St Paul's Ecclesiological Society -- excursion to Rochester, 16 Jul 1881

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XLII. -- SATURDAY, JULY 16, 1881.

Rochester.

A large party joined in this excursion, reaching Rochester by train in the morning.

On leaving Rochester Station, the Guildhall was the first place visited. It is a red-brick and tiled building, erected in 1687, and containing in the principal apartment (the magistrates' room) some panelling, a good coved and plastered ceiling, and a series of eleven full-length portraits of celebrities, from Sir Stafford Fairbourne, William III., and Queen Anne to the late Mr. P. Wykeham Martin, M.P. The Corn Exchange, a little farther up the High Street, has a clock, the gift, as an inscription sets forth, of Sir Cloudesley Shovel, 1706; the present exchange was built from the designs of Messrs. Flockton and Abbott, of Sheffield, in 1871, and is lofty, well lighted, and of pleasing proportions. Richard Watts' Hospital, immortalized by Dickens, awakened much interest. It is a charity founded by will by Richard Watts, 1579, by which six poor travellers, not being rogues or "proctors," receive gratis for one night lodging, entertainment, consisting of ½lb. meat, 1lb. bread, and ½ pint of beer, and in the morning 4d. each. The building is solidly constructed of stone, in two stories: the front rooms are the curator's apartments, and behind these are, on each floor, three cubicles, white-washed and well scrubbed, and each provided with a bed; the upper tier is reached by a narrow gallery. The building was modernized by the substitution of plate-glass for lattice windows, and otherwise restored, a few years ago, and the books show that the charity is constantly made use of. In the High Street several picturesque half-timbered houses were seen, the finest example being a group on the north side.

St. Bartholomew's Chapel, on the boundary line between the High Streets of Rochester and Chatham, was seen under the guidance of the Rev. John Bailey, the Hospital Chaplain. The building consists of a long narrow nave with north aisle, north transept, chancel, and apse, and from the exterior gives no promise of archaeological interest, as the west front, and bell-turret, the south wall, and the tiled roofs are all painfully modern and fresh-looking. The Rev. J. Bailey explained that the chapel was founded as an adjunct to a lepers' hospital by Bishop Gundulph, but was built by his successor, Bishop Ernulf, both of whom were greatly concerned in the building of the cathedral, the actual work being carried out by a monk, Hugh de Cliffe, in 1124. When leprosy ceased to exist, the hospital which adjoined on the north was pulled down, and from about the time of Elizabeth the chapel was sub-divided into dwelling-houses, and there was every prospect of its destruction. About 120 years ago it was restored to its old uses, and a few years since the late Sir Gilbert Scott, R.A., prepared a report on the building, in which he stated reasons for believing that the flat wooden lintels to the deeply splayed windows on the south side were the original ones of the twelfth century, and were devised in order to leave space for the lean-to building, of which there were clear traces on this side, and in which it was probable the lepers gathered to hear the service. The chapel was restored under Sir Gilbert's care, the old carved chalk-stones found in the windows, &c., being replaced and used as guides for the new stonework. The semi-circular recess at the east end was found to be a true apse, domed in concrete, and it formerly had a stone bench round it, as in basilicas; this apse had since been decorated in colour by a member of the congregation. The old cottages built round the chapel were removed, when it was seen that the window recesses had been used as cupboards, boarded up on the interior of the chapel, and that a stove projected into it. The sedilia, having Purbeck shafts, have been opened out, and an organ, rather too large for the building, was put into the north transept; the north aisle is entirely modern. Further restoration was contemplated, including the erection of a vestry, and also the

laying out of the grounds. The funds having increased, a new and large hospital of St. Bartholomew was built in 1863 on the adjoining hill-side.

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The Cathedral.

The party were received under the central tower by the Very Rev. the Dean, who welcomed them to the place, remarking that, though Rochester was neither one of the largest nor most beautiful of our cathedrals, it would be found to contain a great deal of Late Norman and Early English work; but, curiously enough, very little of the work from the thirteenth to the present century.

The Rev. Canon Scott Robertson, F.S.A., of Sittingbourne, said the Saxon history of Rochester, from its foundation and onwards, was better known than that of any other See, but no pre-Norman remains were known to exist in the Cathedral, unless the theory of Mr. James Parker was admitted, that the massive pillars with unchamfered caps, at the west end of the crypt, dated from before the Conquest. Personally, he believed they must begin with the work of Bishop Gundulph, who held the See from 1077 to 1108, and who built the White Tower in London, and the Malling Tower of St. Leonard, near Maidstone. Here, at Rochester, he built a complete church, of which the outer shell of the nave had been shown by Mr. Irvine, clerk of the works under Sir Gilbert Scott, to remain, in great part, as high as the triforium level. Gundulph was succeeded by Ernulf, who had been Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, and then of Peterborough, in both of which places he carried out great works: here he carried forward the nave, built the former chapter-house, and from architectural evidence we believed that he built the present rich west front during his occupancy of the See, 1115-25. In 1137-8, the church and monastery adjoining were so burnt that the monks were dispersed, being without shelter, but they returned ten years later, and the Bishop Walter de Canterbury greatly pushed forward the work of repairs. The chronicles again contain a most puzzling statement, for, about 1177, they say, a second fire reduced the church "to a cinder." The statements appeared to show that the place was utterly consumed: but the members had only to look around them on the rich Transitional Norman work of the nave, to see that this must be accepted with a certain amount of reserve. There was, at all events, an extensive restoration necessary, of which numerous traces remain in the choir-aisles, tower-piers, and in the ornamentation of the nave. In the nave, down which they were looking, many peculiarities were noticeable; for instance, upon each pier there was a vaulting shaft carried to the level of the triforium floor, but although there were traces of the upper portion of these shafts having been removed, the intention of vaulting the nave with stone was never carried out. The triforium gallery, once very perfect, had been blocked up by Sir Gilbert Scott, who considered this action necessary, to ensure the stability of the fabric. The tympana of the triforium openings were filled in with varied and exceedingly rich diapering, some portion of which is like the peculiar ornament, used as a string-course, in the north alley of the cloisters of Canterbury Cathedral, known to have been done about 1226, and this convinced the speaker that the ornamentation was of a much more recent period than Ernulf's constructional work. The nave clerestory, the very appropriate open-timbered roof, and the great eight-light western window, were added in the fifteenth century. Not only was this roof once richly coloured, but the whole of the triforium surface was formerly picked out in green, red, and yellow. If they examined the nave aisles, they would find carving on the north much more elaborate than any in the south aisle, and the eastern bay of the north arcade was blocked up about the end of the thirteenth century. The reason for this may be that in the north aisle an altar of St. Nicholas was reserved for the use of a parochial congregation, until 1421, when a church was built parallel to, and a little north of, the Cathedral, a church which was rebuilt as we now saw it in 1624. The blocking up of the eastern bay of the north arcade of the nave shut off the parochial service from the rest of the cathedral, and formed a parclose screen for the altar of St. Nicholas. Even after the new church was built, the parochial clergy had the privilege of bringing their weekly procession of the Host through the

south-east door of their church, across the cemetery, into the cathedral by a door in the north transept, and of proceeding down the north aisle to a doorway now blocked up near the north-west angle. In 1201 a pious Scotch baker, named William, was murdered by his servants while travelling at Chatham; the monks of Rochester gave the body burial, and found it a very profitable undertaking, as immediately afterwards miracles began to be performed at the tomb, and streams of wealthy pilgrims were attracted to the city. A shrine to St. William was erected in the north-east transept, and with the pilgrim's offerings, the great transepts and the choir were rebuilt. The new work was of a beautiful Early English type, in which Purbeck marble shafts were freely used. It began, according to the chronicles, with the north ala (transept or choir aisle); the new choir was opened in 1227, but was not completed till twenty years later. In the upper choir stalls there is some of the earliest woodwork known to exist; it is of plain but good Early English character, and dates from about 1227. He ought to have mentioned that Gundulph built a tower on the north side, east of the transept, and its ruins still stand; while, on the south side, beneath the floor, Mr. Irvine saw foundations of a second tower, which was removed in the thirteenth century. Mr. Irvine thought Gundulph's northern tower of defence was connected with the city wall, which

he believed crossed the cathedral site, just to the east of the central tower arch; but the speaker did not concur in this theory. The records stated also that in 1343, Hamo of Hythe caused the campanile to be raised with stone, timber, and lead, and put four bells in it. This upper part of the tower, and the wooden spire which formerly surmounted it, were removed by Mr. Cottingham, to make way for the present unsatisfactory tower, rather more than half a century since. Three eastern bays of the south aisle of the nave, they would see, had been greatly extended, so as to form a nave to the chapel of St. Mary in the transept. This late Perpendicular adjunct formerly had a stone bench running round three sides of it, so that the only entrance was at the east end.

Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, F.S.A., of Westminster, referred to the work of exploration so long carried on by Mr. Irvine and more recently by Mr. W. H. St. John Hope. The division of the Norman church into a monastic and a secular portion, as was the case here, was a very usual arrangement, and it led to many quarrels between the monks and the parish, which often ended, as they did here, in the building of a new parish church at the side of the minster. This was generally built in the public cemetery, which was nearly always to the north of the minster, the reason being that the monastic buildings being on the sunny side, the chief approach for lay persons was on the opposite side of the minster, and in order that these people might offer prayers for the dead the burials were made on that side. Since the monks, as part of their duty, said prayers for deceased brethren, this publicity was unnecessary in the case of their graves, and they were accordingly buried at the east end of the minster. The prevalent notion that the monks used the cloister-garth for burials was erroneous. They often buried in the chapter-house and the east and south walks of the cloisters, and we find the earliest grave-stones there; but the western and northern walks were not so used. In the thirteenth century the practice of burial in the church itself became common. He believed that the parochial altar, before St. Nicholas' Church was built, was on the east side of the two Early English bays now forming the eastern part of the cathedral nave, and that a choir-screen, like that still to be seen in St. Alban's nave, crossed the nave at this point. This, and not the screen at the west end of the choir, was properly the rood-screen, above which stood the great cross. The detailed history of this building was exceedingly complicated, not only on account of the great fires which are said to have destroyed the fabric, -- but from which a great deal of earlier work appeared to be still preserved to us -- but because of the many attempts at improvement begun by successive designers, and presently allowed to drop, apparently because funds failed. When sufficient money came in, the fashion had changed, and a new scheme was in turn begun and abandoned.

Mr. Micklethwaite then conducted the visitors throughout and round the cathedral, offering explanations at the leading points. Beginning with the crypt, which extends under most of the choir, he showed the earliest work now left in the western portion. The eastern part of crypt consists of six alleys of comparatively slender columns, with Early English bell mouldings to the caps.

On the north side are a great number of fragments of carving found during the progress of restoration of the cathedral above, and including some censing angels and other figures -- work of about 1320 -- large portions of an Elizabethan tomb, and many other fragments. The carved stones are arranged on boards, quite unprotected from the depredations of unscrupulous visitors. Returning into the upper church, attention was drawn to the Early English architecture of the great transepts, and the party passed into the choir, where the remains of the thirteenth-century woodwork were closely examined. The old desks have trefoiled openings carried by low shafts, and are not more than eighteen inches high, but greater height was tben unnecessary, as they were not used for books. We owed the preservation of these unique examples to the fact that they were encased by the fifteenth-century builders and used as a ledge; but during the last ten years, the casing desks have been taken away and made to do duty for another row of seats. On the previous day he found in a coal-cellar in one of the neighbouring houses a piece of wood, which formed the greater part of one of the thirteenth-century stall-ends. To the east and north of the presbytery was seen a fourteenth-century bishop's monument, in alabaster, richly gilt, much after the fashion of the tomb of William de Vallance at Westminster Abbey, which is of Limoges enamel; the deceased is represented on the effigy as clad in the chasuble, without orphrey, but with a rich dalmatic, amice, and maniple, and having a pastoral staff with napkin attached. At the east end, Sir Gilbert Scott's restoration was freely criticised by members, especially the lowering of the floor, -- which was stated, however, to correspond with the old tile matrices -- and also the want of breadth in the new reredos and high altar which Mr. Micklethwaite said was farther eastward than the ancient one. On the north wall, near to the east end, remains a very perfect stone lavatory. On the high altar were seen a pair of silver candlesticks of the time of Charles II.

The members then went up into the tower, where in a treasury they were shown numerous articles of plate. The principal patera of silver-gilt was pronounced by Mr. Micklethwaite to be a domestic fruit-dish of the sixteenth century. Returning to the south-east transept, Mr. Micklethwaite said that the beautiful doorway on the east side was not originally the chapter-house entrance, although now known by that name, and leading to the modern chapter-house; but it was the monks' principal approach from the cloisters. The elaborate carvings on the sides had been rendered unmeaning by some restorer; originally they showed female figures, one representing the

Synagogue with the Law slipping from her hands, the other, the Church; but the latter statuette had received a new head with beard and mitre, and now did duty as a bishop. Passing through this doorway, the present chapter-house, an oblong chamber of no great interest, was seen; and the visitors descended a flight of steps into a garden, which occupies the western portion of the site of the original chapter-house. It communicates with the cloisters by three richly treated Transitional arches now blocked up; and upon the walls are remains of intersecting arcading.

St. Margaret's Church was also visited under the guidance of Mr. C. Ross Foord. In it is the remarkable palimpsest brass of Thomas Codd, Vicar, 1464. It consists of an inscription surmounted by a half-length figure of an ecclesiastic, habited in surplice, cope, and amice. Behind there is a similar figure of the same size, but wearing the almuce instead of the amice. Mr. Haines ("Manual of Monumental Brasses," page XLVIII.) is of opinion that both these figures represent the same person, and that the alteration was made at his instance.

St. Nicholas (adjoining the cathedral, and rebuilt in 1624), the ruins of the Bridge Chapel, and the Castle were also visited./1

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/1 A paper on Bridge Chapels is printed at p. 203, and one on the Architectural History of the Cathedral at p. 217.