

The Early Architecture of the Cathedral.

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I AM sorry to say that, though I am not quite the helpless creature which the newspapers have chosen to paint me, though I am not "laid up" or "confined to my house," still I am held not to be equal to any appearance at public meetings. I am therefore, most unwillingly, obliged to give up my purpose of doing a good deal at the present meeting of the Somerset Archæological and Natural History Society. It was arranged that I should undertake, not for the first time in my life, the exposition of the two churches of Wells. This I cannot do; I the more regret it, because of the new light which has lately been thrown on the history of the cathedral church at an important part of that history, by its own Sub-dean.

Mr. Church's three papers on the episcopates of Reginald, Savaric, and Jocelin,¹ are specimens of the best kind of local work, and such as has never before been applied to this part of the story of the church of Wells. It is not everybody who knows how to treat a piece of local history, but the many years which the Sub-dean has spent under the shadow of St. Andrew's has enabled him to do it as it should be done. I wish he had done it sooner; I might then have put some things differently in the little book which I wrote some years back, from such lights as I had then. A work of that kind is not easy; the history of one of these ancient churches, the history

(1). Mr. Church's papers are printed in the *Archæologia*, vols. 1, li.

either of its buildings or of its foundation, the mere succession of its members, is not a task to be trifled with; it cannot be dashed off by a swift-going pen at a moment's notice, like the "Etcetera" or "The Sign of the Ship," by the ready scribe of a popular magazine. It needs some control of the "forward, delusive, faculty" of which Bishop Butler found something to say. It needs some practice in historic criticism, some notion of the nature of evidence, some restraint to be put on the popular belief that it is safe to say that a thing did happen, because it is not impossible that it may have happened. I do not know whether Mr. Church has written "charming papers," but he has at least written scholarly monographs. He has not given us the light bread which the soul loatheth, but the savoury meat of real work; and of that savoury meat I have swallowed somewhat; from those scholarly monographs I have learned something. I see that the dates of the buildings of the church of Wells—as I have understood them, as even Professor Willis understood them—must be thoroughly gone through again. I am not ready with a new theory; I cannot make theories all of a moment. Before I give any opinion whatever, I must go through the whole evidence again; and I must look it over again on the spot, which I am just now not quite in the case for doing. But I may throw out a hint or two, which some one may perhaps look to during the meeting, which I may myself look to some other time. I speak only of things which may be, not of things which I at all say were.

All that I have ever done in the matter has been from printed sources; manuscripts are not my line. At once to dig the stones and to build the temple does not fall to the lot of every man; one may say that it falls to the lot of the Bishop of Chester only. Whatever I build, I must have my stones dug for me, and, till Mr. Church took the quarry in hand, it seems that the stones had never been dug in right order. Metaphor apart, the printed sources to which I had to trust gave no true account of the manuscript records.

When I wrote my little book, I asked that those records might be printed; Mr. Church's monographs supply a fresh reason for printing everything. From his report one thing is plain. In the architectural history of the church of Wells, we must not, as, on the strength of our printed authorities, we have hitherto been inclined to do, take a wide leap from Robert in the middle of the twelfth century to Jocelin in the thirteenth. It is now plain that, beside them, Reginald, in the intermediate time, later in the twelfth century, also did great works of building. That is plain from several records of his time; but unluckily those records give us no hint as to the part of the church on which his labours were employed. That we must make out as we can from our notices of the other builders and from the evidence of the building itself; and far be it for me to commit myself to any view as yet. But I may mark a few points for guidance. First of all, as the Sub-dean seems to have noticed, the conventional phrases about the church being well nigh ruined at such and such a time are merely conventional phrases, and go for next to nothing. The old builders took a very small occasion for rebuilding or recasting, if the fancy for rebuilding or recasting took them. Secondly, that we must remember that the Old-English church of Primitive Romanesque, the church of Gisa and his predecessors, clearly lived on till the time of Robert—as the nave of St. John of Beverley lived on till the fourteenth century—and that part of it may have lived on longer still. When Robert is said to have built and consecrated a new church, that might very well, in the exaggerated language in which such things are set down, have merely meant that he rebuilt the eastern part, according to the custom of his time, on a greater scale—as it was afterwards enlarged to a greater scale again. This work, be it noticed, would have made a fresh consecration needful. It is possible therefore—I do not say that it is more than possible—that the present nave, by whomsoever built, immediately supplanted the Primitive nave.

And it is tempting—I do not say it is more than tempting—to suggest Reginald as the man who did the supplanting. Only, to whomsoever we assign the nave, we must remember that it is evidently part of a design which took in the eastern limb and the transepts, and of which the nave would naturally be the last part built. Again, we must remember that there is one part of the building of quite different work from the nave, but which looks still more like the time of Reginald. This is the north porch, clearly too late for Robert, clearly too early for Jocelin. Then again, it is perhaps not quite safe to assume that the west front is necessarily later than the nave. It is undoubtedly later in idea; but, as I said long ago, it need not therefore be later in age; there are marks in the building that look both ways, and, when the late Mr. Parker and I examined it together, we came to the conclusion that the west front was the older, and we gave up that view only in deference to Professor Willis. It was not at all unusual to add on a west front to an earlier nave, which earlier nave might in after times be rebuilt or not. And it was specially usual in the age which above all others indulged in building west fronts which had no kind of relation to the nave, fronts which can be spoken of in plain words as *shams*, though the word does seem to grate on some specially delicate ears. I can only say that, if any one objects to call the west front of Wells a sham, it only shows that he can never really have looked at both sides of it; that is all.

I simply throw out these few hints for any one to think over who may be examining the church of Wells within the next few days, as I hope some day to think of them more fully myself. But whatever conclusion anybody comes to at any time, he will equally owe his thanks to the Sub-dean for having started him on his new tack. Mr. Church has done a good work in reopening the question on a new ground; he has further done wisely in not attempting to settle it in a hurry, or by the help of guess-work.

We have usually, when the Society meets in Wells, to raise our moan over such of the smaller antiquities of the city and its immediate neighbourhood as have perished since the time of the last meeting. We have had a longer interval than I had looked for since our last Wells meeting. We met here in 1863; we met here in 1873; I fully expected that we should have met here in 1883, but, I know not for what cause, the time was put off till 1888. That is, this time of absence from Wells has been half as long again as the other time; a fact which cuts both ways. A full list of objects destroyed is likely to be longer; but it is harder to remember in 1888 than it would have been in 1883 whether a particular piece of destruction happened before or after 1873. I am thinking chiefly of the smaller objects, specially the small domestic buildings, the good old houses which are such a special feature of the district, and of which everybody in town or country thinks himself clever if he can destroy one or two. I am pretty sure that the bishop's barn at Wookey vanished some years before 1873; but I am not clear when the dovecot began gradually to decay, before or after. Nor have I kept the exact dates of the various stages by which so much of the traces of the grand unfinished design of the Wells market-place has given way to the increased grandeur of a flaunting shop. How noble a feature in a street a series of mediæval shops were nobody seems to think. But I am quite sure that it is since 1873 that an ancient house at Burcot, which I used greatly to delight in, and which I used as a model for some work of my own, was suddenly swept away, seemingly out of sheer wontonness. Then further from Wells is the admirable, the unique, fish-house at Meare. Since our last meeting that has become a ruin. It is, I believe, strictly speaking, by nobody's fault that it has become so: but it has become so. And it surely should not stay as it was when I last saw it, last year. It was then not in the state of a ruin of past ages, but in the same grievous state of havoc as

the houses which I saw in Herzegovina in 1875 which had been burned by the Turks. Now surely the Society might make some appeal to the owner. Most likely he knows nothing about it; these things are commonly left to some agent or underling of some kind, "to save or consume things as seemeth him best." Surely we could ask the owner of that unique house, not to "restore" it, *quod absit*—the old house is ruined, and we don't want a sham one—but to take care of what is left and to save it from utter decay. And, within the city, it was a great many years after 1873, it was some years after 1883, that one of the stateliest of the domestic buildings of the city was worse than swept away. Every one here must know that grand old house which stood not far from Saint Cuthbert's church; not enriched, but grand in its simplicity, with its three gables, its ranges of mullioned windows, showing in what kind of house a burgher of Wells once could dwell. It was a noble object to rest the eye on, as we passed from the lower church to the upper. Now, for what reason I know not, it has been cut down to the vulgarest and most paltry type of modern house; the gables have vanished, the mullioned windows have given way to rectangular holes of the poorest kind. What kind of being it can be to whom this kind of change gives any pleasure I know not, and I forbear to guess. Some here may have more certain means of knowledge. And these things happen daily. People have begun to care for primæval and military antiquities; as for churches, they care for them rather too much; they are swept away by the subtler demon of restoration. But the small ancient houses of the land, really among the choicest of its antiquities, perish daily, and no man taketh it to heart. Our great houses perish by mysterious fires: our small houses perish anyhow. One of the most characteristic classes among the relics of old times will soon be wholly lost to us.

And there is another ancient building in the city about which strange and fearful rumours are going about. The

bishop's barn at Wells is not quite equal to the abbot's barn at Glastonbury as an example of a class of buildings which few surpass in interest. But it ranks high in the class; it is one of the precious relics of the old days of the city and its bishopric. In no way is the skill of the mediæval architects better shown than in their barns. To design a building for a lowlier purpose than that of a church or a palace-hall, to make it exactly suited for its own purpose and for none other, and yet to make it as truly a work of the highest art as any church or any hall,—that was exactly what the mediæval architects could do, but what I am quite sure that no modern architect could. Set a modern architect to design a barn, and he would either stick it all over with incongruous ornament, or else give it no artistic shape whatever. But look at the old one; mark well its low and massive walls, its mighty roof with its soaring gables, a wonder of timber-work within; mark its solid buttresses, its narrow slits for windows—the narrow slit as much in place here as the broad window of many bays is in the church or the great hall—all solid and plain, but everything good and finished, the little enrichment that such a building allowed kept carefully for one or two fitting places—to have made such a building as this is indeed a triumph of the builder's skill. And yet I hear whispers of some designs against this precious piece of our local antiquities. I hear something said about applying it to some other use, about changing its essential features in order to suit the purposes of that other use. I read in a local paper that it was a pity that so beautiful a building should be put to so mean an use as that of a barn. O the unwisdom of the ancient architect, who blindly deemed it his duty to put forth his best skill for every work that he took in hand—into whose head it never came either to design a mean building for any purpose, or that any true and honest purpose could be mean—who, being called on to design a barn, designed a building that was perfect for its own use of a barn, and altogether unsuited for any other use.

It is the glory of Wells that it keeps so many buildings, from its great church and its great house downwards, which are still applied to the uses for which they were meant by their first builders; let one at least of its ancient barns still keep its place, unaltered by any modern fingers, on a list so honourable to church and city, and so nearly unique.

One thing more. While we are dealing with rumours, what is this that is whispered touching something greater than the barn, touching the church of Wells itself? What is this that is whispered about a reredos? Some day or other there ought to be a fitting reredos in the church of Wells; but we may very well do without it for the present. For any reredos made now is likely to be on peepshow principles, to show the "beautiful view" from the choir into the Lady chapel. And a reredos made on peepshow principles would be a blow to the church which would perhaps never be got over. There is no greater misconception of the arrangements of a church than this notion of the "beautiful view" into the Lady chapel. But I really do not wonder at it as things are. Everything in the choir is so "cabined, cribbed, confined," that one does not wonder at an escape being sought for anywhither. Only the escape is generally sought for at the wrong end. Once more, as I have said so often, as the great brass lectern teaches us, "in season, out of season," break down the middle wall of partition that is against us; let the church of Wells be as the churches of Lichfield, Hereford, Chichester, and Llandaff; then, with the full length from west door to high altar forming one mighty whole, no one will be tempted to think about the pretty peepshow between choir and Lady chapel. A Lady chapel is built specially not to be peeped into; it is a thing of itself, a design of itself, designed to be kept quite apart from the great whole formed by the whole body of the church from the high altar westward. When the church of Wells has, like the church of Lichfield, its clergy and choir in their place, its laity in their place, and the light screen between the two,

then we will think of a new reredos—perhaps an old one—between presbytery and Lady chapel, one the very opposite to a peepshow, one like the grand work at Winchester and St. Albans and Christ Church Twynham. Till that can be, leave alone a thing which, if not good, is not conspicuously bad, certainly not worse than anything of the same kind is likely to be.

Why Wells should linger so far behind the rest of the world I never could understand. Why what is found perfectly easy at Lichfield, perfectly easy at Hereford, should be thought strange and impossible here is altogether beyond me. At all events, if we cannot hasten the day of deliverance, at least let us not put it back. As yet the wide windows of the barn, the Italian alabaster of the reredos, are only in the stage of rumour. May they never come out of that stage. May they never find their way into any chronicle of actual facts, along with the destruction of the prebendal house in the North Liberty, along with the overthrow of the house of the *informator puerorum*, along with the breaking down of the wall between close and city, along with the other merciless sweepings away of ancient relics and ancient memories which I can witness to during the eight-and-twenty years in which I have watched the doings of this city and its neighbourhood more narrowly than any other.
