

THE CHOIR-SCREEN IN CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL.

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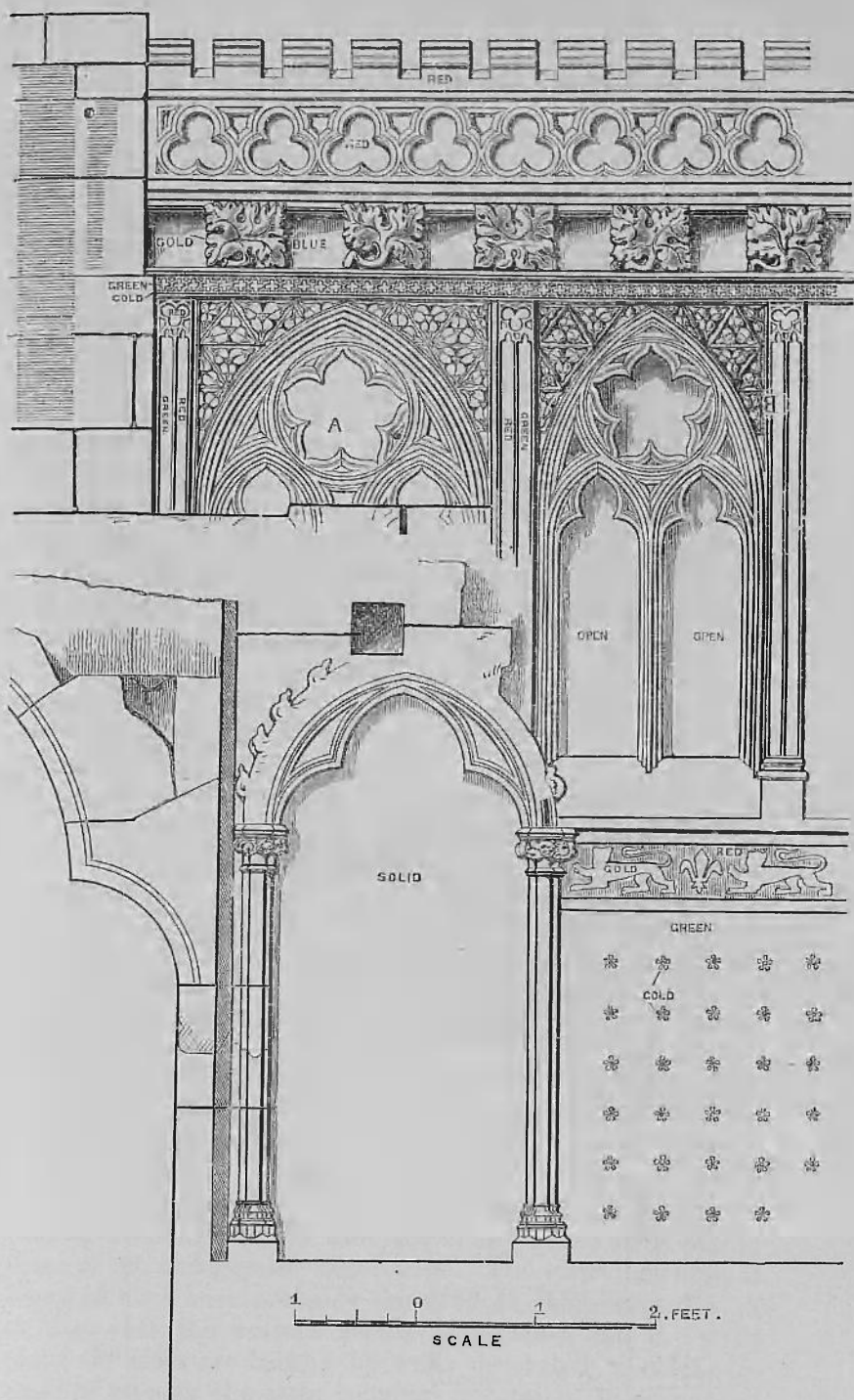
It will be remembered that the Choir of Canterbury Cathedral differs from most other English Cathedrals in this respect, that its stalls have not been canopied, but are backed up on either side by stone screens pierced with window-like traceried openings, and crowned by a highly beautiful cornice and parapet.

Where the screen crosses the eastern transepts, it contains in each a beautiful doorway in the same general style, and the screen reappears in the more eastern bays, though interrupted by subsequent monuments.

These are the work of Prior Henry de Estria, who is recorded, about 1304-5, to have beautifully adorned the Choir with fine carving in stone, and to have made three new doors and a new pulpit. The fine carving in stone doubtless refers to the screen-work above-mentioned; the three doors would be those in the choir-screen, and those leading into each of the eastern transepts, while the "pulpit" means the rood-loft or choir-screen. Of this "pulpit" or rood-loft we have still the greater part of the doorway; but the front facing the nave was at an early date concealed by an extension of its thickness in that direction, and its eastern face has, since the time of Charles II., been equally hidden by the canopied return stalls then erected against it.

The late Mr. Austin obtained, during some of his works, glimpses of the ancient work thus buried up, but it has recently been more fully examined by the removal of parts of the wood-work.

This face of the screen, which backed up the returned stalls, is found to be, in its general idea, a continuation of the side-screens, though with some marked variations in design: *e.g.*, 1. The windowlike openings are here separated by flat panelled buttresses which do not exist in the side-screens:



CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL The Choir-Screen.

Central portion showing Stall and remains of Canopy.

A. Masonry painted to imitate carved compartments. B. Carved diaper, gilt, on pale blue ground.

2. The screens are in some parts (owing to the stairs at the back) solid instead of being perforated ; 3. The two official stalls, viz., those formerly of the Prior and Sub-prior, but now of the Dean and Vice-dean, differ wholly from the others, they alone having had canopies of stone.

The head of the doorway facing the Choir is now almost wholly cut away, and a niche of some kind which surmounted it has been replaced by one of the fifteenth century ; the additions made to the screen at that period, though mainly on the western side, lapping over and increasing the height of the screen towards the east.

The most interesting part of the ancient work thus opened out to view is, perhaps, the fact that it retains in a nearly perfect state its original coloured decoration, which has elsewhere disappeared, excepting a few traces facing the aisles, and some fragments entangled among the monuments on the eastern parts of the Choir.

This colouring is exceedingly good, and is a most valuable example of the decorative painting of the fourteenth century. It is repeated on those parts of the tower piers which intercept the western and the side screens from uniting, so as to continue a sort of suggestion of the design or of its colouring, where the substance of it could not exist.

The bays of the screen-work are equal to the width each of a stall, as is proved by comparing them with some of the horizontal elbows of the stalls which have been discovered. Between these elbows, however, and the string course beneath the traceried openings of the screens, was a space of about a yard in height. This is in the side-screens, temporarily occupied by coloured cloth. It is found, however, that in the original screen these spaces were boarded with oak and decorated in colour, a beautiful border running along its upper edge, and the rest being spangled with gold rosettes on a green ground.

The whole constituted a somewhat unusual instance of a cathedral choir with no canopies to any of its stalls but to those of the two greater dignitaries. The same, however, is found to have been probably the case at Rochester, though in that case the western screen is of wood, and the stalls along the sides are backed by walls decorated in colour instead of screens, the same coloured decoration being applied to the close portion of the western screen. The cornices,

both of the side screens and of the western screen, at Canterbury have iron hooks attached to them, as if for suspending hangings; and we learn that Prior Goldstone, in the fifteenth century, provided hangings for extraordinary occasions, those on one side having been wrought with the history of our Saviour's actions, and those on the other side with the life and death of the Blessed Virgin. Would that De Estria's stall-work and its screens, with their colouring complete, could be duly and faithfully restored from the evidences still existing, untampered with by modern ideas or prepossessions!

The accompanying illustrations show the whole of the screen now actually in existence behind the seventeenth century stall-work, one bay of which is given on a larger scale to show the details more clearly, as well as the arrangement for the hangings, and the portion painted on oak already noticed.