



Chester Cathedral: the recent work in the Cloisters and Refectory

By VEN. ARCHDEACON BARBER, M.A., F.S.A.

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JUST over twelve years ago, I read a Paper on "The Cloisters of Chester Cathedral," which was printed in Volume IX. (New Series) of our *Journal*. In that Paper I entered fully into the original purpose and the history of the Cloisters, pointing out the traces which still exist of their predecessors from Norman times. I do not propose to repeat what I then said, though it is possible that I shall, occasionally, go over the same ground.

The condition of the vaulting in the Cloisters had for some years been a cause of anxiety to the Dean and Chapter. The ribs and other portions were in a crumbling condition, and pieces of stone were falling almost daily. These were not, it is true, large in themselves, but they certainly would have caused injury to anyone upon whose head they had fallen from such a height. Moreover, after heavy storms of rain or snow, water would drop through, thus testifying to the unsatisfactory and unsafe state of the structure. Accordingly, it was decided to have a thorough examination made, and advantage was taken of the presence of Mr. G. Gilbert Scott and Mr. Thompson, the builder, of Peterborough (who were

engaged on the south-west corner of the south transept), to have a thorough inspection made. At first it was contemplated only to make the eastern walk safe and secure, but it was soon found that further work was urgently necessary, if the building was to be preserved. In many places the roof was not watertight, whilst the superincumbent weight upon the groining was evidently excessive, and threatened the stability of the structure. The mullions of the windows were in a crumbling condition—indeed some had completely vanished—and although they contributed to the venerable and picturesque appearance of the buildings, they must to some people at any rate have suggested something like a ruin.

The Cloisters, therefore, were treated in sections, which were successively closed to the public, the covering, whether of flags or of ordinary slate roofing, was removed, and the rubbish and material with which the pockets of the groining were filled was excavated and carried away. The Vestibule and the Maiden's Aisle were treated in like manner, and when I tell you that some 550 tons of soil and 80 tons of broken stone were thus brought down you will see that the task was a very heavy one, and will understand how urgently necessary it was that the groining should be relieved of so enormous a weight.

Among the stones removed are many interesting fragments of former buildings, though what these buildings were, and how they were demolished, and their remains placed there, it is impossible to say. These fragments belong to all periods from Norman times onwards. Some of them are certainly interesting, though I do not suppose the most competent architect could reconstruct in his imagination a perfect

building from any of them, as the scientist has built up the ichthyosaurus or other extinct animal from a single bone.

These stones are at present stored in the large Norman Vaulted Chamber (sometimes erroneously called the Crypt), on the west side of the Cloisters. Perhaps at some future day it may be thought advisable to have them sorted and arranged, the more interesting ones to be preserved for exhibition, possibly in the place where they now are, and the rest to be buried. If these stones are remains of the Dormitory, which is supposed to have stood at the eastern side of the Cloisters, and to have been reached by the staircase which is entered by the doorway in the north-east corner, they point to successive buildings used for this purpose.

One ground-plan was disclosed, and the roof over this portion was raised so that it might be open to inspection, though the height up to this roof does not give headroom for this to be done without difficulty or inconvenience. Certain piers and traces of an arch were revealed, and it is rather difficult to reconstruct the building of which they were a portion. I believe there are some who remember the remains of an arch appearing over the roof of the Vestibule to the Chapter House; but whether any can recollect the range of buildings which once stood upon the top of the Vestibule and eastern Cloisters I do not know.

Mr. Alderman Vernon has most kindly lent me some old views of the Cathedral, and amongst them is a beautiful pencil sketch of this part of the Cloisters, said to be by Turner. Whether this is so or not it is perhaps not possible to say; or again, whether it was taken on the spot, or is a copy from a print

or other sketch. It gives a building all along the east side, standing on the Cloisters, and lighted by windows of the Perpendicular style. It is not quite clear whether these windows are all perfect, or whether some mullions have gone; but one of the Cloister windows beneath, which looks much wider than any of the existing ones, is certainly in a ruinous condition.

It should, however, be noted that one of the windows or openings at the north is two feet wider than the others, having five lights instead of four. The opening measures eight feet eleven inches, instead of six feet eleven inches. On comparing the drawing with an engraving dated June, 1815, from a drawing by T. Espin, it will be found that when the latter made his sketch, the portion of the building which abutted on the north transept (slightly different in appearance from the rest), which appears in the pencil sketch I have referred to, had been removed, whilst that part of the Cloisters which admits into the eastern door of the north aisle had vanished as well as the whole of the south walk. Turner was born April 23rd, 1775, and the engraving after Espin, forty years later, does not betray any indication that this part had been *recently* removed; so that if the sketch is by Turner it can hardly have been made on the spot, but is probably a copy.

I had hoped that some mention of the work carried on from time to time by the Dean and Chapter in this part of the Cathedral might have appeared in the Chapter books, but I find that this is not so, and that entries of that kind are not to be found in our earlier records. Nor is there any allusion to the buildings in the interesting annual reports issued from 1868 to 1875 by Dean Howson, which Mr. Coppack, our

chapter clerk, has kindly allowed me to see. The last of these was dated May 20th, 1875, and showed that up to that time £68,697 5s. 10d. had been expended or subscribed for the work of restoration. Allusion is of course made to the rebuilding of the Cloisters on the south side, so as to form a mechanical support to the north aisle of the nave, when the groining of that aisle was done at the expense of Mr. Platt, of Stalybridge.

In the excavation necessary for this work, remains, which Dean Howson confidently affirmed could be identified with those of the first abbot, as well as the memorial stones of Ranulph the third abbot, and of Robert the fourth abbot, were discovered; whilst fragments of tiles were also turned up, showing that this portion of the Cloisters (or at any rate the carrells or monks' studies) had once been paved with them. But I find no reference to the work which was then done in the eastern Cloisters, though I have always imagined that the flat roof of flags over the Vestibule and Cloisters was put on at that time.

It may be well to state here that, in the work which has just been done, the pockets of the groining have been filled with reinforced concrete, and the level surface at the top covered with a thick bed of asphalt. The effect of this has been to make the whole structure solid and secure, and so to preserve for many generations this interesting portion of the old monastic buildings. The mullions of the windows have also been renewed and repaired, every old stone that could possibly be used again being retained. For myself, I should like to see the windows glazed again, as they were originally, when the monks spent a great part of their days in studying there, and as they still

are in the more beautiful Cloisters at Gloucester. Such treatment would preserve the internal walls from decay, and remove that discoloration which has resulted from long exposure to the inclement weather of our English climate.

Whilst the roof of the western Cloister has been treated in a similar manner, it may be well here to draw attention to the southern and northern corners of it. At the south is a passage entered from the Cloister by a Norman doorway, which is divided in a singular manner by a column or pillar which supports the later Perpendicular groining of the Cloister. The passage runs under the old Norman chapel of the abbots (afterwards of the Bishop's Palace), and between the wall of the unfinished north-west tower, and the *Secunda Aula* of the abbot's apartments, commonly called the Crypt. This passage had been used as a storing place for the timber used for the Musical Festivals. This was removed and the place was thoroughly overhauled. The thick layers of whitewash were carefully removed from the walls and roof, and some beautiful Norman work was revealed in the corbels, quite worthy of close inspection. This passage, according to the plan in the British Museum, taken soon after the Dissolution of the Monasteries, led into a longer passage called "the Gallery," from which access was gained to the domestic offices of the abbot's dwelling. It is now in daily use by the choristers, who through it find their way to "the Vaulted Chamber," now occupied as their vestry and practice-room, whilst the Refectory is undergoing restoration.

Dealing with this western side of the Cloisters, we need to be reminded that the ground level on the

west has been entirely altered of recent years (in fact when the present King's School was built), and brought back to what was very probably its original line. The sunken playground as we now see it did not of course exist, and the ground there was on the same level as Abbey Square, if it did not rise a little southwards. The space in fact was the garden to the Bishop's Palace, which was on the south side.

In Hanshall's *History of the County Palatine* there is a vignette wood-cut of the Palace taken from Abbey Square. The building on that side has only a ground floor, the front door being reached by six steps, but on the St. Werburgh Street side there would of course be a second storey. When the new school was built, under Sir Arthur Blomfield, the vaulted chamber, as we term it, and the space beyond it eastwards, where the large wooden doors are, were retained by the Dean and Chapter, though above it was built the library of the King's School. In the plan above referred to, the vaulted chamber is called "the Strong Beer Cellar," over it "the Derby Chamber," and the adjoining space "the Pantry." This wood-cut represents the crypt as covered with soil with trees growing there, and shows as rising directly from it the Chapel with the rooms above it, which was attached to the Palace.

On a previous occasion I have dealt more particularly with this part of the Cathedral, so I need not describe it, but it ought to be stated that it is in a very dangerous condition, and that, if it is to be preserved, as certainly it ought to be, for it has many historical and archæological interests, immediate steps must be taken, and scientific grouting applied so as to secure the building. The Chapel may then come into use again, either as a quiet place for private

prayer, or for other devotional purposes on special occasions.

I believe that I drew attention on a former occasion to the very graceful grouping of columns and arches at the south-west corner of the Cloisters (in the frontispiece of Parker's *Mediæval Architecture* there is a beautiful rendering of this by J. H. Le Keux), but there is a singular feature also at this spot which would not generally attract notice. The roof is supported here in one place not in the way usual in mason's work, but in the manner which would be adopted by carpenters, the bracket being fashioned just as if it were made of wood. At the north-west corner certain older buildings stand on the Cloister, and abut on the Refectory. These (now used as offices of the comparatively modern house in Abbey Square, which is used as the Choir School) have apparently been part of the ancient monastic buildings, and it seemed a pity not to retain them. Plans have been prepared for their conversion into two class-rooms for the choristers, so that if the house in the Square is removed, and the west front of the Refectory opened out to view, a proper and convenient place might be provided for carrying on the education of the choristers.

Coming now to the north side, the roof was, as on the west and south, a sloping roof of slates on rafters. This arrangement had the effect of blocking up a considerable portion of the lower parts of the windows of the Refectory. The substitution of the flat roof already described freed some of this, and allowed of the removal of some of the brickwork with which the windows had been closed, and so they

were lengthened appreciably, though not to their full dimensions.

In the course of their operations the workmen were brought into close contact with the bricked-up arcading and windows which had originally given light to the Reader's Pulpit, and the staircase by which it was approached. It was found that some of the masonry of the shaft was in a very dangerous condition. It had been cut away at the bottom, and was resting on a very insufficient support, and might very soon have collapsed altogether. It was, therefore, necessary that it should be repaired in the most conservative manner possible, whilst access to it was so easy, and this was accordingly done, much to the advantage of the appearance of the Refectory, both from the inside and the outside. The groining in the Maiden's Aisle was in a very dangerous state and had to be strengthened, and this required much skill and care. Here too the wooden columns, which had in a cheese-paring age been used to replace the broken stone ones, were removed, and proper ones took their place. The rain water from the Cloister roofs for years had been soaking the foundations, and now proper provision was made for carrying it right away.

It will readily be understood that all this could not be effected without a very large expenditure of money. Skilled masons had to be employed for a very long period, in addition to the labour of removing a vast quantity of material. The Dean and Chapter have no fabric fund, and they could not have carried out the task without the generous support of the public. They gratefully acknowledge their special indebtedness to the late Mr. Close Brookes, of Birtles Hall (whose death only occurred on Friday last, March 20th), who was

High Sheriff two years ago, and who gave £1,500 towards the restoration of the Cloisters. Without this most generous aid it would have been impossible to do what has been done; and we can only hope that others may be inspired to follow his example, so that the work in connection with the Refectory may be carried to a successful completion.

As I have already pointed out, the restoration or repair of the Cloisters on the north side brought us into touch with the Refectory. The alteration in the windows, or rather the restoration of what had previously existed, naturally suggested the overhauling and survey of the whole building, with a view to its reparation. This had long been the dream of the Dean and Chapter, and we can only hope that it may be fulfilled; though this must depend upon the response which a generous public makes to their appeal, for the expense will be very great.

Some brief account of the building is here necessary. As the familiar name by which it is known implies, it was originally the Refectory or dining hall of the monks. The room, if restored to its original proportions, would be 124 feet 6 inches in length and 33 feet 6 inches in width. As you are aware, a considerable portion of it on the western end has been cut off, and has long been roofless and in a ruinous condition. For more than 300 years it was used as the Free Grammar School, or King's School, founded by King Henry VIII. after the dissolution of the Monastery.

In the plan amongst the Harleian manuscripts at the British Museum already referred to, and which is said to have been taken from a survey made a short time after the Dissolution, the building is shown intact with

one entrance door from the Cloisters, and a small doorway at the east end at the foot of the staircase to the reader's pulpit. In this plan the building is described as "the Monks' hall or fraternity now the free school." There is no definite date assigned to this plan or survey, but there is a singular admixture of old and new, of past and present in it, or in the titles given to the various parts. Thus, if you have "the Abbot's kitchen," "the Abbot's well," "the Monks' cellar," and "the Priests' kitchen," you have on the other hand "the Bishop's garden," "the Bishop's gate or porch of his palace," and "St. Thomas' Chapel, now Dean's house."

We of course are only familiar with the entrance to the Cloisters from Abbey Street, which came through a dismantled window of the Refectory down a descent of thirteen steps, the building to the west being without a roof. We remember too how the passage leading to this entrance was flanked by some old cottages, evidently built out of some of the stones from the monastic buildings, which were pulled down some years ago.

Dean Cotton always has the credit, or discredit, of the act of vandalism by which the Refectory was cut in two, and a shorter road from the Deanery to the Cathedral was secured. He was Dean from 1786 to 1806. In Poole's *Concise History of the County and City of Chester*, published in 1791, there is "an elegant ground-plan of the City and suburbs of Chester taken from a *recent* survey." In this plan the road *through* the Refectory is given, so that if Dean Cotton was responsible for it, he apparently lost little time in making it, for it is in existence five years after he became Dean.

I had hoped that I might have found some record in the Chapter books of this operation, but there is none. We do not know, therefore, whether the western end of the Refectory was in a ruinous condition before this was done, or whether it fell into disrepair afterwards. Certainly, it cannot have improved by its exposure to the weather for so many years.

When the work of restoration was taken in hand, or seriously contemplated, considerable stimulus and encouragement was given to it by the generous contribution of £1,000 by the Gleadowe family, as a memorial to the late Rev. Canon Richard Gleadowe, who was formerly headmaster of the King's School. The east end of the Refectory is being treated in this way, and a tablet will record the fact, and will thus hand on the memory of one who was connected with the Cathedral and with the Diocese for so many years ; as well as the generosity of his relatives.

The west window, now practically finished, naturally attracts observation, and invites comment. I had thought that we might have seen the restoration of the lancet windows which were there in Early English times, and of which some traces may still be seen ; but, after much deliberation and several interviews with Mr. Scott, the present design was settled upon, and it is earnestly hoped that the criticising public will approve of it, as the relatives of Mr. Gleadowe, who are responsible for the cost, have done.

As might have been expected in the case of a building as old as this, many interesting features have come to light in the course of the work. Though we cannot certainly say that there is any trace of Norman building, there is distinct evidence of Early English architecture, though the windows were altered

at a later period, and filled with tracery in the Decorated and Perpendicular style. Other revelations were of a less satisfactory nature. It was found that a buttress at the north-east angle was built without proper foundations, was not bonded into the building which it was supposed to support, and was thus an element of danger.

We are sometimes inclined to associate "jerry-building" entirely with the present day, yet here was evidence of the grossest negligence and carelessness on the part of mediæval builders. A similar instance was found out years ago in the case of the Lady Chapel, and was fully described by Sir G. Gilbert Scott in the paper which he read before our Society on June 8th, 1870. He then expressed the opinion that the Perpendicular extensions of the north and south choir aisles had been built as abutments and supports to the Lady Chapel, the walls of which were nearly a foot out of the perpendicular. This discovery was somewhat disconcerting, as it gives rise to the suspicion that the foundations of the Refectory in other parts may also be faulty. The roof at present is quite plain.

Whether the hammer-beam roof, for which provision was evidently made as is shown by the corbels on the walls, was ever really put up, it is perhaps not possible to say. But that such roof ought to be constructed and in harmony with the architecture of the period of the building, there can be no manner of doubt. This would of course involve considerable expense, and it is to be hoped that liberal subscriptions will flow in so that the work may proceed without interruption. If the room can be restored to its original proportion it would, in Mr. Scott's words, be

one of the finest, if not the finest, monastic refectories in the country.

In his report to the Dean and Chapter, dated July 8th, 1913, Mr. Scott has pointed out what ought to be done, and as you will have gathered already, the gift of the Gleadowe family has rendered it possible to undertake the eastern end. But the building ought to be once more restored to its full size, which would make it about thirty feet longer than what we have been accustomed to. Its height to the top of the side wall is thirty-two feet, and with a proper and ornamental roof over it we should indeed have a noble room. The wooden floor would have to be removed, the interior walls cleared of their thick coats of limewash, and the beautiful natural colouring of the stone-work revealed. Then the defective stones should be renewed inside and outside, and the west front opened out to Abbey Square.

When to all this is added the possibility that the foundations *may* be faulty, and that underpinning *may* be necessary, it will be recognised that it is impossible to give an accurate estimate of the amount required for the work. Roughly speaking, Mr. Scott thought that £10,000 might be required, and this was before the Gleadowe gift had been made. This again might not include the clearing away of the soil on the north side, which has accumulated in the course of ages, and rises to a considerable height. In fact the ground level at the north side of the Cathedral is quite a puzzle; it must be much higher than in the days of the Monastery, shown perhaps by the fact that St. Thomas' Chapel is in the basement of the Deanery, and so well below the surface; and *how* the ground was raised to such an extent we can only conjecture.

It will be seen from what I have said, that if this most desirable work is to be carried out in its entirety, we shall need very wide and liberal support. The Dean and Chapter are most grateful to those who have hitherto helped by their contributions, and to the ladies who are stirring up interest and enlisting sympathy in the work, and they appeal very earnestly for a fuller measure of support, so that this unique specimen of a monastic building may be preserved for future generations.

The Reader's Pulpit is a great archæological and historic treasure, and it has already been restored to some, if not to all, of its pristine beauty. Whether the one at Beaulieu is more perfect and ornate I cannot say, for I have never seen it. But we in Chester ought to be proud of our own, and should be anxious to see it in its original condition, with all its surroundings in strict harmony and keeping. Though the room will no longer serve its original purpose, it will prove an admirable place for meetings, and specially for those of a religious or ecclesiastical character.

In conclusion, I can only express the hope that I have not wearied you, as also my regret that it was not found possible to give illustrations of the different points touched upon. But you must be so familiar with the building that you would readily be able to grasp them. I have to acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Hopkins, the foreman of the works, who has most kindly furnished me with details and particulars incorporated in this paper.