

John Bilson, who died on 15th December at Hessle, near Hull, was an old and honoured member of the Institute who had served it well at its meetings and in his contributions to this *Journal*. He was born at Newark-on-Trent on 23rd September, 1856, and, after his school-days at Sheffield, was articled to Mr. W. Botterill, an architect in Hull, whom he afterwards joined as a partner and succeeded in a flourishing practice. As an architect, Bilson's reputation was greatly aided by his work in designing school buildings, the first conspicuous example of which was Hymers College at Hull, followed by additions to well-known schools, such as Rossall, Grantham and Bromsgrove. He also undertook the repair of many churches, for the most part in Yorkshire, which included work done at the two Beverley churches, Bridlington priory church, and other important monuments. In 1930 he retired from practice, and in later years growing infirmity confined him to his house; but to the end he maintained a keen interest in the pursuits which he had followed in active life with exemplary thoroughness and single-mindedness of purpose.

As an architectural antiquary Bilson attained distinguished eminence. He brought to the study of ancient buildings practical knowledge exercised with the soundest judgement. Those who have attended archaeological congresses under his guidance knew that, whatever building he was describing on the spot or in a lecture would be treated by him with the same clearness of expression, logical directness of thought and sedulous accuracy of detail. These qualities were manifested in his writings with a striking lucidity of style which was a complete reflection of his spirit. His earliest contribution to the *Archaeological Journal* dealt with the recent discovery of the remains of the Romanesque east end of Durham Cathedral.¹ In 1906 he contributed a paper on the 11th century east ends of St. Augustine's, Canterbury, and St. Mary's, York.² His masterly analysis of Cistercian architecture, in 1909, was an edition, with an extended application, of a survey of the architecture of Kirkstall Abbey previously published, with St. John Hope's account of the buildings, by the Thoresby Society.³ In 1917 he returned to the discussion of his favourite topic in an article on the Norman school and the beginnings of Gothic architecture, with special reference to Canterbury and Montivilliers,⁴ and in 1922, in a detailed exposition of the chronology of the vaults of Durham,⁵ he said his last word on a subject which had formed, twenty-three years earlier, the central feature of a discourse delivered to the Royal Institute of British Architects, and expanded into two papers in their journal with the title *The Beginnings of Gothic Architecture*.⁶ Finally in 1930 came his new reading of the history of the nave at Wells, following an examination of documentary evidence by the late Dean of Wells, Dr. Armitage Robinson.⁷ Other societies benefited by similar work. His papers on the plan of the early Norman cathedral at Lincoln⁸ and on the Yorkshire churches of Weaverthorpe⁹ and Wharram-le-Street and the relation of the latter to the church of St. Rule at St. Andrew's,¹⁰ were printed in *Archaeologia*. For many years he worked assiduously for the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, whose excursion programmes long showed signs of his minute care in their preparation, while, among his papers written for the Society's journal, those on Gilling Castle,¹¹

¹ *Arch. Journ.*, liii, 1-18.

² *Ibid.*, lxiii, 106-16.

³ *Ibid.*, lxvi, 185-280.

⁴ *Ibid.*, lxxiv, 1-35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, lxxix, 101-60.

⁶ *Journ. R.I.B.A.*, 3rd series, vi, 259-69, 289-319.

⁷ *Arch. Journ.*, lxxxv, 23-68.

⁸ *Archaeologia*, lxii, 543-64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, lxxii, 51-70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, lxxiii, 55-72.

¹¹ *Yorks. Arch. Journ.*, xix, 106-92.

Newbald Church,¹ and St. Mary's, Beverley,² are models of work in which architectural description is fortified by competent handling of documentary material and due attention to the historical interest of their subjects.

Amid a variety of work, the theme to which he constantly returned was Romanesque architecture in England and Normandy during the period succeeding the Norman Conquest. He was under no patriotic illusions which picture a national style of architecture resisting the innovations of the invader. Anglo-Norman architecture was to him an importation which, like Norman feudalism, absorbed such elements as it found prepared to receive it on English ground. 'I am a Frenchman', he once said to the present writer, and the words well described his mental attitude. He became a constant attendant at the annual meetings of the *Société française d'Archeologie*, in whose leaders and their methods he found a type of mind akin to his own; and it is not too much to say that he possessed natural gifts of observation and criticism which made him fully the equal of professional archaeologists trained in the *École des Chartes*. These gifts showed themselves well matured in the papers already alluded to as published in the *R.I.B.A. Journal*. In the second of these he developed the thesis that in Durham Cathedral, the chronological evidence for the building of which was already well established, there came into being a great building completely vaulted with stone in which, earlier than in any other dated example, the three essential principles of Gothic construction, the ribbed cross-vault, the pointed arch and the flying-buttress system, made their appearance in vigorous embryo beneath a Romanesque dress. This implied no change in his convictions with regard to the Norman origin of English Romanesque, but it claimed a priority of invention in an English building, somewhat remote from the chief centres of architectural activity, which startled and perplexed French scholars, accustomed to recognize the Ile-de-France as the true cradle of Gothic art. At the same time, Bilson spoke with authority and sincerity, and, though at first his theory was contested by Robert de Lasteyrie and other acknowledged masters of French archaeology, he brought such weight to its support that, in the course of years, if not entirely accepted abroad, it has at any rate obtained its place as a highly respected alternative to the older French doctrine. Nothing could indicate so clearly the esteem with which Bilson was regarded in France as the appearance of several of his papers in a French dress in the *Bulletin Monumental*, including his final paper on the vaults of Durham, and Lasteyrie himself translated for the *Comptes-rendus* of the *Congrès archéologique* held at Angers in 1910 his account of the Vaults of Angers Cathedral, which did not appear in English till later. He became a member of the executive body of the *Société Française*, which at Rouen in 1926 bestowed on him the *grande médaille de vermeil* which commemorates its patriarch, Arcisse de Caumont.

In 1925 he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Durham, a well-deserved compliment which he greatly appreciated. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 1895 and served on its Council for a time. Of our own Council he was for some terms of office a prominent member, and in his later years was an honorary Vice-President of the Institute. In 1901 he married Edith, second daughter of Sir Robert Craven, who died in 1919, leaving him with a son and daughter who survive him. A sound architect, an architectural scholar of the first rank, endowed with unusual powers of reasoning and accuracy of statement which made him a formidable opponent in controversy, he was almost the last survivor of a generation of medieval archaeologists whose services to their science cannot be underestimated or overlooked.

A.H.T.

¹ *Yorks. Arch. Journ.*, xxi, 1-42.

² *Ibid.*, xxv, 357-436.