bradford, and Wellington, cannot fail to attract the notice of every passenger by the Bristol and Exeter Railway, while to the native who meets with them, now backed by the hill side, now breaking the level monotony of wide-stretched moor, now buried among the dark green foliage of surrounding elms, or rising in calm majesty amidst undulating corn-fields and richly verdant meadows,—they become as much a part of the scenery, which, perhaps without his knowing it, is almost necessary to his comfort, as the hills, fields, and meadows themselves; and if his thoughts lead him deeper than mere impressions, he cannot but confess that they are not only calculated to

raise his mind to higher and holier things than those of this world, but are also proofs of the gratitude of those who erected them to that Almighty Being, who has given to the inhabitants of this favoured district all things richly to enjoy.

Some of these beautiful edifices are no doubt of early date, but by far the greater number are of that style which Rickman has called Perpendicular; and of these the majority are comparatively of late date in the style, having been built or modernized in the reigns of the two first monarchs of the Tudor dynasty, though no doubt many of them are somewhat earlier. The question has often been asked—what was there in the circumstances of the times, to account for the great move in church building, which evidently took place between the reigns of Edward III. and Henry VIII.? Nor, as far as I am aware, has any satisfactory answer been given to it. No doubt the splendid simplicity of the works of Edington and Wykeham gave a spur to the genius of Wainflete, and the builder of King's College Chapel; but still the circumstances of the nation at that time, occupied as it was by foreign wars and domestic commotions, do not seem to have been such as were likely to produce such works as these; nor can the local tradition, that these towers were built by Henry VII., out of gratitude for the services of the faithful West to the Lancastrian cause, be admitted as satisfactory,—that selfish and calculating monarch being more busily engaged in filling his own coffers, by the aid of such men as Empson and Dudley, than in expending vast sums in works of piety, though that elaborate specimen of stone panel work, his chapel at Westminster, is no doubt an exception.

It has always appeared to me that a more satisfactory solution of the difficulty might be found in the pious fore-

sight of the Church herself. The Romish establishment had been gradually losing its hold upon the affections of the people, even from the time of Richard II., when, under the patronage of John of Gaunt, Wickcliffe preached Reformation, and endeavoured to give the Scriptures to the laity. The grasping avarice of Henry VII., and the extortion of which he was guilty, gave little hope that church property might long be respected; and might not those sagacious men, who at that time directed the expenditure of the revenues of the church, have read in the signs of the times a true warning of the fate which hung over the Romish establishment, and actually befel it in the following reign; and, by building these exquisite towers, have endeavoured to preserve to the church that part of its wealth which was available for the purpose, and being in the shape of money was in greater danger of secularization from the rapacity of the crown than their landed property, though how little even that was secure from the unbounded avarice and despotic power of Henry VIII., the fate of the monastic establishments but too clearly proves. But whatever was the cause of their erection, there they stand, the ornament and pride of the county, which a native, whose eye is accustomed to them, would probably not wish to exchange for the finest Early English Decorated steeples that ever pointed to heaven.

But however much we may admire them, still if we would be really archaeologists, and not mere antiquaries, it it is our part not only to know and to admire the works of by-gone generations, but also to reason on them,—not merely to learn these things as sources of amusement, or even as subjects of curious investigation, but as things of practical utility, the knowledge of which may be productive of improvement to modern art; and though I am

not one of those enthusiasts who think that the time may come when the best decorated buildings will be thought only good specimens of transition work, or, on the other hand, that the architects of the fourteenth century had attained to absolute perfection,—still, if by criticising the construction of these beautiful towers, I may, in a very humble degree, help to induce architects to take for their models the edifices of a time when the principles of Gothic architecture were more fully and correctly developed than they have ever been before or since; and by shewing that they are beautiful, not on account of, but in spite of, the principles on which they are built, help in some measure to check the taste for Perpendicular architecture, I may, perhaps, hope to prevent the perpetration of some outrages on good taste; for to educe what is beautiful from faulty principles, requires an amount of talent which, though these men certainly possessed it, falls to the lot of very few; and though a close imitation of a beautiful work will probably itself be beautiful, still the attempt to build an original Perpendicular tower, too often, as far as I can judge, ends in producing an unsightly, though, it may be, elaborate, and expensive failure.

Now I am not a professional architect, and cannot but feel that I am presumptuously intruding on the province of other persons in venturing to read this paper; but trusting to their kindness to excuse my want of technical knowledge, and to that of the audience at large, for my deficiencies of taste and judgment, I will proceed with my subject.

That excellent architectural antiquary and very learned mathematician, the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, lays down the following principles as essential to complete Gothic architecture,—frame-work, lateral continuity, or wall work, spire-growth, and tracery,—of which the three first

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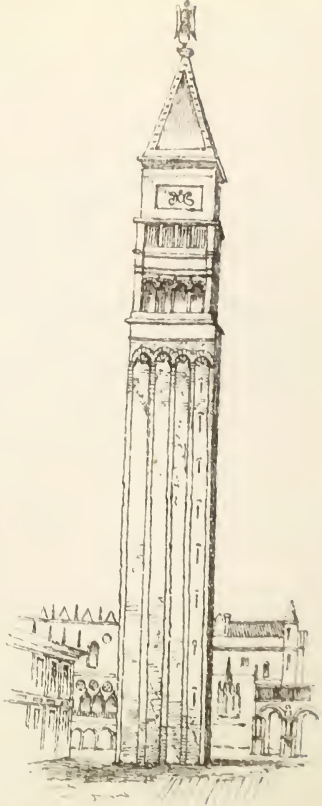
West Munkton.



The Campanile, St. Mark's, Venice.

appear particularly to apply to towers; and if he be right, it follows that, so far as any building is deficient in these points, by so much it is defective as a Gothic design ; and what I shall endeavour to shew is, that as there was a gradually increasing recognition and development of these great principles, from the Romanesque to the Decorated, so a gradual neglect of them took place from that period to the end of the reign of Henry VIII., and that our later towers, commonly known as Henry VII. towers, are in fact as completely post-Gothic buildings as those German edifices to which the learned Professor applies that term. The accompanying plates, which are intended to illustrate this, represent a Venetian campanile and five Somersetshire Perpendicular towers,—West Monkton, Wrington, Wellington, Bishop's Lydeard, and St. Mary's, Taunton.

Now it will, I presume, be readily allowed that unity of design is essentially necessary to the perfection of a Gothic tower;—I mean, that if any part of the building can be removed without injury to the general plan, it is clearly an excrescence; and though this excrescence may be in itself beautiful, it is a faulty principle for any important part of a building to be independent of the other parts, or, in other words, there should not be a pile of independent buildings one upon another, instead of one building standing on a sufficient base, and rising naturally as it were from it, continuously, and without break; and it is to produce this unity of design that the principles above mentioned are absolutely necessary in the construction of a tower.

That they are necessary will, I think, appear from a slight inspection of the campanile, which, however beautiful it may be as a campanile, is certainly the very reverse of what a Gothic tower ought to be. It has no defined base,

but rises at once from the ground like an ancient Doric column. It has no frame-work, except its own outline against the sky. Its lateral continuity is destroyed by the fluting, and it is a square pier, or a shaft which, according to its size and the material of which it is composed, might serve for a thousand other purposes. Owing to the absence of frame-work, there is no necessary connection between its parts. The spire which crowns it cannot possibly grow out of its base. It is, in fact, a square fluted shaft, having at one end a sort of shrine, a square box, and a spire, all perfectly distinct and independent of each other, and altogether forming what, being of marble, of great size, and standing upright, is, I suppose, a very good campanile; but which, if about two feet long, made of wood, and furnished with a handle at the end, (which, as it has no defined base, may easily be imagined) would only require the Doge's cap at the other end to make it quite as good a design for the staff of a Venetian constable, as for anything else; in fact, it is a Romanesque campanile, and not a tower at all, in the Gothic sense of the word. I have spoken of this campanile in what may appear a slighting tone, not with any intention of depreciating Italian architecture, of the merits and demerits of which I candidly own myself to be a totally incompetent judge, but merely to shew the immense importance of the principles above mentioned to that unity of design, which is indispensable to the construction of a perfect Gothic tower.

That a frame-work enclosing the tower will conduce to the appearance of unity of design is obvious, but it is not of itself sufficient, for it is very possible to fritter away the wall work enclosed, so as totally to counteract the effect of

the frame; and it is manifestly impossible to enclose a spire within the same frame as the tower, which frame in fact is formed by the buttresses.

Buttresses, then, are essential to a perfect tower, and ought to extend, at least apparently, as high as the cornice moulding. Great care should be taken in the arrangement of the windows and the treatment of panel work, ornamental niches, etc., lest the continuity of the wall work be frittered away; and the spire ought to grow as it were out of the base of the tower,—that is to say, if the lines of the spire be continued to the ground, the points at which they touch it ought to coincide with the external lines of the bases of the buttresses.

I am not sure whether this is exactly the case or not with any spire; but it will be found that those of the fourteenth century, at all events, approach nearer to it than those of any other period, while in many of our most admired Perpendicular towers, the principle of spire-growth is altogether abandoned, and those of frame work and lateral continuity very imperfectly carried out. Those early Romanesque towers, which are probably of Anglo-Saxon date, being destitute of buttresses, and having generally each story of rather smaller area than the one below, cannot really be said to have any frame work; for the pilaster-like strips of stone which we observe at Earls Barton, Sompting, and elsewhere, are in fact a mere matter of construction, performing the same office to the rubble masonry as the wooden frame, in what in these days is called a brick noggin, does to the brick work set in it; and have rather the effect of frittering away the lateral continuity, by dividing and subdividing the wall into small compartments, than of conveying any idea of unity in the design of the whole building; while

each story, occupying as it often does a smaller area than the one below, is in fact an independent building, which might be removed without much alteration of the tower, beyond diminishing its height. In this, as well as in the Norman style, which I hold to be perectly distinct from it, there are no real spires. That at Sompting, as well as many to be met with on the Continent, being in fact roofs, in the construction of which there is no attempt at spire growth whatever, though the height of some of them may almost give them a title to the former appellation.

In many Norman towers, the principle of frame work seems to be more completely developed, the broad flat buttress at the angle of the tower being frequently carried up to the cornice-moulding, though in some cases it ceases below the belfry story, which in that case becomes an excrescence—a fault very characteristic of the latest, and, in general, most admired, type of our Perpendicular towers. The small size of the windows, the arcades running round all four sides of a story, the plain square, or semi-hexagonal string-courses, and the cornice, which has often the same projection as the buttresses, all conduce to the effect of lateral continuity and general unity of design.

As we approach the close of the twelfth century, the Gothicizing element of the Norman Romanesque becomes more and more developed. In the place of walls of enormous thickness, and broad flat buttresses, the system of vaulting now introduced brought in, almost as a necessary consequence, thinner walls, and deep buttresses, while the vertical lines, gradually gaining the mastery over the horizontal, step by step converted the Romanesque into Gothic, until, in the thirteenth century, we have the well-developed Early English, with its deep buttresses, slender windows, and lofty spires.

It is to this period that we owe such buildings as Wells, Lincoln, and Salisbury. Still, however, though during the prevalence of this style, the frame-work and lateral continuity of the towers may perhaps with truth be considered quite equal to those of the fourteenth century, the principle of spire-growth had not as yet attained its complete development. There are, I believe, not more than three or four instances of Early English diagonal buttresses in existence; and the effect of the buttresses being placed at right angles to the walls of a complete steeple is, that either the lines of the spire, if continued to the ground, fall outside the bases of the buttresses, causing an apparent want of stability in the whole fabric, and at the same time rendering the tower and spire independent of each other; or, when this is avoided, the depth of the buttresses is so much increased as to appear exaggerated, and out of proportion to the rest of the building; or else the spire is so much diminished in bulk, as to appear mean and insignificant.

But during the next century this error was corrected, by placing the buttresses diagonally at the angles of the tower, by that means suggesting an octagonal base, within which the whole tower stands, and from which the spire rises naturally in the form of a slender octagonal pyramid; and whatever means may be adopted to relieve the junction of the square tower with the octagonal spire,—whether a simple parapet, clusters of pinnacles, or a plain broach,—the effect of complete frame-work, unbroken lateral continuity, and good spire growth combined, is such that tower and spire together form a whole, rising naturally from a sufficient base, essentially connected in all its parts, and bearing throughout undoubted evidence of unity of design.

Of the five Perpendicular towers, in the accompanying

illustration, the three first, West Monkton, Wrington, and Wellington, may certainly be termed Early, in contradistinction to the other two, Bishop's Lydeard and St. Mary's, Taunton. And though I have not been able actually to ascertain their dates, I believe I have mentioned them nearly in the order in which they were built, and I am inclined to think that neither of the first three is later than the reign of Henry VI., and neither of the two last earlier than that of Henry VII.

I do not wish it to be supposed that these five specimens include every type of Perpendicular tower to be met with in this county, but they will be sufficient to illustrate what I wish to shew, namely, the difference of design which exists between the early and later towers of the Perpendicular period, and that our Henry VII. towers, such as Bishop's Lydeard, St. James's, Taunton, Chewton, Huish Episcopi, Kingston, Staple Fitzpaine, and particularly St. Mary's, Taunton, which is frequently mentioned as the finest tower in the county, however beautiful in themselves, are in fact post-Gothic buildings, inasmuch as the great principles of frame-work, lateral continuity, and spire growth are altogether neglected in their construction, though this neglect may perhaps be more striking in some of them than in others.

The first of these towers to which I shall draw your attention, and which I believe to be the earliest of the group, is West Monkton. It is, though very simple, a beautiful design, and having no spire, the effect of unity is very well preserved. It consists of three stories above the west door, separated by string courses, and contained within a frame-work composed of rectangular buttresses and a bold cornice moulding. In the belfry-story is one small window of two lights, and above the

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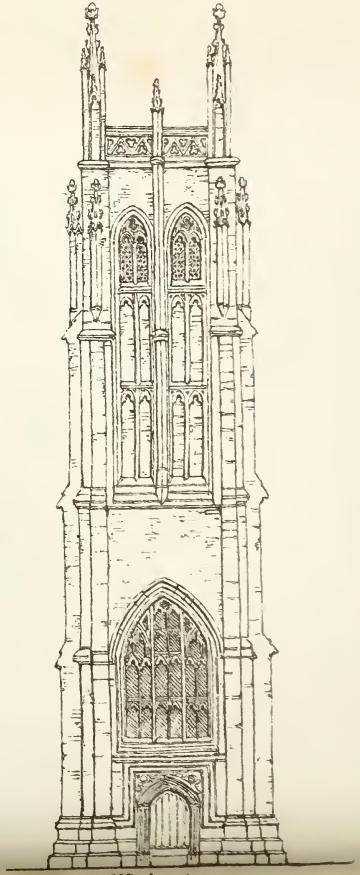

Wrington.

door is a larger one of three lights, while the wall work of the second story being quite plain and unbroken, the effect of lateral continuity is in no degree destroyed: did not the position and size of the buttresses shew that the principle of spire-growth was neglected, it would perhaps present as perfect a development of the principles of a Gothic tower as could easily be found even in fabrics of the fourteenth century.

In the next, Wrington, the buttresses are rectangular, but, extending quite to the cornice-moulding, they form a perfect frame-work to the whole tower, which consists externally of only two stories above the west door, in the lower of which is a large window, while the upper is occupied by the mullions and tracery of two narrow windows, separated by a sort of buttress, or rather pinnacle, rising from the string-course between the stories. The upper part of these windows being pierced, gives light to the belfry, having altogether the effect of a very fine lantern rising from the top of the lower story, but which, having its base so low down, and being contained, together with the rest of the tower, within a perfect frame-work, forms, with the lower part of the tower, essentially one design; while the effect of lateral continuity is in great measure preserved by the mass of unbroken wall between the top of the large window and the base of the lantern.

Wellington tower, though much plainer, is in design very similar to Wrington. As there, there are externally only two stories above the west door, but the lantern being quite plain, with the exception of two small windows in the belfry, and the wall-work being unbroken from the top of the large window to the base of those in the belfry, except by one string-course, the effect of lateral con-

tinuity is perhaps more perfectly preserved than even at Wrington.

In these three towers, the only great principle which seems to have been neglected is that of spire-growth ; for lines drawn from the base of the rectangular buttresses, to a point above the tower, would either extend to an impossible height, or else form a spire utterly disproportioned in bulk to the area of the square tower on which it would stand. If, however, it be required to build a Perpendicular tower, it appears to me that they would afford a model infinitely superior to any to be derived from the more elaborate and more generally admired Henry VII. towers, which I will now proceed to describe.

With all its faults of design, Bishop's Lydeard probably presents as graceful and pleasing a specimen of a Tudor tower, as can be met with anywhere. It consists of four stories, of which that at the base is much the highest, and is occupied by a door with spandrils, and a large window of five lights, immediately above which is a bold string-course. The two next stories are equal to each other in height, and each contains one window of two lights. Above these is the belfry, which stands on a sort of broach, slightly receding from the face of the wall, having two windows considerably larger than those of the stories immediately below, above which is a bold cornice-moulding, a very beautiful pierced parapet with high pinnacles at the angles, and a smaller one at the centre of each side. The buttresses stand at right angles to the walls of the tower, and only extend to the base of the belfry story, ending in pinnacles, which are carried up outside the angles of the belfry to about half its height. It is built of red sandstone, the masonry is particularly good, the mouldings and ornaments well and boldly executed ; and from the beauty

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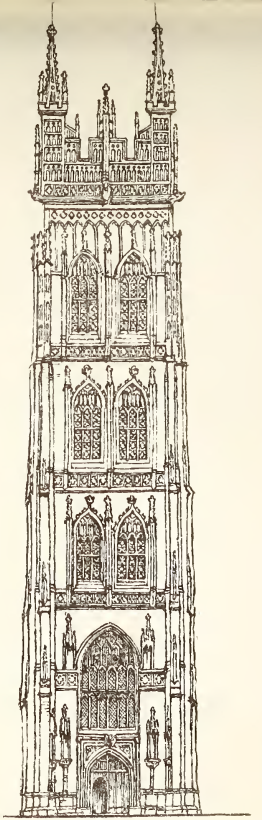
Bishop's Lydyard.



St. Mary Magdalen, Taunton.

of its situation, the rich colour of its material, and the elaborate workmanship of its details, is certainly a very striking edifice.

But it has many and great faults. In the first place the frame-work is incomplete, extending only to the base of the belfry story, which is, in fact, a square lantern of great beauty and elaborate workmanship, but quite independent of the design of the tower, which in reality finishes at its base, from which point a broach spire might have risen naturally enough, though even then its growth would have been imperfect, owing to the position of the buttresses. The string-courses of the second and third stories are at the same level as the sets-off of the buttresses, so that either of them might be removed, and little alteration would be seen except in the height and proportion of the tower. Owing to the size and height of the lower window, there is a deficiency of unbroken wall work in the west front, which is however in some degree obviated on the south side by the whole basement story being plain and unbroken, giving an appearance of firmness to that side which is wanting to the west front, where the lantern, rising above the rectangular buttresses, renders the whole top-heavy, and gives the appearance of the tower standing on too small a base for security. Beautiful as it certainly is, it has no spire-growth, its frame-work is incomplete, and there is an apparent want of lateral continuity and oneness of design. In short, if I am right in my view of what is essentially necessary to the design of a perfect Gothic tower, it is to all intents and purposes a post Gothic building.

But if this be the case with Bishop's Lydeard, it is far more so with St. Mary's, Taunton, where all these faults are exaggerated, and where, in addition to incomplete frame-work, an independent lantern, and entire neglect of

spire-growth, the lateral continuity is totally destroyed by its double windows, its top-heaviness and instability increased by the disproportionate size of its magnificent pinnacles, the base even on the south side being apparently weakened by the insertion of three niches in the mass of wall, and the smallness of the area of its base, together with the lamentably decayed state of the stone of which it is built, altogether give such an appearance of insecurity, as to render a distant view, at least to me, much more agreeable than a close one.

At the beginning of my paper I apologised for intruding upon the province of professional architects ; I will, therefore, now say no more than this,—that I am quite aware that, if I have performed my task at all, I have done so in a very imperfect and slovenly manner. But if my view has any truth in it, and I cannot help thinking that it has some, I will conclude, not altogether without hope that these hints, in the hands of scientific men, may perhaps be productive of some slight good to the practice of ecclesiastical architecture.