

Sculptures in Church of St. John Baptist, Wellington, Somerset.

BY MR. C. E. GILES.

IN the spring of the year 1848, while the decayed chancel of the church of St. John Baptist, Wellington, was being pulled down, some beautiful sculptures were found in detached pieces, turned upside down, and forming the floor of the space around the altar. Further examination shewed that the faces of the figures, and all the characteristic features, had been destroyed by the hammer, while the rich colouring and gilding were nearly perfect, owing, perhaps, to a coat of plaster which had been spread over their surface, to receive the decalogue in black letter with red capitals. Evidently these sculptures formed a portion of a very elaborate reredos, which the iconoclastic spirit of the Reformation had not spared, and probably in after times the final blow had been dealt, when they were thrown down to form a part of the pavement. Exposure to the air and other causes destroyed the colours, so that now little of their original splendour can be traced. Having, however, made correct sketches at an early period, and marked

each colour, I am enabled to vouch for the accuracy of the specimen given in the accompanying plate. What the design of this reredos was seems very uncertain; the principal fragments found form portions of a regular series of panels, about twenty inches high. In the centre was the crucifixion, and "on each side were trefoiled niches, so disposed as that a larger figure, averaging seventeen inches high, in a niche the whole height of the relief, alternated with pairs of smaller figures, one above the other, each about eight and a half inches high, ranged in smaller compartments, two of which are comprised in the height of the sculptures". I have been unable to form any satisfactory idea of the original arrangement of this screen: there were evidently larger figures, probably half the size of life, for portions of very rich canopies remain of this size, one of which appears to have been the centre of the arrangement. The panel, containing St. Christopher, would seem to have commenced the series of smaller figures; the crucifixion occupies the centre, and I believe the St. Michael, with the shrouded figure, was the last.

"The crucifixion represents our Lord (in the most conventional way) extended on a T cross. The compartment is foliated under a square head: the ground is blue, thickly pounced with fleurs-de-lys in gold, but at the lower part a green colour has been added over the blue, as if to represent a background of country," probably, from its being in the

form of a hill, Mount Calvary. "The fleurs-de-lys can also be seen under the superadded green, but have not been gilt. The cross itself is of gold, with a floriated border of red and black along every edge. The figure of our Saviour has the hair of gold, and the drapery also of gold, with red and black lines on the folds. It would seem that there were originally two small figures of angels, one at each extremity of the arms of the cross. Near the cross stand two soldiers, much mutilated. At the dexter side are two more figures, apparently the Blessed Virgin supported by another female. The one which seems to be the Virgin is remarkably draped: the dress is of gold, with a cross-pattée on the breast in black, and black edgings, with blue sleeves and a blue mantle: the hair is golden. The other figure has a tunic of dark red, bordered in gold, and a mantle of gold lined with blue, and turned up and hemmed in red. Two other figures, on the sinister side, seem to be a soldier and a figure in a cope: but in most unintelligible attitudes.

"One considerable fragment contains four large and six small figures in niches. The first, on the dexter side, appears to be a female, gorgeously habited and holding a handkerchief. The tunic is blue, powdered with gold and red spots, and hemmed in gold: the mantle, gold lined with vermilion and bordered with green, embroidered with a flowing pattern of vermilion and gold. The second figure is a bishop, with mitre, staff, and chasuble, and



giving the benediction. The third appears to be holding his own head after decapitation; and would be St. Denys, were it represented as a bishop. Fig. 4—a large one—is elaborately coloured and habited, and carries a staff, scrip and bottle; but no cockle-shell—indeed, no head-dress at all—which should make it St. James. No. 5, seemingly in crown and cope, is too much mutilated for explanation. No. 6, is an abbess with staff and book. No. 7, has a cope and spear, and may represent St. Philip. No. 8, is an archbishop; over, No. 9, another abbess: and No. 10 is St. Peter, arrayed with great magnificence.

“Another piece (represented in the accompanying drawing,) contains seven figures, three large and four small. The first is a large one, and is habited in a cope, much mutilated, remarkable for a thick cord passing round the neck and depending in front. Figure 2, is perhaps St. John at the Latin Gate, being a figure half immersed in a vessel or barrel. Below it is St. Catharine, and an angel destroying the wheel. Figure 4, a large female figure carrying a sword, may probably also represent St. Catharine. No. 5, is a six-winged cherubim, carrying (it would seem) a soul in a linen cradle:—by no means an uncommon representation. The niche below it is vacant; two holes remain, by which a figure would seem to have been pinned in. The 7th figure is a bishop in the attitude of benediction.

“A fourth fragment contains but one large figure, probably St. Mary Magdalene, and two small ones, one a bishop, both carrying labels.

“A fifth sculpture contains a large St. Christopher, and two smaller niches, of which one has a ship—of yellow, with a white sail charged with crosses in vermilion, the crew yellow, and sea blue,” in which are represented small fishes; “and the other a most singular representation of a mermaid, with glass and comb!

“Another large piece contains two large and four smaller figures, which cannot be assigned to particular saints; and a seventh fragment displays St. Michael, with the dragon and scales, and in two smaller niches a shrouded figure (such as is occasionally seen in brasses) and a naked figure walking over a toothed instrument.

“An eighth fragment, containing two large and four small figures, is much mutilated. One large figure holds the hull of a ship; the other, a male, appears to have a long club. Of the smaller ones, two seem to be deacons in dalmatics, and one holds a fringed label.

“The ninth piece has a large figure complete, and the half of a second, divided by two small figures in copes.

“And now as to the date of these interesting remains. The character of the foliation of the stonework would point to about the year 1400, early in the third-pointed period. This date is confirmed

by the armour in which the soldiers are dressed in the panel of the crucifixion. They are seen,—in spite of the dreadful mutilation they have suffered,—to have a camail round the neck, a tight-fitting jupon emblazoned; a horizontal studded baldric, or sword-belt, and pointed sollerets on the feet. The year 1400 will be a date, rather late perhaps than otherwise, for that point in the transition from mail to plate armour, which is indicated by these particulars. It is curious to observe that the jupon of one of the figures is emblazoned with scorpions: a device represented by ancient artists occasionally on the surcoats of the quaternion of soldiers who were present at the crucifixion,—since revived for the same purpose by Overbeck.

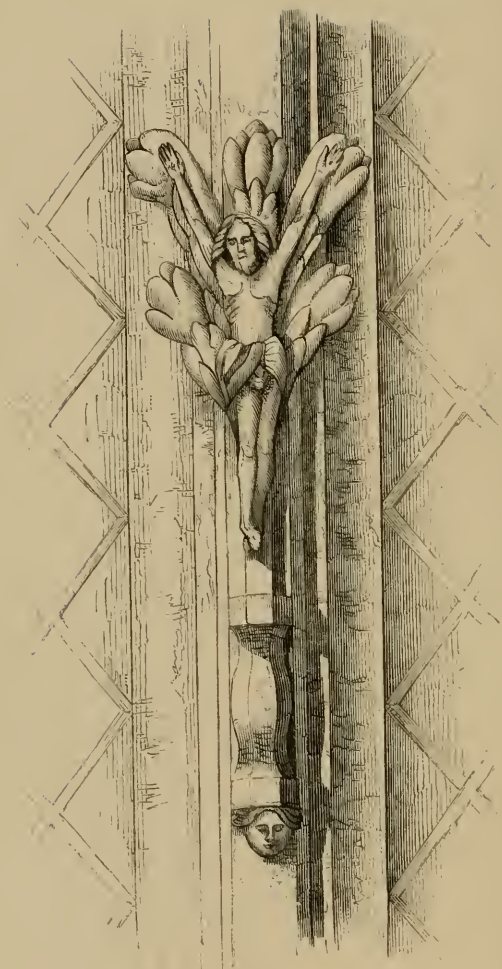
“The above date is also confirmed by the costume of some of the female figures. The large Saint Catharine, for example, has a close-fitting surcoat, or bodiced gown, with an outer mantle fastened by a jewelled strap or band across the breast. [See drawing.] There is no wimple, however, nor head-dress, the neck being bare and the hair long and flowing. This dress is well known as belonging to the close of the 14th century—the reign of Richard II and Henry IV.

“The true date, therefore, may be fairly concluded to be a little earlier than the year 1400. It may further be observed, that no figure in the series has a nimbus; and that the tracery of the niches, as well as the figures, was all beautifully diapered and coloured.

“The general date of the chancel of Wellington church being of the transition from first to middle-pointed, this reredos must have been a later addition.”

The foregoing quoted passages are taken from an account given in the *Ecclesiologist* for August, 1848, from sketches and memoranda which I furnished. As they afford information additional to that supplied by myself, I have extracted them to accompany the illustration of one of the fragments now given to the public for the first time. The portion containing the figure of St. Catharine has been selected as affording an example of costume very characteristic, and clearly marking the date of these sculptures. Few can fail to admire the exquisite grace and symmetry of this representation of one of the most favorite saints of the middle ages. The gown open at the sides, and displaying the dress beneath, is stated by Fairholt, in his useful work on “*Costume in England*,” to be first observable in monuments of the time of Edward III, and to have continued in fashion until the reign of Henry VI, a period of about a century, a sufficient proof of the estimation in which this elegant costume was held. In the notice previously quoted, it is stated that there is no head-dress; this is hardly correct; the peculiar horns which made the ladies’ head-dress of this period notorious, are very clearly distinguishable.

On the centre mullion of the east window of a chantry chapel adjoining the south aisle of this

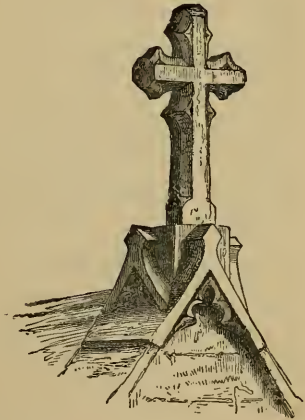


SCULPTURE ON CENTRE MULLION OF WINDOW
AT EAST END OF SOUTH AISLE OF WELLINGTON CHURCH, SOMERSET.

church, is carved the singular crucifix represented in the accompanying plate: the cross is budding into lilies, symbolical of the life in death, and the purity imparted through the same: the buds are five, representing the five wounds. The exact meaning of the lower symbols I am unable to explain; but, perhaps the grotesque head, crushed by the pedestal, may signify the victory over sin.

I may add that the chancel inclined considerably to the south, and that the east window (happily preserved) is a very valuable example of transition work, probably late in Edward I.

On the east gable of the nave stands the cross represented in the margin; it is an unusual and bold type, perhaps earlier than the fifteenth century work below it. Some traces of a former church of Norman date, were discovered embedded in the walls, with polychromatic decorations, including also a cushion shaped capital, with square abacus.



On one of the bells is the inscription,

“*Pos resonare jubent pietas mors atque voluptas.*”