



The 13th Century Crypt, Bridge Street, Chester

By FRANK SIMPSON, F.S.A.

(Read February 7th, 1922).



HIS fine old timbered building is one of the best specimens of black-and-white architecture still remaining in Chester. Some forty years ago there were eight of these timbered gable buildings on this west side of Bridge Street, four of them adjoining the one now under notice. To-day there are only two, this, and the one next door now occupied by the English Leather Company as a boot shop. The latter has been gutted and modernised beyond recognition.

The timbered front of these premises contains some interesting details of carving. The whole length of the beam above the row, is carved with a geometrical design of circles and semi-circles strapped together, with a row of dentels above and below, cut out of the solid oak. This decoration is to be seen on several old Chester timbered buildings, viz. :—the first and second beam in the old black-and-white house in Lower Bridge Street, now dated 1503 [1603]; on the beam under the upper story of Axon's Buildings, Lower Bridge Street, W.; and on the beam above the row over Haswell's, Northgate Street, which is about to be demolished.

Above the beam, resting on eight oak moulded and carved brackets is a large window which fills the space originally occupied by four smaller windows; and on either side, the oak struts filled in by plaster, form four panels. Above the

window is another massive beam, in the centre of which are the initials of the original owner, and the date of its erection, "T. C. 1664." The space on either side is carved with geometrical figures of ovals, diamonds, and squares strapped together similar to what may be seen on the beam under the gable of the "Bear and Billet," near the Bridge-gate, the date of which is 1664. Above and below this beam is a row of dentels similar to those on the lower beam.

The eight plaster panels above the beam have circular oak heads with dentels cut out of the solid oak, and are partly filled in by oak centre pieces on which is carved the *fleur-de-lys*. Above these panels, in the centre, is another window, with two similar panels and centre pieces on either side. Above these on each side of the building is a short, heavy beam, extending to the window, in which are carved the running vine and bunches of grapes (seen on several of the old timbered houses in Chester) with a row of dentels below. At first sight, one would suppose that the two short beams had originally been one, extending the whole width of the building, and at some later period had been cut through for the insertion of a larger and more modern window. But closer inspection makes it quite clear that the beam was not cut, as the straight and curved struts, and cross-piece, are in their original position. As a matter of fact, this window was put in at the same time as the large window below, and took the place of two smaller windows.

The gable above is filled with curved struts, the spaces between being filled in with plaster. The barge boards are carved with circles containing an eight-leaved flower and other ornamentation. In the centre of the gable is an ornamented finial, the lower part of which, in 1800, terminated in a carved pendant.

Mounting the steps on the north side of the building we enter the row, known by old Cestrians as the "Scotch Row." The old Chester Rows were generally known by the designation of the trades which were principally carried on in them, and not by the name of the street in which they were situated, as is the case to-day.

The Row opposite, Bridge Street, East, was known as "Mercers' Row," because it was occupied chiefly by silk mercers. Northgate Street Row, West, with its fine timbered gable buildings (now unfortunately demolished) was known as "Shoemakers' Row," for a similar reason. The premises in the rows named were occupied by citizens who traded there throughout the year. Such was not the case with Watergate Street Row, South, or Bridge Street Row, West. This to strangers is probably difficult to understand, unless it is remembered that the trade of the city was entirely confined to the Freemen and brethren of one or other of the City Guilds, or Companies, a privilege granted to them by ancient charters; and any outsiders who attempted to trade here—except during the Great Fairs—were immediately arrested and fined, or imprisoned. These great fairs were held twice a year, 5th July and 10th October, and continued for two weeks. To denote that the fair was on, a glove was hung out at the south-east corner of St. Peter's Church. During the time the glove remained exposed outsiders were allowed to enter the city and barter their wares, but immediately it was withdrawn, they had to cease trading, and leave the town.

The Gildsmen were very keen on protecting their trade, and eager to see the last of these strange traders. The day following the close of the fair the aldermen and stewards of each of the twenty-five city companies were on the war-path arresting, or giving in charge of the beadle or constable any person, or foreigner, as he was called, who attempted to sell or expose his wares. The culprit was then taken before the mayor of the city, who saw that justice was done—especially if the offender had been transgressing against the brethren of the particular company to which the mayor himself belonged.

During these fairs the city was thronged, and the outside trader had difficulty in getting a stand, lean-to, or shop in which to exhibit his goods. The people from various parts of the country, or of a similar trade, generally congregated together. Watergate Street Row, South, was

known as "Welsh Row," as most of the Welsh flannels were sold there. The late Mrs. Shearing, wife of Robert Shearing, chemist, Watergate Street (one of the city sheriffs in 1824) informed the writer that when she was a young girl, her father, Mr. Hughes, a flannel manufacturer, of Welshpool, used regularly to attend the Chester fairs and exhibit his stock of Welsh flannels for sale on a stall in Watergate Street Row. So great was the demand for trading facilities during the fairs, that a number of wealthy woollen manufacturers, chiefly from Yorkshire, joined together and purchased property on the south side of Foregate Street (11th October, 1814) for a term of five thousand years, for the erection of fifty-eight single shops, eleven double shops, and a large room occupying the whole space of the building for stalls, stands, etc., in which to sell their woollens during the great fairs. This last was called the Union Hall, by which name it is still known. The fourth article of agreement was "that no inhabitant of the City of Chester, shall, during any fair, rent, use, or occupy any shop or shops, standing or standings, in the said Hall, without the previous license in writing of the said Committee men or Directors, for the time being." The rear part of this building is still in existence. The front portion was taken down and modern shops erected in its stead. Among the original directors was one Joshua Brooke, of Holmfirth, in the county of York, a descendant of whom was, until 1920,¹ still interested in this property. The Commercial Hall, on the opposite side of the street, was somewhat similarly erected for the sale of hardware.

Now to return to our old building in Bridge Street, where we had just entered the Row. This row was known as "Scotch Row" because it was principally occupied by Scotch merchants during the great fairs. This bit of Row with its rugged heavy oak beams and bracketed posts is unique and typical of the Chester Rows in more ancient times. The building may be entered from the row, or the street below. The shop has been considerably altered from its original state so that it may be more suited for modern trading.

In the front room above the row, the north and south walls are panelled with oak. The panels next the ceiling are oblong, measuring twelve inches deep and twenty-four inches wide. The others are eighteen inches deep and nine inches wide, with mouldings on either side, the top and bottom being finished by the chamfered edges of the framework. The front is filled in with glass from end to end, and the rear wall of the room has been taken down. Two heavy beams with fine mouldings cross the room north to south, and along the top of the beam is a row of dentels. The ceiling is decorated with plaster. Between the two beams is a large circular boss, about four feet in diameter, decorated with the vine and bunches of grapes, and on either side of the beams are two smaller circles, about three feet in diameter. That to the front is decorated with bunches of grapes, leaves, and circular studs. The other is filled in with pomegranates and grapes.

Some interesting details of plaster decoration are to be seen in the upper storey. The large centrepiece is of geometrical design with dentels similar to those on the beam in the room below. In the four corners of the ceiling are bunches of grapes with leaves and vine, and in the extreme corners are conventional leaves similar to those often seen in the grape decoration. Attached to the ceiling is a pendant, of moderate size, not nearly so massive or elaborate as that in Leche House, Watergate Street Row, which has a pulley for a swinging lamp. In this case the end of the pendant has been broken, but it no doubt was originally used for a similar purpose. When plaster decoration became so fashionable, pendants were frequently attached to plaster ceilings.

When the writer visited this room some twelve years ago, a chimney breast on the north side was decorated with "T. C. 1661." The letters and date were coloured, but in June, 1920, this inscription had disappeared. Mr. James Firth, who was also present on the previous occasion, distinctly remembers seeing it.

In a back room of the first storey, a mantelpiece bears on the head, in high relief, a shield, and on either side, "T. C." and the date, "1661." A discrepancy will thus be seen between this date and that on the timbered front of the building. It is quite evident that the building was not erected in 1661, as the occupants had resided there for some years previous to that. The solution appears to be that internal alterations took place at that time, and three years later the premises were re-fronted.

The initials are those of Thomas Cowper. The Cowpers were a very old family and had held very high positions, not only in the county but in the country. Thomas Cowper was a page of honour to Prince Arthur, eldest son of King Henry VII, and attended the prince to Chester in 1489. In 1570 a Thomas Cowper, D.D., was appointed to the see of Lincoln, and thirteen years later was transferred to that of Winchester. They were a very wealthy family, owning large estates, until John Cowper, when sheriff of Chester, 1554, headed a party of citizens in an attempt to rescue George Marsh from the stake at Spital Boughton. In consequence of this, and to avoid arrest, he made his escape into Wales. He was outlawed and his estates confiscated. After the death of Queen Mary his outlawry was rescinded by Elizabeth, but only a small portion of the property was restored.

The Chester branch of the Cowpers have generally been described as "merchants." They can be traced on the Chester Freemen Rolls from 1567, in which year Richard Cowper is enrolled as an ironmonger, and fifteen years later George Cowper is similarly entered. Thomas Cowper, described as "merchant, of Chester," carried on business in these premises in Bridge Street as an ironmonger. He married Juliana, daughter of Matthew Ellis, of Overleigh, situated above the river bank opposite the castle. He was buried at St. Peter's church, January 1, 1620, leaving two sons and two daughters. Matthew, the second son, died through wounds received at Boughton, February 13th, 1644.

during the siege of Chester, and Thomas, the elder son, succeeded to his father's business. This is the Thomas Cowper with whom the narrative of this ancient building in Bridge Street is more closely connected. He was apprenticed to William Spark, ironmonger, of this city. A copy of his apprenticeship certificate is entered, among many others, at the end of the earliest book now existing of the City Company of the "Mercers, Grocers, Ironmongers, and Apothecaries." He was admitted into the Company 13 July, 1618, when he was twenty-two years of age. His name is not entered on the rolls of the city freemen published by the Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society, but had he not first been a freeman of the city, he could not have been admitted into the company. He was admitted into the company by servitude to William Spark, to whom he was apprenticed for seven years. He was junior steward of the company in 1622, and senior steward the year following. He was appointed alderman of the company in 1657, and retained that position for a considerable number of years. In May, 1658, he was fined one shilling for "not coming to the meeting in gown." This is the Thomas Cowper whose initials are seen on the timbered front of the old building, and the mantelpiece within. He married Catherine, the daughter of Thomas Thropp, Mayor of Chester in 1615, at St. Michael's, July 28, 1621.² He was Mayor of the City 1641-2. It was during his Mayoralty, August 8, 1642, that the first symptoms of civil strife were manifested in Chester. A drum was beaten at the High Cross, for the Parliament, at the instigation of Sir William Brereton and a few others, who exhorted the loyal citizens to side with the Parliament against the King. The mayor, Thomas Cowper, informed of what was going on, proceeded to the Cross and ordered the constables to arrest the leaders of this treasonable gathering. The latter compelled the constables to retire; upon which the mayor stepped forward, and seizing one of the leaders by the collar, delivered him to the civil officers, at the same time wresting a broadsword from another of the party, with which he instantly cut the

drum to pieces. His boldness and promptitude restored peace to the city.

When King Charles stood on the Phoenix Tower and saw his army defeated September 24, 1645, on what will always be known as Rowton Moor, although the defeat took place at Hoole Heath, three staunch, loyal citizens were with him : the mayor (William Walley), Sir Francis Gamull, and Alderman Thomas Cowper. The king, seeing that the fight was lost, accompanied Sir Francis Gamull to his house in Lower Bridge Street where he stayed that night, and next day—about noon, with five hundred horse, marched over the Dee Bridge and passed into Wales. The three loyal citizens accompanied him on the journey and remained with him at Denbigh two days, when they returned to the city. A room the King occupied in the castle has ever since been known as “ King Charles Tower.”

On each of the two occasions on which the king visited Chester, Thomas Cowper was his constant attendant. He was also one of the six citizens who refused to sign the articles of surrender when the city capitulated to the Parliamentarians in 1646. For his faithfulness to his sovereign, Alderman Cowper received as a token of royal favour a special grant of a new coat-of-arms composed of the bearings of the ancient Earls of Chester, with the motto *Fide et Fortitudine*, which has since been used by his descendants. In a picture which is from an original painting executed in 1657, and now hung in the mayor's parlour, Alderman Cowper bears on his breast the Carolus medallion. He was sixty-one years of age when this portrait was painted.

In the Freeman Rolls are the names of several men who took up their freedom to the city through servitude to Alderman Thomas Cowper :—

July 16, John Rughe [Hugh] son of Hugh Williams, of 1665-6. Llanegrin, Co. Merioneth, gentleman, defunct, and P. of Thomas Cowper, of Chester, Ironmonger.

In the clergy vestry at St. Peter's church is a wooden tablet :—

To the memory of Thomas Cowper of ys citty, esquire, alderman and justice of peace, maior 1641. He died 19th of July,

1671, aged 76 yeares, and also of Catherine his wife, daughter of Thomas Throppe, of the saide citty of Chester, alderman and justice of peace. She died 29th May, 1672, aged 72 years. They had issue five sones and two daughters, of which three sons and one daughter survived them.

This wooden tablet was formerly attached to the north wall, but was removed to the vestry when the interior of the church was restored.

For the purpose of this paper, we need only refer to Thomas, the eldest surviving son, who was baptized at St. Peter's, December 19, 1624. He took up his Freedom of the City, March 18, 1647-8. He is entered on the Freeman Rolls as :—

“Thomas Cowper, Ironmonger, son of Thomas.”

He joined the Ironmongers Company, May 6, 1648.

About 1660, partly by heirship and partly by purchase, he came into possession of the Overleigh estate. He married Elizabeth, daughter of John Baskervyle, Esq., of Old Withington, at Holy Trinity, December 25, 1668, at which time the lady was twenty-four years of age.

Thomas Cowper appears to have been taken into partnership with his father, for on July 11, 1666-7 we find that

William Edwards P. of Thomas Cowper the younger, Ironmonger, was enrolled as a Freeman ;

and on July 18th of the same year

Lewis Williams, P. of Thomas Cowper, of Chester, alderman, and Thomas Cowper the younger, Chester, Ironmongers.

Thomas Cowper was buried at St. Peter's November 30, 1695. In the list of deeds belonging to St. Peter's Parish we find :—

May 7, 1695.

No. 12. Deed Poll under the hand and Seal of Thomas Cowper, of Chester Gentⁿ creating a rent charge of £2 13s. 4d. pr annum to the Churchwardens of St. Peter's Parish issuing out of the Golden Talbot in Eastgate Street.

Due Candlemas Day Old Style for ever on 13th Feby.

Thomas Cowper's Charity.

Thomas Cowper, by his Will bearing date 7th May, 1695, charged a certain Messuage in the Eastgate Street of Chester, called the Golden Talbot, wth the sum of £2 13s. 4d. to be issuing out of the same yearly, for ever, and to be paid to the Church Wardens of the Parish of St. Peter's in Chester, for buying bread for twelve poor persons weekly, such as the said Churchwardens should think fit, one penny loaf to each, and the surplus and the advantage of buying the bread to go to the clerk and sexton. Part of the buildings belonging to the Royal Hotel [now known as the Grosvenor Hotel] Chester, occupy the site of the House formerly called the Golden Talbot.

This property belongs to the Duke of Westminster, by whose Agent the rent charge is paid.³ It is distributed in bread every Sunday, pursuant to the directions contained in the Will.

Thomas Cowper's widow survived him twenty-one years, and was also buried at St. Peter's, December 14, 1716.

Close to where the wooden tablet (already mentioned) was originally attached to the north wall of the church is a marble shield which was also erected to the memory of Thomas Cowper and his wife Elizabeth. It bears a Latin inscription describing the virtues of the deceased; at the top of it are the arms of Cowper of Overleigh, and on the lower part of it, the same arms with three quarterings; attached below is a small tablet, bearing the following interesting Latin inscription:

*Thomæ cineribus cineres miscentur Elizabethæ
Conjugis carissimæ, Viduæ mæstissimæ, Joannis Baskerville
de Withington Ari: filiæ et Britonum et Normanorum
Primoribus oriundæ. Pia Benefica vixit, Bonis flebilis occidit
Xo: Dec: Ano: Christi 1716, Ætat: 72o W: C: Armr: Nepos
hocce M: P.⁴*

"Along with the ashes of Thomas are mingled those of Elizabeth his dearest wife and most sorrowful widow. She was the daughter of John Baskerville, Esquire, of Withington; and was descended from both British and Norman chieftains. She was godly and full of good deeds in her life, and died, to be lamented by the good, on the tenth of December, in the year of Christ, 1716, and the 72nd of her age.

"W. C., Esquire, her nephew, erected this monument."

Thomas and Elizabeth Cowper had issue three sons and two daughters. Thomas the firstborn only lived about nine

days, and was buried at St. Peter's, 8th September, 1669. Thomas, the second son, was baptized, November 3, 1670. He married Martha, daughter and sole heiress of Robert Callis, of the county of Lincoln, gent., at St. Oswald's, August 18, 1693. He was admitted to the Freedom of the City, December 23, 1696, and the following year was elected member of Parliament for the City of Chester.

John, the younger son, was baptized at St. Peter's, January 16, 1671. He was admitted to the Freedom of the City the same time as his brother Thomas, and on the death of his father he inherited the Overleigh estate. He became Vicar of Middlewich, where he died, and was buried September 29th, 1718.

In the Freemen Rolls we find—

1695-6. Dec. 23. Thomas Cowper, Gentleman

Dec. 23. John Cowper, Gentleman

Sons of Thomas Cowper, Gentleman, defunct.

Thomas had issue two sons and two daughters. Thomas, the first born, was baptized at Chester Cathedral, September 13, 1694, and was buried at St. Peter's, February 2, 1695-6. Thomas, the second son, was baptized at Chester Cathedral, September 17, 1696. He married Esther, second daughter and finally co-heiress of John Alleyne, of Greseley, Co. Derby. They had issue one son and two daughters. Thomas, the son, was baptized at St. Peter's, November 19, 1725. Esther, the elder daughter, became the wife of Roger Wilbraham, of Dorfold, Esq., and was buried with her only child, John Wilbraham, at Acton, November 10, 1740. Arabella, the second daughter, was baptized at St. Peter's, August 11, 1725. She became the wife of John Hincks, of Charlton, Esq., and was buried at Holy Trinity church, Chester, August 13, 1792, having had two daughters who died unmarried, and one son, Thomas Cowper Hincks, who was born in 1728. Esther, the younger daughter, died, and Arabella, the surviving daughter became heiress to her grandfather, Thomas Cowper, who died at Sutton Coldfield, May 25th 1736, and was buried at St. Peter's, Chester.

In 1747, Arabella resided in the house in rear of the shop in Bridge Street, and two years later sold the premises to Edward Burrows, Gent. The lady signed her name as Arabella Cowper, but at the time she sold the premises Cowper was changed to Cooper.

In 1797 the premises were occupied by a Thomas Jones, who, although described as a cutler, sold general ironmongery. He was still occupying the premises in 1818.

In 1815 Edward Burrows sold the premises to Edward Powell, cutler, of Chester, who eventually carried on business there and took into partnership Thomas Edwards, also a cutler. On the north side of the frontage is a spout head bearing the initials "P. & E.," and the date, "1830." In 1833 Thomas Edwards purchased the premises from Mr. Powell, and became sole proprietor. Requiring more storage accommodation for his business he, in 1839, decided to investigate the rear of the premises, and men were set at work to clear the ground. Instead of having to excavate, they found they were only clearing out years' accumulation of rubbish, and that they were in a building of fine architectural beauty, which had been entirely hidden from view. When this became known, it caused intense excitement among the few archæologists in the city—this was ten years before an Archæological Society was founded in Chester. To gain more headroom, as the crypt from the floor to the intersection of the groining was only eleven feet, the rock was excavated to a depth of three feet six inches, this now making the total height fourteen feet six inches, with the floor level five feet nine inches below that of the shop.

The crypt is forty-two feet three inches in length and fifteen feet three inches in breadth. The vaulting, consisting of small stones, is finished with groining divided into six bays, formed by plain splayed ribs (nine and a half inches deep) springing from semi-conical corbels six feet above the new floor level. The crypt was originally lighted at the west end by a window with triple lights, having three centred heads and a single straight bar transome across each light. The jambs and mullions are massive and deeply

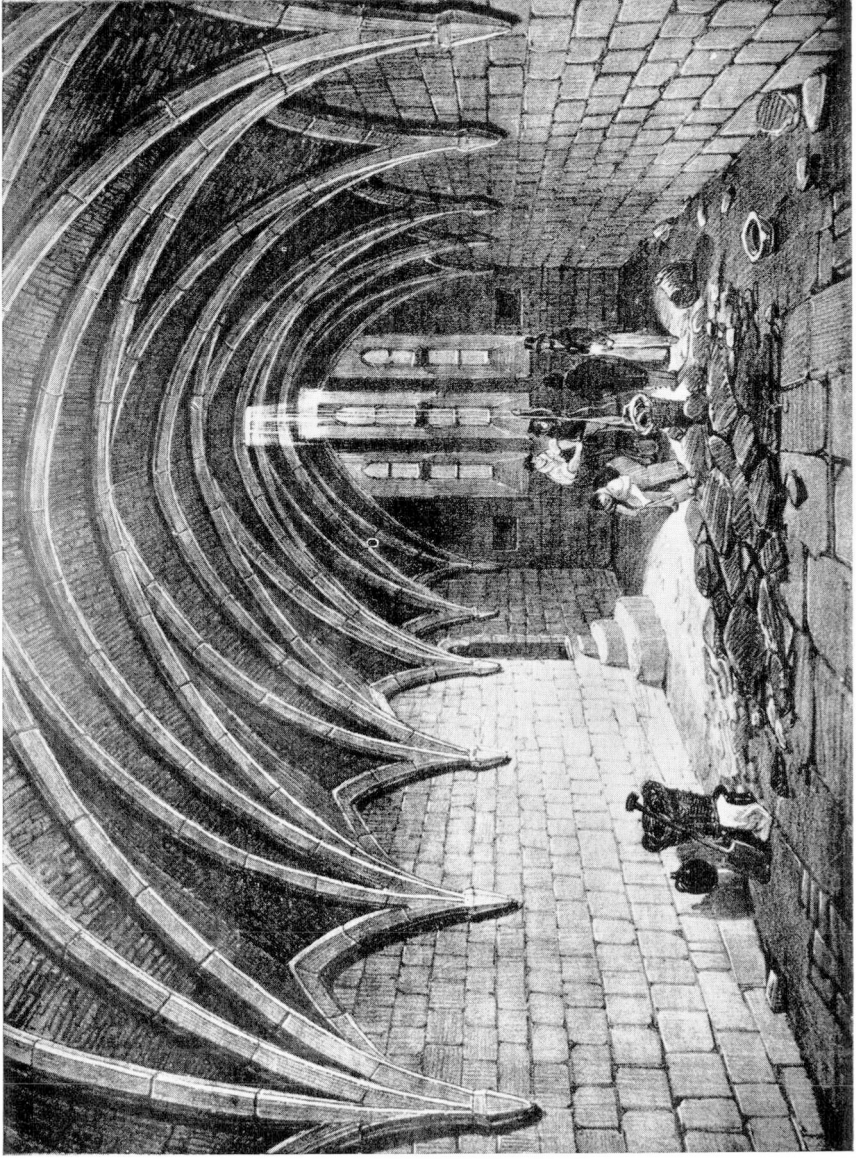


Photo.—F. Simpson, F.S.A.

The Crypt, Bridge Street, Chester.

From a sketch by W. Tasker, 1842.

splayed. The inside of the splay of the centre light is two feet six inches, with a glass space six feet two inches by one foot seven inches, and that on either side two feet, with a glass space of five feet eight inches by ten and a half inches. The dowel holes for the iron bars are to be seen cut in the stone mullions and jambs, and the remains of gudgeons on one side of the three lights, two above each transom and two below, bear witness to there having been double shutters to each of the lights. The sill of the window is five feet above the present floor level. The three lights were filled in with brick about twenty years ago.

In the Chester Archæological Society's Journal, Vol. I., N.S., p. 47, it is stated :—" the crypt is lighted by a triple lancet window." Probably this error was caused through the darkness (until recently) of the crypt, which made it difficult for one to see the top of the window. Strangely enough, the majority of the illustrations of this crypt show the window as having lancet lights. The transoms, which are extremely rare in lancet lights of this size, saved the writer from falling into the same error. The apex of the groining and the deep splay at the top, on either side of the centre light, two feet six inches square, have been cut away, and in the centre of the crypt two feet ten inches by one foot eight inches of the vaulting has been cut out and covered by a trap door. When the débris was being cleared out of the crypt in 1839, it was hoisted up through this opening, and from that to the present time the iron rods, etc. have been passed through it to the smithy, which is above the crypt. This, Mr. Newman informed the writer, was the only way long lengths of iron could be got to the smithy, as there was no access to it from the rear of the premises.

It is recorded that when the crypt was cleared of the rubbish, and the intersection of the groins examined, marks were discovered from the lead on the stone-work, shewing that a couple of lamps had been used for lighting.⁵ The chapel in the so-called Julius Cæsar's tower, in the upper ward of the Castle, which was built about the same

period as the crypt, was lighted in similar fashion. One of the hooks from which the lamps were suspended is still to be seen.

On either side of the window is an aumbry, or locker, about seventeen inches square, and the same in depth. In that on the south side was a four-shouldered holy water stoup, of plain design, measuring seventeen inches in diameter, and eight-and-a-half inches in depth. It was discovered in this position in 1839. These aumbries, or lockers, which do not appear to have had doors at any time, are in a very high position, almost out of reach, but this is accounted for by the lowering of the crypt floor to its present level in 1839.

In the second bay west, on the south side, is a staircase door-way of Early English work, with a beautiful trefoil head. The opening is six feet three inches in height and two feet three-and-a-half inches in width. It is approached by three circular steps cut out of the natural rock when the floor was lowered. From the present level of the floor to the sill of the door is three feet ten inches. Inside the jamb of the doorway on the east side, are the remains of two gudgeons from which the door has hung. Passing through the doorway, from a small square landing, we ascend, to the right fourteen (originally fifteen) stone steps formed between the inner and outer wall, the winders at the top, where it is now blocked up, turning to the right, above the crypt.

In the first bay east, south side, the vaulting and ribs have been cut away about three feet by four feet, and a window inserted so as to admit light to the crypt from a wooden staircase leading to a showroom above the shop. The floor of the crypt was covered with an oak floor in 1844, but this has entirely disappeared. At the east end of the crypt, and fifty-three feet from the front of the building, is a modern stone screen with a pointed doorway in the centre, and a similar window on either side. Cut in the upper portion of the south wall in the first bay west is the following inscription :—

NORTHGATE ST.

FAIRGATE ST.

ST. PETER'S CHURCH.

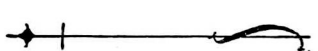
Old Cross

WATERGATE STREET

BRIDGE STREET

Crypt.

Crypt.



" T.E./A.D. 1839/THIS ANCIENT CRYPT/IS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN/FOUNDED ABOUT THE 12th/CENTURY. IT WAS CONCEALED/FROM PUBLIC VIEW BY BEING/NEARLY FILLED WITH RUBBISH/WHICH WAS REMOVED AND A/NEW SCREEN ERECTED A.D. 1839/JOSEPH LUNT, MASON. THE OAK FLOOR - - ERE LAID BY/ - - PARRY, A.D. 1844."

There appears to be a general impression that this crypt was connected by a passage with Messrs. Roberts & Co.'s crypt, another fine example, in Watergate Street. This idea has probably arisen owing to a small plan of the two crypts, rows, etc., published some years ago, and copied in Morris' *Tudor Period*, p. 249. This plan shows the Bridge street crypt as projecting under the row, and dotted lines show the position of the supposed passage between the two crypts. But the plan is not correct; as a matter of fact the east end of the Bridge Street crypt is fifty-three feet two inches in rear of the front of the row, the stall and passage way measure twenty feet two inches, therefore the entrance to the crypt is thirty-three feet in rear of the row. Had there been a passage as marked on the plan, the entrance through the west end of the Bridge Street crypt would have cut through the aumbry and half of the window on the north side. The discrepancy between the writer's measurements and the plan caused him to consult the Ordnance Survey map, which confirmed his statements. I am indebted (not for the first time) to Mr. Horace Davies, A.R.I.B.A., who kindly made me a copy of the Ordnance Survey plan for the purpose of illustrating this paper.

This crypt is the finest of those now remaining in Chester, and from its style of architecture certainly the oldest, dating from the early 13th century, probably about 1220. Considerable doubt has been expressed for what purpose these Chester crypts were erected. That most of them were used as strong rooms in which to deposit valuable wares, and for security against fire seems a reasonable solution. Little has been written about the crypt in question. Dr. Rock

thought it was a mortuary chapel, not for the secret celebration of religious services, but probably a private oratory.⁶ Chancellor Raikes, when speaking of Early English Architecture, casually referred to this crypt as "the chapel recently brought to public notice."

A well-known local antiquary, in a very able article on Mediæval Architecture in Chester, speaking of this crypt discounts Dr. Rock's statements, and goes on to say, "every reasonable argument is against its religious use." Independent of the present window being at the west end, and therefore entirely unsuited for a religious purpose, it is not probable that two ends would be lighted by windows, nor need even a mediæval chapel be placed at so low a level."⁷

The window being at the west end can hardly be accepted as conclusive evidence that the building was not used for a religious purpose. At St. Paul's, Boughton, the window, and altar, are at the south end of the church. At Eaton Hall the altar is at the west end of the chapel. Roman Catholic churches, where local surroundings permit, are all built on this form. There is nothing left to guide us as to what was at the east end, which stands nearly in a line with the west side of the old Roman road, and it is now impossible to say how the space in front of the crypt was occupied during the intervening time from the erection of the crypt to that of the timbered building we see to-day.

In regard to the low level of the floor, this, prior to 1839, was only two feet one inch below the present level of the street, which is higher now than it was in the 13th century. The crypt was built on the surface of the red sandstone rock, which at the Cross is only three feet four inches below the bottom step of the flight leading to St. Peter's church. Had the crypt floor been at a still lower level, I fail to see in it any evidence that the crypt was used for a religious purpose, or otherwise. This low level is met with in churches in England, and frequently so in those on the continent. The nave of the cathedral is considerably below the level of the street. At the west entrance one has to go down two successive flights of four steps each. Taking into consideration the

fine groining and ribs, the beautiful Early English doorway and window and the holy water stoup, which has always been in this crypt, is not it reasonable to assume that this building was erected, and used, for religious purposes?

On the death of Mr. T. Edwards, to whom all archæologists are indebted for saving this crypt, his son, William, came into possession of the property, 1867, and carried on the business. It was about this time that the old windows above the row were replaced by those we see to-day. Towards the end of 1879, Mr. W. Edwards commenced building operations, and in 1880 Mr. Sam Smith, solicitor, became the owner of the property. In 1881, the premises were occupied by Messrs. Thrippleton and Fleet, still as an ironmonger's shop. This firm had a very short stay; Mr. Thrippleton spent much time in the damp crypt, where he caught a chill, and within a few months died of pneumonia. In the latter part of 1882, Messrs. Newman and Crittall became tenants (as ironmongers). This partnership only lasted about eighteen months as Mr. Crittall retired from the firm, and Mr. Newman continued to carry on. In March, 1906, Mr. Newman purchased the premises and continued to carry on the business up to the time of his death, October 1919. The stock was sold by tender, and the premises were sold by auction, May 15, 1920, when Messrs. John Blake, Confectioners, Watergate Street Row, became the purchasers.

It was during Mr. Newman's occupation of the premises that the crypt window was bricked up, and the space in the rear, four feet seven inches, between the window and a high wall was filled in level with the top of the window, so as to form a foundation for a tall chimney in connection with the smithy forge. It will thus be seen that the trade of an ironmonger had been carried on in these premises for at least three hundred years.

Since the above article was written these premises have (1921) undergone extensive alterations and repairs, so as to convert them into a modern café. Fortunately no part of the antique structure has been destroyed or injured in the

slightest manner. The crypt has been thoroughly cleaned, the floor raised about three inches with concrete, and a wood flooring placed above. The walls have been cleaned with wire brushes, and the pointing made good where required. The smithy chimney (erected by Mr. Newman) has been taken down, and the ground on which it stood, in rear of the crypt window, has been cleared away to the floor level. The Early English window has been filled with lead diamond lights, filled in with cathedral glass. In the upper part of the centre light the arms of Cowper, in stained glass, have been inserted, in the south light a *fleur-de-lys*, and in the north a Tudor rose. The vaulting, where cut away, has been made good, and the stairs leading from the crypt to the room above have been opened out at the top and are now more in keeping with what they originally were. The room is heated by radiators, and electric lighting has been installed throughout the building.

In the room above the row level the oak panelling has been cleaned and polished, and retains the position in which it was found. The decorated plaster ceiling in this and the room above has been carefully retained. The stone fireplace, with the initials of Thomas Cowper, and the date, 1661, formerly in one of the back rooms, has been cleared of the various coats of paint which covered it, and removed to the south side of the room above the row level, now used as a smoking-room. From various measurements taken, this is considered by the architect to have been its original position.

The thanks of antiquaries are due to the architect, Mr. Ogilvie Campbell, and the contractor for the alterations, Mr. Edward Pritchard, for the able way in which they have carried out a difficult task. Not only has its ancient properties been carefully protected, but it has at the same time been made into an up-to-date café. The proprietors also are to be congratulated on possessing one of Chester's unique treasures.

The thanks of the writer are due, and freely given, to the late Mr. Newman; Mr. Lund, who served with the firm for

many years; the present owners of the building; the architect, Mr. Campbell; and the contractor, Mr. Pritchard, for allowing him free access to the building.

NOTES.

¹ In 1920 the Union Hall, including the shops facing the street, was sold to Mrs. Burrell, Chester.

² *Chester Marriage Licences*. Lanc. and Chesh. Record Society. Earwaker MS.

Ormerod's *Cheshire*. Vol. I., p. 375, states S. John's Church, 13th August, 1622.

³ The above rent charge is paid by the Duke of Westminster on the 13th day of February in each year.

⁴ A copy of the Latin inscription appears in Ormerod's *Cheshire*, Vol. I., p. 324; also in Hemingway's *Chester*, Vol II., p. 89. Neither of these accounts is in accordance with the inscription on the tablet. Hemingway appears to have copied Ormerod, without reference to the tablet itself.

⁵ *Strangers' Handbook to Chester*, 1856, p. 65.

⁶ Oratories (small chapels or places of prayer) were erected in the houses of wealthy people for the private use of the family. To administer Divine Service there it was necessary to obtain a special licence from the Bishop.

⁷ *Chester and N. Wales Arch. Journal*. Vol. I. N.S. p. 48.

