



The Chester Mystery Plays

THE PROPOSED REVIVAL IN CHESTER

I N July of 1906 a proposal was brought before the Council of the Chester and North Wales Archæological and Historic Society, by the English Drama Society, to reproduce in Chester at Whitsuntide the whole cycle of ancient "Chester Mystery Plays."

The English Drama Society, having already given a representation of three of the Plays (the "Nativity" group) in London in June 1906, and having met with much success, suggested the reproduction of the whole cycle of Plays at Chester, and approached the Archæological Society with the view of ascertaining whether local interest would be sufficient to warrant the reproduction, and also to enlist the support of the citizens of Chester generally.

The proposal was carefully considered by the Council of the Archæological Society, who eventually passed a Resolution to the effect that a revival of these Plays would, in their opinion, be exceedingly valuable from an historical, antiquarian, and educational point of view,

and expressing its desire to co-operate with the English Drama Society in the representations.

The Council approached the Mayor of Chester (Alderman Robert Lamb) with a request that he would convene a Public Meeting at the Town Hall, Chester, and the Mayor kindly consented to do so, on Friday, the 19th October, 1906, at three o'clock p.m., with the object of bringing the proposals of the Drama Society before the public, and to ascertain their feeling with regard to them.

The Meeting was duly held, the Deputy Mayor (Alderman Dr. John Roberts, J.P.) presiding in the unavoidable absence of the Mayor. A letter from the Dean of Chester to the Mayor was read, signifying his disapproval of the proposed revival, and taking exception to the representation of religious subjects by a Drama Society.

The Bishop of Chester expressed his doubts as to whether the representations could be given in a manner which would satisfy the requirements of reverence, but he thought that this was more likely to be accomplished by professional players, such as those of the English Drama Society, who would approach the work with literary sympathy, than by local amateurs. If, however, it could be shewn that the representations would meet these requirements, he promised that the project should receive his support.

Mr. Nugent Monck, Secretary to the English Drama Society, then explained the character of the Plays, and

the proposed mode of representation, assuring those present that the players who would take part in the representation would do so with all reverence. Moreover, he undertook to submit the whole text of the Plays for revision by the Council of the Archæological Society.

The Bishop suggested that a preliminary representation of some of the Plays should be arranged; and it was eventually decided that the three "Nativity" Plays should be represented in the Music Hall at an early date, when an indication of their reception by the public, either favourable or otherwise, could be taken.

Resolutions were passed recording the opinion of the Meeting that a revival of these Plays in Chester at Whitsuntide was desirable, and pledging itself to support the undertaking by assisting to raise in the City and County the necessary Guarantee Fund; and a Committee was appointed, with instructions to arrange for the preliminary representations.

The three Plays, viz.: "The Salutation and Nativity," "The Play of the Shepherds," and "The Adoration of the Magi," were accordingly given in the Music Hall, Chester, on the Afternoon and Evening of Thursday, the 29th November, 1906, both representations being well attended; and judging from the audiences, both by their numbers and the interested and reverent manner in which they witnessed the Plays, the representations were pronounced a success from an artistic and antiquarian and from a religious point of view.

The production of the Plays was however very costly, although the preliminary representations may be said to have paid their way; and under the circumstances the Committee did not feel justified in proceeding with the reproduction of the whole cycle of Plays; and accordingly

Resolved :—“ That the Committee, though much impressed with the interesting character of the Plays, and the reverent manner in which they were represented, regret that they cannot undertake the responsibility of arranging for the reproduction of the whole cycle, in consequence of the exceptionally heavy expenditure required.”