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BISHOP HOTHAM'S MONUMENT AND THE SHRINE OF ST. ETHELDREDA, AT ELY.

BY S. INSKIP LADDS, A.R.I.B.A.

In 1770, the Dean and Chapter of Ely moved the Choir Stalls from their ancient position under the Octagon, and the Altar from the western bay of the Choir, and put them into the Presbytery. In 1852, they moved them again and put the stalls into the three bays of Bishop Hotham's Choir, and the Altar into the third bay from the east of the Presbytery. These removals involved most unfortunate displacement of the shrines and monuments of the Saints, Bishops and others, and in some cases it is now difficult to identify the stones with certainty.

It is perhaps correct to say that none of the monuments suffered more disastrously than did that of Bishop Hotham, and in order to understand the matter thoroughly it is necessary to turn one's thoughts back and to compare our knowledge of to-day's condition with such information as we may glean from documents, pictures and the stones themselves.

One of the things which has led to more confusion than anything else, is the fact that the canopy of Bishop Hotham's tomb is too short for the tomb itself, which it does not cover properly. This fact seems to have caused so much concern about 1855, that the Authorities of those days came to the conclusion that the two structures could not have had anything to do with each other, and they removed the tomb from under the canopy and set it up on the other side of the Choir, and, having no monument for St. Etheldreda, they concluded that this canopy must have been the substructure of her shrine, although a very little consideration ought to have shown them that neither in dignity nor magnificence is it at all suitable.

Moreover, if they had looked to Bentham's History, they would have seen a picture of Bishop Hotham's tomb with the canopy over it, as it stood before the removal of the of the Choir Stalls and Altar to the east end.¹ At first sight, this picture is rather puzzling, because it shows the tomb built into a thin wall at one end, against which wall the canopy abuts. This, however, should not have troubled

1. Bentham, History of the Cathedral Church of Ely. Plate XVIII.

them, because it must be remembered that Bishop Hotham died before the rebuilding of the Choir was completed, and was buried behind the Choir Altar. It seems evident that the monks built his tomb before the Altar with its screen-wall was set up, and then, finding that they had left no room for the screen-wall, they solved the difficulty by building the wall with an arched opening over the end of the tomb. Some years later, when they decided to erect a canopy over the tomb, this was butted up against the screen-wall, and therefore was not so long as the tomb which it was supposed to cover.

Another difficulty is that the canopy seems to be too low for the tomb, even without the alabaster effigy,—the Purbeck marble shafts supporting it should have been a foot or two higher. That this condition is not due to its removal in 1770, is proved by Bentham's picture which clearly shows it so in 1767; but of course, it might have been due to post-Reformation disturbance.

Writing of Bishop Hotham's tomb, Bentham says "a magnificent tomb was erected over him, with his Effigies in Alabaster; it was adorned with a sumptuous Branch, for seven Tapers, on the top of it; and in the several compartments on the sides and east end, adorned with sculpture, representing the History of the Creation and Fall of Man; and many other decorations: the tomb still remains, but much defaced, and divested of the above mentioned ornaments: instead whereof is placed on the top of it a kind of wooden ornament, and a modern Inscription, (wrote about the time of Q. Elizabeth, or K. James I.) with a wrong date of his death, and mentioning part of his munificence to the Church; but falsely ascribing to him the building of the Dome and Lantern;"¹

Archdeacon Chapman² seems to have thought that the sculpture was on the "Branch" or candelabrum, which, quoting the Lambeth MS. 448, he describes as "seven candelabra springing in a beautiful manner from one stem and around images of man's creation and ejection from Paradise, four images there were also of armed Kings and four dragons at the four parts of the structure."

The stonework of the tomb certainly does not show any sign of these 'images,'—the smaller panels have had little statues in them, but the one which remains is not an 'armed King,' and there is no sign of 'four dragons'; it seems more probable that all this imagery was upon the base of a bronze candelabrum. It should be said, however,

1. Bentham, p. 158, also pl. XVIII. and Appendix No. XXXVI., (page 48).
2. F. R. Chapman, *The Sacrist Rolls of Ely*, I., p. 96.

that Dean Stubbs thought that it was upon the tomb.¹ He further says that the tomb was surmounted by a stately canopy and watching loft upon which stood the candelabrum. It is difficult to recognise the canopy as a watching-loft, nor does it seem possible that it could support a heavy candelabrum. Some years later the Dean seems to have changed his mind, for, although he still uses the same words in describing the tomb on the south side of the Choir², in writing of the canopy on the north side³ he speaks of it as "the substructure of St. Etheldreda's shrine as renewed by Alan de Walsingham."

As we see it today, the tomb with its panelled sides now divested of its imagery, carries a heavy Purbeck marble slab upon which may have rested the alabaster effigy of the Bishop; there are, however, no signs of this, but there are six large iron staples which may have been used to hold down an iron grid or 'hearse' similar to that over the effigy of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, in Warwick Church.⁴ These staples are fixed considerably nearer to the eastern end of the slab than to the western end, which shows that the screen-wall had been built before they were fixed. We seem to have a reference to the hearse in the Sacrist Rolls for 1341-1342: "For fitting ten bars above the tomb of Bishop John de Hotham, 7d."⁵

At Ely there was no general destruction of the effigies of Bishops and others at the Reformation, and yet the effigy of Bishop Hotham had disappeared before the removal of the Choir to the east end, as is shown by Bentham's picture which is dated 1767.

The tomb and the canopy were removed from their original place, behind the Choir Altar, in 1770, and set up under the fourth arch from the east on the north side of the Choir. When the choir was moved westward they were taken down, and the canopy, completely restored and one half of it entirely renewed, was, about 1885, re-erected under the same arch, but the tomb was removed to the third arch on the south side. This was done because at this time it had been decided that the canopy was the substructure of the shrine of St. Etheldreda, an identification which we apparently owe to William Burges.⁶

It certainly looks rather like the substructure of a shrine, but it seems very unlikely that those who destroyed the Saints' shrine would go to the trouble of re-erecting its substructure over the tomb of Bishop Hotham; they would

1. C. W. Stubbs, *Historical Memorials of Ely* (1897), p. 137.
 2. *Ibid.*, *Ely Cathedral Handbook*, (21st Edn. 1904) p. 165.
 3. *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 159.
 4. F. H. Crossley, *English Church Monuments*, pp. 35, 168.
 5. F. R. Chapman, *The Sacrist Rolls of Ely*, I., p. 117.
 6. Sir Gilbert Scott's Lecture, at the Bissexcentenary Festival. 1873. See 'St. Etheldreda's Festival,' by Dean Merrivale, p. 67.

have destroyed it entirely. It seems much more likely that Alan de Walsingham erected this somewhat singular structure as a canopy over Bishop Hotham's tomb after the work of rebuilding the Choir and Octagon was completed.

That some alteration was made in the canopy some time after the Reformation is evidenced by the inscription and by the wooden erection on the top, but both these alterations could be made without taking down the whole canopy.

Apart from the extreme improbability of the post-Reformation people rebuilding the canopy, there are other reasons for thinking that it is not the substructure of St. Etheldreda's shrine.

That there was a shrine or shrine-cover—in addition to the stone coffin into which St. Sexburga had placed her sister's body—is clear from the fact that the monks stripped off some of the silver plates to pay the fine inflicted upon Bishop Nigel by the King,¹ and that some thirty years later Bishop Geoffrey Ridel repaired the two sides and part of the covering with silver.² This shrine, which appears to have been a structure of 12th century date, and was, doubtless, of wood covered with metal plates, chiefly silver, is shown in one of Bentham's illustrations.³ That the stone coffin itself remained until the Dissolution is also clear.⁴

The shrine would have been raised on high upon some kind of stone or marble substructure—very ornate and beautiful. Probably when Bishop Hugh de Northwold moved the Saint's body into his new presbytery, in 1252, he provided a new substructure for the shrine, and it is a significant fact that we have, preserved in the south triforium of the nave, some loose stones of Purbeck marble, beautifully moulded and carved, which must have formed part of a handsome monument. It apparently consisted of some fourteen or more marble shafts with moulded bases and caps, supporting a canopy with richly moulded arches, all of the finest Early English work, of the same date as the fabric of the Presbytery.⁵ If this monument was indeed the substructure of St. Etheldreda's shrine,—and it is difficult to imagine that it was not,—there could have been no reason why Alan de Walsingham should have replaced it by another, and one moreover, very much inferior in every way.

1. Bentham's, *History of the Cathedral Church of Ely*, p. 140.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

3. *Ibid.*, plate XLVIII., fig. 1. See also a description of it in Stubbs, *Ely Cathedral Handbook*, pp. 150, 160.

4. Fuller, *Church History*, II., 97, quoted in Stubbs, *Historical Memorials of Ely*, p. 84.

5. Most of these stones, having become dirty and discoloured by age and neglect, were not recognised when I wrote my book upon the Monastery of Ely, 1930, but, some years later, when re-arranging the many loose stones, their great weight compared with ordinary freestone led to their identification.

There is, also, good reason for supposing that Alan de Walsingham never did build a new substructure for St. Ætheldreda's shrine. The epitaph upon his memorial brass as recorded in the "*Historia Eliensis*"¹ cites many of his works at Ely but says nothing about the Saint's shrine, which surely would have been mentioned if he had done anything for it.

We seem to be forced to the conclusion that the canopy belonged to Bishop Hotham's tomb, and that the Purbeck marble stones formed part of the substructure of St. Ætheldreda's shrine.

1. C. W. Stubbs, *Historical Memorials of Ely*, pp. 139, 159.