# ST. ALBAN'S ABBEY.

By Mr. John Chapple.

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There is, perhaps, no great church in England which illustrates more remarkably than the Abbey Church of St. Alban's, not only the changes and development of architectural art, but critical periods in the history of Christianity and of the Church in this country. Built at first almost entirely of Roman brick from the city of Verulamium, which stretched along the opposite hill side, the very walls and tower spoke —as the latter in its renovated condition speaks with a yet clearer voice—of the days of the Cæsars, of the early struggles of the faith, and of the changes which rendered possible the use of such materials for the construction of a great Christian church. The architecture of this first portion tells of the years immediately succeeding the Norman Conquest, when Lanfranc assisted his friend and kinsman, the Abbot Paul, in enlarging and rebuilding the Saxon church, and the heads of the Benedictine monastery were about to become great feudal lords. About and around this primitive brickwork are the evidences of the later splendour, which ranged through so many centuries; exquisite sculpture, intricate tracery, arcading and tabernacle work so delicate that it is difficult to understand how any portion of it can have been preserved in the midst of the iconoclasm by which the Church has been visited. For here St. Alban's supplies us, thanks to the restoration which has now been for some time in progress, with the most striking example we know of the destructive powers brought to bear in the sixteenth century on the "carved work and images" of the greater churches. The marble base, on which rested the golden and jewelled shrine of the saint whom the chroniclers of the Abbey, with a total disregard of historical verity, insist on calling the "Protomartyr Anglorum," has been discovered, packed into portions of wall which were built after the removal of the lesser altars, twenty-six of which have been found, and the various subsequent changes. The sculpture in the Lady Chapel, and many a wreath of foliage elsewhere, such as one would think sufficiently harmless, have been shattered and broken. But this base of the shrine, of considerable size, and wrought in the hardest Purbeck marble, has been smashed of set purpose into so many and so minute fragments, that its very destruction must have been a work of extreme labour. It has been re-constructed—that is, the several fragments as they were found have been placed together, and arranged with a loving care and a skill that reminds us of the "building up" by Professor Owen of some great Saurian of the Lias. The destruction and disappearance of this beautiful work heralded in a long period of dangerous neglect and of more active

mischief. The great piers of the central tower were hacked and weakened. The woodwork of the Choir vanished. The magnificent conventual buildings, which covered all the hill with the varied outlines of their roofs and towers, were swept away almost utterly, so that there is not one of the greater monasteries in England left so completely without witness to the daily life and arrangements of its ancient possessors; and many chapels and chantries, which, like satellites, circled round the vast Church of the Martyr, were pulled down to the ground. When, in the first half of the last century, Stukeley visited St. Alban's as a "station," on one of his amusing *itinera*, he found the work of spoliation in steady progress, and made drawings of certain portions, which a year or two afterwards had completely disappeared. This, which may be fairly called the "destructive period," and which reflects the indifference to mediæval art, and to our own past history prevailing throughout it, lasted into the present century. It left the Abbey Church in a condition of extreme danger. The casing of the tower piers had been so far cut away, that the rubble with which, as in all Norman work, the interior was filled, and which does not bond with the casing, crumbled and sank; and, indeed, the southern pier, in the words of Sir Gilbert Scott, "had been excavated beneath the floor into a sort of cave, so far as we can judge, with a view to the destruction of the tower." When, or by whom, this was done we cannot tell. We can only be truly thankful that the purpose of the miners was foiled, and that the dangerous state of the Church was made apparent at a time when the zeal for restoration and repair, if it has somewhat exceeded its due bounds, has nevertheless preserved many a noble church for the reverence and admiration of future generations. If the last century was a period of destruction, this is as certainly one of renovation; and the works which are now in progress at St. Alban's mark an epoch in the history of art and of the Church, not less distinctly than the Roman brick and huge arches of its tower, or the shattered sculptures of its shrine. There is no English church, unless, perhaps, we except Canterbury, which tells so striking and so plain a story. After long years of neglect, it is "renewing its strength," and recovering its ancient beauty. It rises on its green hill above the Ver, a long "ridge" of building, a witness to the changes of seven hundred years; while the bricks of its tower, as the sun lights up their faces, tell their tale of yet another seven centuries. Roman Verulamium, the pagan city, with its temples, its amphitheatre, and its luxurious villas, has vanished, and but a mass of crumbling wall remains on its site. The great Christian Church, to build which the city was spoiled, still looks across to the gate from which, if the legend be true, St. Alban was led to his execution; and if my Lord Abbot has passed away, his chair has been raised to an episcopal see, and a Bishop of St. Alban's will shortly succeed, not indeed to the old magnificence of the abbots, but to their church, and to its venerable associations.

"If the legend be true," for in its details there can be little doubt that the story of St. Alban had become encrusted with much that is

"imaginative" before it assumed the complete form in which we find it recorded by Bede. The first mention of the martyr is in the life of St. Germanus, of Auxerre, written by Constantius at least one hundred and fifty years after the date assigned for the death of St. Alban. It is clear, too, that when Offa founded his church here, about A.D. 793, the place of the martyr's tomb, and of the little church which, it is said, had been built over it, was quite forgotten. The story of Offa's foundation leads us altogether into the region of the miraculous; and we fear also that St. Amphibalus, must take his place with St. Veronica, St. Vitus, and other saintly personages who have been manufactured out of names. But we cannot afford to spare St. Alban. Admitting that we know nothing with certainty of his real history, we cannot reject altogether the account in Bede. The evidence for the existence and martyrdom of St. Alban is tolerably sound, if it be not of the first order, and we may claim him, not indeed as the "Protomartyr Anglorum," since the "Angli" were not as yet in sight, but as the first recorded sufferer for the Christian faith on the soil of Britain. Where his relics really repose is quite uncertain. It is most improbable that the remains preserved in the great shrine were his, unless we believe the story of the miraculous discovery of his coffin by Offa. Probably they have mingled with the dust of the hill on which he suffered, and on which his great church rises.

The position of St. Alban's Abbey on the line of the Watling Street, the great road which crossed the country from Kent to Chester, together with its convenient distance from London, gave it a special, and sometimes undesired importance, as a resting-place for kings and great personages travelling northward, and as a sort of outpost of the metropolis. It grew, as we know, into one of the wealthiest Benedictine houses in England, and if its resources were sometimes drawn upon, after a fashion which provoked an outcry from the monks, the general hospitality of the Abbey was unbounded. Prelates from far countries, such as that Armenian Archbishop, who told to the brethren the story of the Wandering Jew; monks of other orders, such as those from Clugny, who, at Abbot Whethamstede's express desire, left with him a pattern of the habit worn by them; great lords and bishops, with their trains of attendants, their horses, and their dogs; and great foreign Princes, who, after kneeling at the Canterbury shrine, seldom failed to visit that of St. Alban—were all welcomed, and all received the lodging and the entertainment due to their several conditions. The great tower and the vast church are nowhere more impressive than when approached from the side of London, and the view from the last steep ridge over which the road passes, where the Abbey suddenly presents itself, projected against the sky beyond a wide, wooded landscape, is much the same (allowing for the difference between a well-kept road and the rough track through the old forest of Hertfordshire) as must have been looked on by those earlier pilgrims. Such an Abbey must have been the pleasantest of hostelries. It well maintained those old Benedictine traditions of hospitality and learning which gave strength to the

order in the dark days of the last century, and in our own time have preserved to it, in part, at least, its primitive cradle at Monte Cassino. The School of History at St. Alban's really deserved to be so called. Headed by Matthew Paris, the greatest of monastic chroniclers, it continued at least to the days of Abbot Whethamstede; and the volumes of the St. Alban's historians are not the least important of those which have been printed by the Master of the Rolls. To these local writers we are indebted for much special information about St. Alban's and its neighbourhood. They give us, for example, many curious details concerning the two battles fought at the place during the Wars of the Roses, in the first of which the Duke of Somerset, the "Percy out of Northumberland," and the Lord Clifford, were killed in the street near St. Peter's Church. No one dared to touch their bodies until the Abbot, not without great difficulty, obtained leave from the Duke of York to bury them in his church. They were accordingly interred in the Lady Chapel; but the destruction which fell on that beautiful part of the church has swept away their monuments altogether. After each of these battles, the King, Henry VI., fell into the hands of the victors, and on each occasion he was carried, first to the shrine of St. Alban, and then to the apartment in the Abbey which was reserved for the reception of Royal Visitors.

In order to estimate at its proper value the great work of restoration which is now in progress, it is necessary to understand something of the architectural history of the Church. The Norman church, with a vast nave, transepts, a central tower raised on arches so lofty that it is impossible to look on them without wonder, and a short choir terminating in an apse after the usual fashion, was built, as we have seen, by Paul, the first abbot, after the conquest, and mainly with Roman bricks. But a Saxon church had been raised by Offa, and it is more than probable that certain baluster columns, which exist in the triforium of the transepts, are relics of this earlier building, since they perfectly resemble balusters found embedded in the walls at Jarrow and at Monk Wearmouth, and known to be Saxon. Thus the existing church contains relics of the earliest building erected (so far as we know) on this site. The Norman church was modelled on that of St. Stephen at Caen, where Paul had been a monk. It was covered, we are told, wholly with plaster, both within and without. It must have resembled, in Sir Gilbert Scott's words, a "snowy mountain." Within, the plaster was covered with decorative colour, as was always the case, although the vagaries of modern architects have frequently reduced these ancient interiors to bare walls. This Norman church remained almost untouched until the end of the twelfth century, when Abbot John de Cella, a prelate of more zeal than worldly wisdom, began the re-building of the west front, but without counting the cost. His work was not carried far; money was not forthcoming; and the three western portals were barely finished by Abbot John. But, in the judgment of Sir Gilbert Scott, "the quality goes far to compensate for incompleteness." "I doubt," he adds, "whether there exists in England a work so perfect

in art as the half-ruined western portals of St. Alban's." The architect was probably one Gilbert, of Eversholt; and it is remarkable that in the church of his native parish, Eversholt, in Bedfordshire, some work is in existence which closely resembles this at St. Alban's, and which in all likelihood is also due to him. The re-building, which Abbot John had abandoned in despair, was carried on by his successor, William of Trumpington, who completed the west front, besides five bays of the nave on the south side, and four on the north His work is fine early English, though it has not, to borrow Sir Gilbert Scott's expression, the "spiritual character" which marks that of his predecessor. Then the re-building in the nave was abandoned for a time; and about the year 1256 the eastern arm of the church was attacked, and its re-building was begun on the enlarged scale, which was usual in dealing with a Norman choir. The ground plan of all this part of the church, as it at present exists, was then laid down. The choir and presbytery were lengthened. The retro choir was arranged for the shrine of St. Alban; a chapel was provided beyond it for that of St. Amphibalus; and eastward, again, extended the Lady Chapel. The whole of this work, except the upper part of the Lady Chapel and portions of that of St. Amphibalus, was completed under Abbot John of Hertford (beginning in 1256) and his successors. It is very finely decorated, of the first or geometrical order, with many peculiarities and much graceful design. The Lady Chapel, which remained incomplete, was finished by Abbot Hugh, of Eversden, between 1308 and 1326, and is one of the most beautiful works of that period, wonderfully rich and delicate in its window tracery and in its peculiar ornamentation. It was during the abbacy of John of Eversden, also, that a portion of the south side of the Norman nave fell, and this was rebuilt (either by him or his immediate successors) in a manner which still renders it the admiration of all beholders. The superb screen or reredos which divides the choir of the Monks from the chapel of St. Alban, and the screen called St. Cuthbert's, which closes the eastern end of the nave are later works, but of great magnificence, and such as give a marked character to this most noble church. It is difficult to say to which portion of the works, ranging as they do through so many centuries, the palm of the highest beauty and of highest interest should be awarded. But, while other churches can show early English and decorated designs of equal beauty, the Norman work of St. Alban's belongs to itself alone. Roman tiles have been used elsewhere, but not so exclusively or with such remarkable associations. Much of this Norman church has, happily, survived all dangers—the danger from deliberate rebuilders, like the earlier Abbots, and the danger arising from neglect; but the means of ensuring safety were only applied just in time.

The restoration of St. Alban's is due, in the first place, to the zeal of the late vicar, the Rev. Dr. Nicholson. When the danger from the condition of the central tower became at last very pronounced, he took steps for the formation of a committee, by whose directions Sir Gilbert Scott was called upon to make a first report. At once

the tower was strengthened and supported—a work of great anxiety, and not to be carried through without considerable peril—this was begun in 1870. Masses of cement concrete were inserted and rammed down into the foundations. The shattered piers were in part rebuilt, and strong iron bolts were inserted at the different stages. The tower was thus saved, and the decaying plaster having been removed from the exterior, the courses of Roman tile of which it is composed are now seen in their proper character. The unusual colour (of singular beauty when backed by a clear blue sky) and the massive power of the huge, fortress like block, are wonderfully impressive. The restoration of the tower within has not been less successful. The great arches, all of Roman tile, have been partly coloured, but in sound and sober fashion, and only in direct imitation of such traces of older colouring as were visible. Colour had been carried over the greater part of the church, and the series of crucifixes, painted on the great Norman piers of the nave above the altar, which formerly existed in each bay, are among the most noticeable pictorial relics in England. They are of late Norman or early English date, and it is worth observing that in the earliest of them the cross of our Lord is a literal tree, coloured green, and with projecting knots and branches.

The restoration has been continued into the choir, which was in a very indifferent condition, and into the chapel of the great shrine beyond it. In the choir, a very beautiful and probably unique entrance or portal, with tabernacled canopy, was discovered, but in fragments, like the shrine. This has been replaced, and as a similar fragment or two proved that there had been a second portal opposite, this has been restored and the few ancient fragments fitted to the new work. The base of the shrine, however, is the most wonderful work of reconstruction ; it is a tall mass of sculptured Purbeck, with a series of open arches at the sides, much enriched with colour. At one end appears the beheading of St. Alban ; but the really marvellous portions of its decoration are the carvings of foliage which fill the side spandrils. The vine, the maple, and above all the oak, with its acorns, are reproduced in this hard stone with the truth of nature not to be exceeded. As it now stands, even in its shattered condition, the portion of St. Alban's shrine thus recovered is not only of extreme archæological value, but is a precious relic of art.

The Lady Chapel (east of this chapel of the shrine) had been, almost from the time of the dissolution, separated from the church, and was used as a grammar school. Happily, the school, but only of late years, has been removed elsewhere. The Lady Chapel, which had suffered more than any other part of the church, will be again connected with it, and the work of restoration here is in full progress. It is under the special protection of a committee of ladies, at the head of which is the Marchioness of Salisbury. The restoration is an affair of some delicacy, since the number of small figures and the amount of intricate tracery are very great ; but it is in hands that can safely be trusted.