

ST. ALBAN.

6 FEET.

The Shrine of St. Alban (South Elevation).

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THE SHRINE OF ST. ALBAN.

By J. T. MICKLETHWAITE, F.S.A.

It is not often that an object of such size as the shrine of St. Alban is so completely recovered after having been lost for more than three centuries. I think, therefore, that some account of the finding, as well as of the monument itself, will be of interest, the more so as the history of the finding throws considerable light on that of the destruction of the shrine. It is convenient to use the word *shrine*, for we have no other single word which will serve the purpose; but what has been found is, speaking strictly, the marble base, which carried the *feretrum* or shrine proper. In the widest meaning of the word it is but a part of the shrine.

To understand what follows, it is necessary to remember the plan and condition of the eastern part of St. Albans Abbey Church: the main building originally opened eastwards into the Lady Chapel by five arches, three in the central span, and one in each aisle. But in the year 1553, fourteen years after the surrender of the Abbey, these five arches were walled up, and the church west of them was made parochial, whilst the eastern portion was desecrated—part of it was made into a schoolhouse, and the rest became a public thoroughfare. It is most likely that the chapels which had been formed in the outer wall of the south sanctuary aisle were destroyed at the same time.

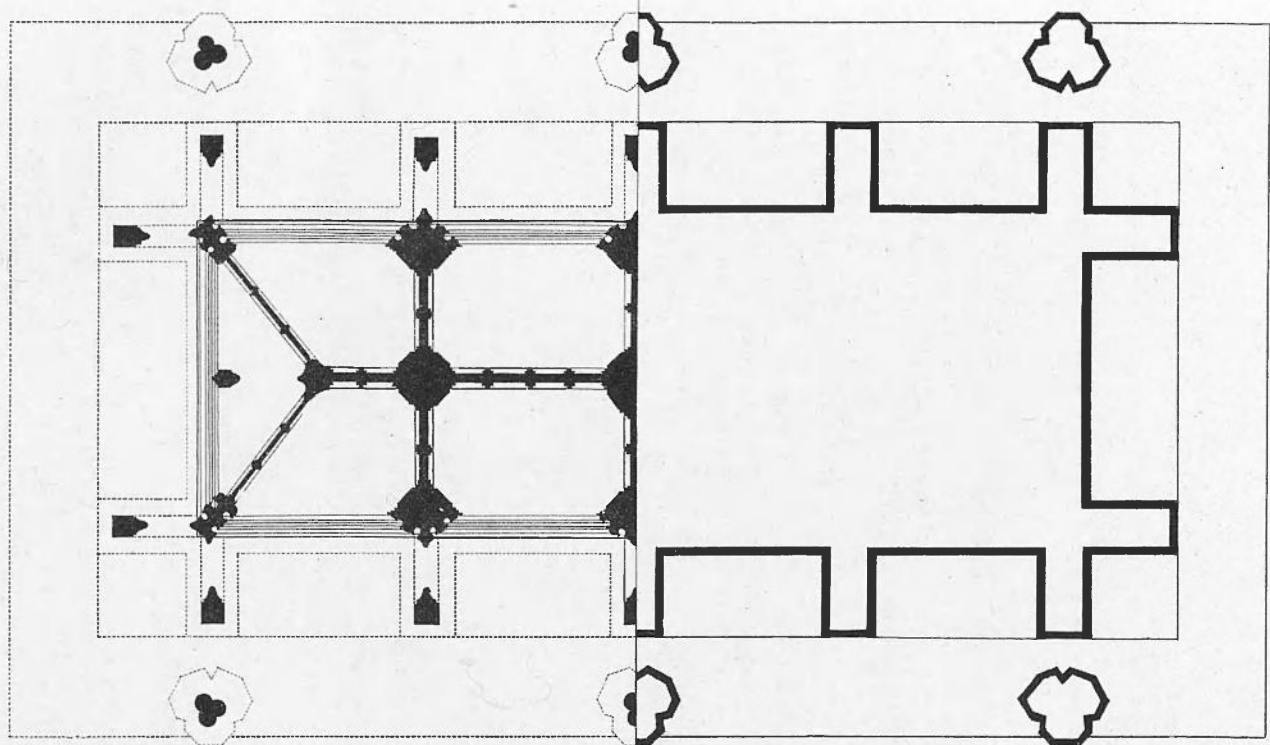
The recovery of the shrine was begun several years ago by the late Dr. Nicholson, who caused the central of the five eastern arches, and that next to it on the north, to be opened out, and found in them a considerable quantity of wrought Purbeck marble. Sufficient was not found to give any clue to the general design, but the fragments were at the time believed

to have belonged to the shrine, and were carefully preserved, in the hope that more would be forthcoming. They now prove to be a large part of the moulded plinth and of the side panels of the niches, and a short length of the beautiful carved cornice.

Nothing more was found until February in the present year, when, Sir Gilbert Scott having ordered the removal of a modern wall-casing in the south aisle, there was discovered behind it a great number of fragments of chalk, elaborately worked and painted. These were carefully sorted out from the rubbish with which they were mixed, and in a short time Mr. Chapple, the clerk of the works, reported that he had "discovered the shrine." This unfortunately happened at a time when, from a cause in which all must sympathise with him, Sir Gilbert Scott was unable personally to attend to the matter, and so it fell to my lot to represent him then, and now to write this account, of which no one can feel more than myself how inferior it is to what it would have been had it come from his pen.

On going over to St. Albans, I found that there could be no doubt as to the newly found fragments belonging to the shrine. Mr. Jackson, the foreman of the works, who deserves to be named as one of the chief agents in the recovery of the shrine, had, with infinite patience, fitted together the shattered pieces—nearly two hundred in number—and had made out the forms of the ten niches; he had, in fact, obtained the plan of the upper part of the monument, thereby rendering the working out of the rest of the design, as the pieces came to hand, a comparatively easy matter. In spite of the difference of material, it appeared, on comparing them, that the new fragments and Dr. Nicholson's belonged to the same work, and more were seen to be built in the walls blocking up the two southernmost of the five arches. We began to cut some of these out, but in doing so exposed others to view, and, therefore, stopped until we could obtain leave to pull down the whole walls. This being granted, we opened out the northern of these two arches. The upper half contained nothing of value, but the lower proved extremely rich; from it we obtained almost the whole of the basement of the shrine, and the greater part of the next stage up to the springing line of the arches, and also some of the cornice. The arch

THE SHRINE OF ST ALBAN.



PLAN THROUGH MULLIONS.

PLAN THROUGH PLINTH.

SCALE.



in the north aisle was next opened, but none of the shrine, except a few small splinters, was found in it. That in the south aisle was left for a time, in order that a photograph might be taken of the painted inscription and the little wooden image before they were removed. But a week later there were found in it the whole of the south side, from the springing of the arches upwards to the cornice, one figure only being missing, and also the corresponding portions of the east and west ends, and of one bay of the north side. This was the richest find of all, and also the last of any importance; for we now possessed the whole shrine, except the detached buttresses to be mentioned presently, and the upper part of three out of the four bays on the north side. The fragments of one of the missing gables were afterwards found under the pavement in the south aisle, but they are very much decayed.

The fragments were found in such regular order that there was no difficulty in assigning the proper place to each as it came to light; and as the lowest step still remained in position to mark the site of the shrine, the work of rebuilding was commenced as soon as the requisite authority and funds for the purpose could be obtained. And now, in spite of its having been smashed to hundreds of fragments, scattered in various places, and used as common walling stone, the shrine of St. Alban rivals in completeness, and far surpasses in beauty and genuineness as an ancient monument, the clumsily rebuilt and much patched-up shrine of St. Edward in Westminster Abbey.

The form of the shrine of St. Alban is shown by the illustrations. Two low steps carry a sort of tomb-shaped basement, eight feet six inches long, three feet two inches broad, and two feet six inches high, each side of which is divided by vertical lines into four square panels, and each panel ornamented with a richly moulded and sub-cusped quatrefoil. The ends have each one panel filled with a curiously elongated quatrefoil, divided in the middle by a vertical rib. The main divisions of the basement are carried up into the next stage, which consists of ten large niches, four on each side and one at each end. These niches are separated from one another by thin slabs of marble, ornamented on both sides with sunk panels, and the end niches are divided into two by slender mullions. The niches are

elaborately traceried and groined inside, and in front have delicately cusped and sub-cusped arches. Above the arches are crocketed pediments, the *tympana* of those at the sides being decorated with beautifully-carved natural foliage, whilst the larger end *tympana* contain subjects—at the west the decapitation of St. Alban, and on the east the scourging of Amphibalus. There have been seated figures in the spandrels between the pediments. One of these is missing on the south, and is, except the buttresses, the only important loss on that side; the remaining two represent kings, that in the middle holding a model of a church, and the other holding a lance. There is a third king at the west end in the spandrel between the sub-arches, and he, like the first mentioned, holds a model of a church. It is not quite clear whom these represent; one of them must be Offa, but no other kings appear to have been benefactors to such an extent as to justify their being represented as founders. Only one of the three figures, which have been in the spandrels on the north side, has been found; it represents a bishop or abbot in eucharistic vestments. The half-spandrels next the corners of the shrine contain censing angels, all eight of which have been found. A splendidly carved cornice runs round the shrine above the pediments, the finials of which form part of it. And above the cornice the structure is roofed with thick slabs of marble, the edges of which are worked so as to form a cresting round the whole. This topmost member is not part of the recent find, but has been lying in the church for some years, and is said at one time to have formed part of the pavement. The inscription which Dr. Nicholson placed on the site of the shrine was cut on a portion of it.

Standing on spurs of the plinth, opposite the principal divisions and at the angles, there have been detached buttresses, connected with the main structure by transoms at the height of the springing of the niche-heads, and by half-arches butting against the cornice, the enrichment of which they penetrate. Of these buttresses, fourteen in number, very little has been recovered. Their general form can be made out from the spurs, upon which they stood, and from the connecting arches and transoms, of which latter three complete examples have been found, giving not only their own form but that of the shafts above and below them. Of the

upper arches only one has been wholly recovered, but considerable portions of others remain where they have joined the cornice. The buttresses have terminated with pinnacles, a large part of one of which remains, but not enough to fix its height with absolute certainty.

In the lower step of the shrine, that which was found still *in situ*, in the pavement of the church, there are six curiously-shaped sinkings, which, till lately, were often pointed out as the positions of the pillars which carried the shrine; they are now found to be quite outside of it, and range three on each side, exactly opposite alternate buttresses. One stone has been found, which fits and explains the shape of the marks. It is a sub-base, made up of three octagons, and evidently intended to carry a triple pillar.¹ No corresponding upper base or capital has been found, but there are a number of fragments, made up of three circular shafts twisted together, which fragments, however, do not correspond sufficiently to enable us by fitting them together to obtain a complete column, and so obtain the height. These six pillars probably carried the six candles, which, as early as the time of Abbot William de Trumpington, were placed round the body of the saint. They are much too slender to have carried a canopy over the shrine, and those at the corners are not placed as we should expect to find them had such been their purpose.

Except the heads of the niches inside, which are of chalk, the whole shrine, and its steps, buttresses, and candlesticks are of Purbeck marble, the hardness of which has not prevented its being worked with the utmost elaboration. The pieces have been run together with lead, and in one case where a groove was made too large for the panel it was to receive, it was evenly lined throughout with lead, to reduce it to the right size. Some of the stones used were very large; for instance, all the four pediments on the south side and the figures in their spandrels were worked in a single slab, and the heads of the ten niches were formed out of only four blocks of chalk. On the other hand, very small pieces have been used; in some parts even the mouldings are worked separately, and planted on to plain panels; the smaller pieces have been secured to their places with what appears to be pitch. It seems as if the heads of the

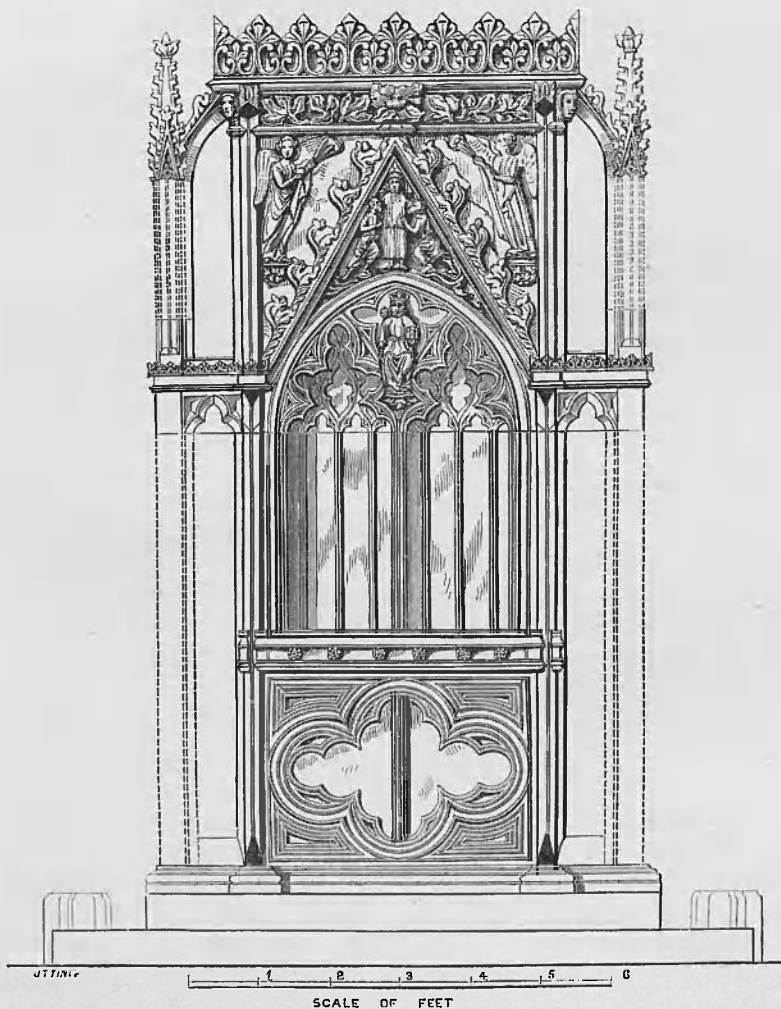
¹ See wood-cut on p. 211.

detached buttresses had been worked in the same pieces as the adjacent parts of the cornice ; for those are found in all cases to be worked in separate stones, the main stones of the cornice being notched to receive them. The clumsiness with which these pieces are fitted contrasts curiously with remarkably careful and elaborate carving upon them.

The carved foliage is throughout most excellent. It is a good deal varied both in choice of subject and manner of treatment ; most of it is purely natural, but in places, notably at the east end, there appears that conventional curling of the leaves which is characteristic of the "Early perpendicular," rather than of the "decorated" style, whilst the top brattishing and the smaller one on the transoms of the buttresses are treated in a way which, so far as I am aware, is peculiar to themselves. Although the disposition of the upright leaves is late, they have at first sight a curiously "Early English" look, and some have imagined them to be parts of the thirteenth-century shrine re-used in the fourteenth. But a close examination leaves no doubt that they are of the same date as the rest of the work. Had they been found with early work, their singularity would have been as remarkable as it now is. A noticeable feature in the upper brattishing is the great use which has been made of the drill in its production.

The figure carving is not so uniformly good. The king at the east end is a beautiful figure, and the seated figures between the gables at the sides are, though not so good, still quite up to the average of fourteenth-century statuary. The censing angels at the corners are not all of equal merit, but none of them are very good, and the side ones are unpleasantly out of scale with the seated figures, with which they range. The placing of subjects in the end gables was one of those blunders not uncommon in mediæval works, but which are almost unaccountable in men of such taste and judgment as the designers of this shrine must have been. The figures are necessarily small and in constrained attitudes, and they are either the work of an inferior hand, or the sculptor has worked as if he felt all along that under the circumstances it was hopeless to expect a good result.

The chalk work, that is to say the interiors of the niches above the springing line, is painted. The ribs of the groining are of various colours, and the cells are left white, and



The Shrine of St Alban (East End).

powdered with a few conventional roses. The heads of the ends and sides of the niches have had the tracery gilt, and the flat painted alternately red and blue, the principal red compartments having each three leopards in gold, and the corresponding blue ones five fleur-de-lys. The smaller compartments have had flowers similar in form to those in the groin-ing. Just above the springing line of the tracery, where the panels sunk in the marble backs and sides are continued in the chalk work, the latter is painted in imitation of the marble. The gold is mostly perished, and the figures can now with difficulty be made out ; but the other colours are still bright, though they have faded much since they were first brought to light. Measures have been taken to preserve them as much as possible from further decay.

There remains to be noticed the three lozenge-shaped openings in the base of the shrine. They occur in the eastern and western bays on the south side, and in the western only on the north. What is their meaning I am unable to decide ; the best suggestion I can give is that they are a tradition of an earlier shrine formed, as we know to have been usual in the twelfth century, with a hollow base pierced at the sides in order that pilgrims might crawl in at one side and out at the other.

There is a difficulty about the date of the shrine. Before the discovery it used to be said on seemingly good authority that the shrine of St. Alban was set up by Abbot De Marinis in 1308, but the work now found can hardly be so early as that. Sir G. Gilbert Scott having kindly promised a note on the dates of the shrines, I shall not enter further into the question.

The shrine in its present form appears never to have had an altar belonging to it ; at any rate it was never attached to the structure as in that of St. Edward at Westminster, nor can it have been very close to it, for the steps are, if anything, more worn with kneeling on at the west than at any other part. It is most likely that the high altar was looked upon as the altar of St. Alban, and continued to be so even after the erection of the great reredos.

The body of the Saint appears to have been at St. Alban's in the *feretrum* itself, and not in the marble base as we now find it at Westminster, and this agrees with the account of the *feretrum* left us by Matthew Paris. There is nothing to

indicate the form of the *feretrum*, which appears simply to have stood upon the base, and been entirely independent of it. Nor is there any very distinct indication of the means employed for its covering or protection. At each corner of the top slab we find a hole, which seems intended to receive an upright rod three-quarters of an inch in diameter, and there is one like hole in the middle of the south side, and six rather irregularly placed at the west end. The north side and east end are imperfect, so that it is not certain whether they had similar holes. These holes *may* have held guide rods to keep a suspended cover in its place, but there is nothing to show how such a cover was suspended.² Besides the larger holes there are at regular intervals all round the upper slab, and close to its edge, small holes about a quarter of an inch in diameter. These holes are pierced with the same drill which is so much used in the crestring; they pass diagonally quite through the corner of the slab, and appear at its side immediately above each of the smaller leaves. These piercings may have been intended simply to give so many points of shadow in the crestring; but if so, it seems strange that they should be directed upwards and quite through the corner, instead of being drilled horizontally into the marble, which would have been easier to do, and would have better served the purpose. It is just possible that they received the ends of a number of small iron rods forming a kind of cage or herse over the *feretrum*, but such a herse cannot have existed at the same time as a moveable cover sliding on rods in the larger holes. Perhaps the cover of the *feretrum* was in this case a pall of some rich material supported by the herse of iron wires.

The state in which the fragments of the shrine were found seems to indicate that it was not destroyed at the surrender of the Abbey in 1539, but in 1553, when the Lady Chapel was cut off from the rest of the church. And this would account for our having recovered so little of the buttresses

² In the ridge-rib of the wooden vaulting there is a hole exactly over the centre of the shrine, and a short distance to the south there is a second hole in the boarding of the ceiling of the Abbey. These holes are so placed that it would be possible for a cord or chain suspending a cover over the shrine to pass through the first, and after going over a pulley above

the ceiling, to return to the floor of the church through the second. But the holes are little more than an inch in diameter, and it is scarcely likely an object so large as the cover must have been, would be raised and lowered by a chain small enough to pass through them. There are many similar holes in different parts of the ceiling.

and candlesticks, which being slender, and detached from the main structure, would be very likely to be broken away, and to disappear during the fourteen years in which the church was disused, and probably neglected. The complete recovery of the main structure, and the circumstance that fragments of the same parts were usually found near together, shows that the shrine was broken to pieces at the same time as the walls in which it has been found were being built, and most likely for the express purpose of supplying material for them.

Besides those of the shrine of St. Alban there have been found, both in the arches I have spoken of and in other parts of the church, a large number of other fragments, many of which are of great beauty. These, though cared for, are as yet very imperfectly sorted and fitted together, owing to the want of special funds for the purpose, and the unwillingness of the Restoration Committee to do it out of the general fund at their disposal. We have, however, been able to identify sufficient of the shrine of Amphibalus to give us its design complete except the plinth, of which somewhat oddly none has yet been found. It is of chalk, and in the disposition of its parts much resembles the shrine of St. Alban, but is much smaller, being only about six feet long and three feet broad. There are only two bays to each side, and one at each end, and the divisions between them are more marked than in the other shrine. The figures between the gables are contained in niches, the canopies of which form part of the cornice, and there do not appear to have been any detached buttresses. The panels of basement are ornamented with curious interlacing tracery, amongst which at one end are letters forming the words *St's amphibalus*, and at the sides the initials *RW*, together with fleur-de-lys and dogs' faces. The initials are, as Mr. Mackenzie Walcott has pointed out, those of Ralph Whytcherche, a sacrist who placed the *feretrum* of Amphibalus on a tomb of white stone—*operis interasilis*. On one end of the shrine there are considerable remains of colour and gilding, but the remainder appears never to have been painted.

Considering the large number of images which have been removed from the adjoining parts of the church, particularly from the great reredos, it is remarkable that so few fragments of statuary have been found in the walls which have been

pulled down. The lower part of a figure of St. Erasmus, a part of an arm probably of St. John Baptist, and the whole of a very fine statue of St. George, are all that have been met with, except a few pieces of figures, on a small scale, amongst which is the trunk of a small crucifix. From this we may gather that the images were not removed at the time when the church was made parochial.

We cannot hope that all the fragments which have been found can be restored to their old places, but they should not for that reason be the less taken care of. Many of them are of great beauty, and corresponding portions may at some time be found to them. I would suggest that they be all labelled as to where they were found, and not stacked together, but placed where they may easily be examined. The Lady Chapel, which is now only used for a Sunday school, and, when re-united with the church, is not likely to be required for ecclesiastical purposes, seems to be just the place for the preservation of these shattered relics; indeed, the chapel should be treated as one of them, not "restored," but put into substantial repair and left to tell its own tale.

[In the following letter, Sir Gilbert Scott explains how the difficulties with respect to the date of the St. Alban's Shrine may be reconciled.]

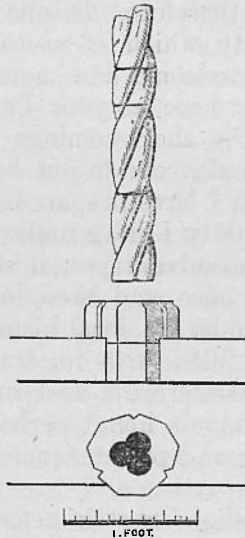
I AM asked to state my opinion on the probable date of the substructure of the shrine of St. Alban.

If we are to believe the statement of Thomas Walsingham, we should set it down at once as having been made under the direction of Abbot John de Marinis, in 1308; as he says that this Abbot caused "the marble tomb, which we now see, to be constructed at a cost of eight score marks." As, however, Walsingham wrote two generations later, I think we are at liberty to test his statement by the character of the work. Some parts of the carving of the cornice might very well agree with the date assigned, while other parts of the same look very much later, and the tracery in the internal partition is in style identical with that of the windows of the Lady Chapel, erected some years later by Hugh de Evensden. On the other hand, the foliage of the cresting on the top, as well as that to the horizontal mouldings of the buttresses, looks very much like 13th century work.

It seems clear, however, that the early-looking details must give way to those which have a late character ; as it is easy to follow an early fashion after its general relinquishment, but next to impossible to anticipate a fashion before its establishment. The evidence, therefore, seems to me to point to a later date than that of De Marinis, who died in the very year in which he is said to have carried out this work.

My own impression is that he might have so far commenced it, or ordered it to be commenced, as to have the credit of being its author ; but its execution must have been in reality long delayed. I should attribute it to Evensden, who succeeded De Marinis, and held the Abbacy till 1326, and I should suppose the work not to have been completed till close upon the last-named period

GEO. GILBERT SCOTT.



Sub-base and triple pillar.

See p. 205.