

*See family of White  
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AN ARCHITECTURAL NOTICE OF ST. JOHN'S  
PRIORY, CLERKENWELL.

BY W. PETTIT GRIFFITH, ESQ. F.S.A.

[Read at St. John's Church, 10 June, 1867.]

THE story of the religious Knights of St. John of Jerusalem (as well as that of the Knights Templars) has been so often told, and is so well known, as to render a repetition unnecessary. Some authors have entered so enthusiastically into the exploits of the knights as either to lose sight of the buildings belonging to the Priory, or to allude to them in a very cursory manner. Beyond the mention of the church by old John Stowe, in 1598, who naturally raises curiosity by his statement that "the great bell tower was a most curious piece of workmanship, graven, gilt, and enamelled, to the great beautifying of the city," there is not much trust-worthy information on the subject. The object of the present paper is to place on record certain facts and data connected with the Priory buildings, the result of discoveries and observations made during a residence of many years on the site of the Priory.

The Priory was founded about A.D. 1100, by Jordan Briset and Muriell his wife, near "unto Clarkes Well" (now Clerkenwell),

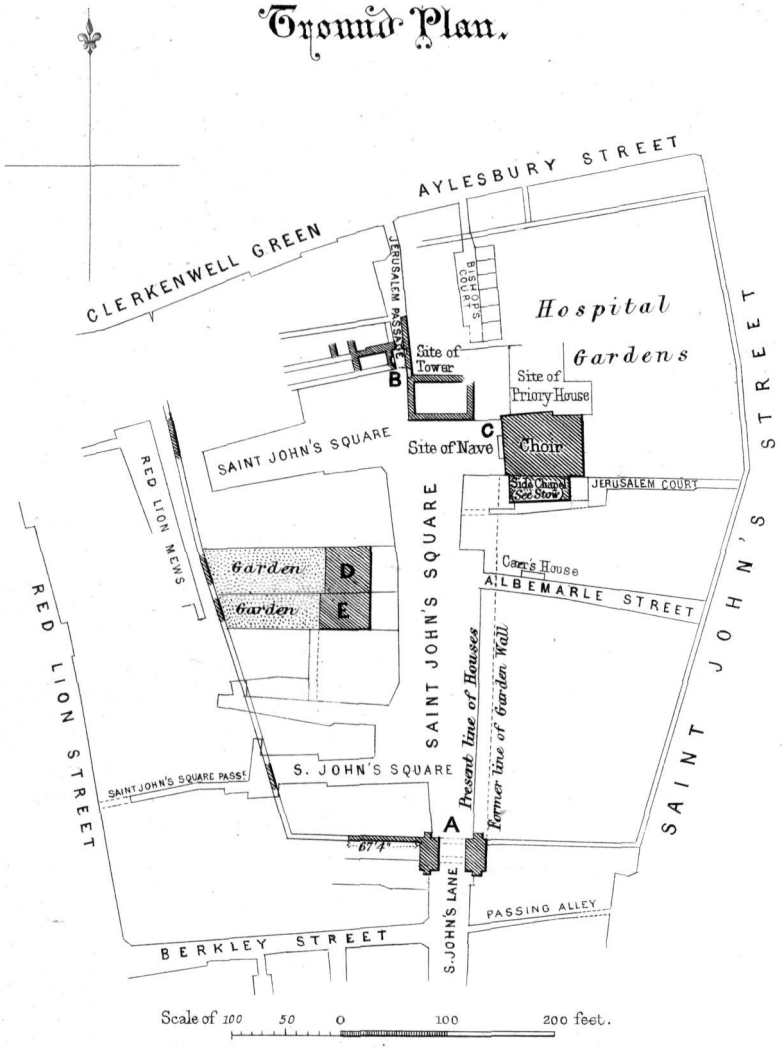
in the reign of Henry I. Ten acres of land were purchased for the above purpose, of the adjoining Priory of St. Mary; and for those ten acres, twenty acres were given in his lordship of Willingdale in the county of Kent.

In the plan are set forth from measurement the traceable remains of the boundary walls and buildings. No restorations have been attempted. The two principal objects of interest connected with this once important religious military institution are the southern entrance, known as St. John's Gate, and the Church; these are both situated in St. John's Square, which latter, in old maps, is called St. John's Priory. St. John's Square was the Priory-court, and bounded by the ancient buildings; in Robert Seymour's Survey, 1735, it is named "St. John's Court, vulg. St. Jones', St. John's Square." The inclosure walls can still be traced on the north, south, east, and west sides; and the modern dwellings in St. John's Square are mostly built upon the old rubble walls of the hospital: fragments of the ancient buildings are frequently discovered.

The north boundary comprised the north postern and the Priory buildings and walls, extending from the north postern westward towards Red Lion Street, and from the north postern eastward towards St. John's Street. The foundations of the Priory buildings and walls form the foundations of the cellars under No. 19, and the basements of Nos. 21 and 22, on the north side of St. John's Square. An opening was made in the basement wall between Nos. 19 and 20, St. John's Square, on Sept. 12, 1851, and the wall was found to be 7 feet thick, and formed of squared stone on the outer or north side, and chalk rubble within. Some of the stones had been used for windows, &c. One stone was exactly similar in nature to the mantel stone found in the cellar by St. John's Gate, and was covered with black shining flinty particles, as if it had been subjected to fire. This wall was close by the northern postern. In tunnelling beneath No. 46, St. John's Square, for the main drainage, in Aug. 1863, solid concrete foundations of the Priory buildings had to be cut through. The distance from the surface of St. John's Square to the bottom of the concrete was 26 feet.

# SAINT JOHN'S PRIORY, CLERKENWELL.

## Ground Plan.



A. Saint John's Gate. B. North Postern. C. Saint John's Church.

D. Burnet's House. E. Dr. Clarke's House.

We are informed from the minute book of the Commissioners for Paving, &c., of the parish of St. John, Clerkenwell, that permission was granted on May 19th, 1780, to Mr. Gabriel Gregory, the proprietor of the house adjoining (then about to be rebuilt) at the south-west corner of Jerusalem Passage, to take down the north postern, and thereby leave the south entrance to the above passage "open from the ground to the sky." The north postern, therefore, was previously covered, and by the plan in the Commissioners' book it appears to have been 17 feet 10 inches long (inside measure), and 10 feet 1 inch wide at the south end, and 10 feet 9 inches at the north end, and inclosed next St. John's Square by a light inclosure with a gate 10 feet 7 inches high, and at the other (north) end by a gate 5 feet 5 inches wide and 8 feet high. This was an outer gate in the north boundary wall, which latter was 3 feet 6 inches in thickness at this part.

The Priory was inclosed on the south side from St. John's Street (eastward) towards Red Lion Street (westward), with St. John's Gate in the centre. Of the southern boundary there are St. John's Gate and 67 feet of wall extending westward from the gate remaining.

Of the eastern boundary, Hollar has given a view as it appeared in 1661. It portrays the east end of St. John's Church, with the hospital gardens and boundary wall; all of which faced St. John's Street.

Regarding the westward boundary, there are remains of the old Priory wall in Ledbury Place, being also the west garden wall of Bishop Burnett's house, and in the west garden wall of Dr. Adam Clarke's house, which adjoins Burnett's house southward, and in Red Lion Mews or Yard; all these portions remaining formed a continuous wall, which was the western boundary.

Cromwell, in his *History of Clerkenwell*, mentions a circumstance which occurred in November 1826, that seems to establish the probability that, *previously to 1381*, when the hospital was destroyed by Wat Tyler, its buildings extended southward beyond the present Gate.

In excavating the ground on the east side of St. John's Lane, for the purpose of making a new opening into the sewer beneath,

the workmen came to a wall between four and five feet thick, which crossed the lane from east to west, and, there can be little doubt, both from its situation and strength, formed part of the original erection of the Hospitallers. This idea receives confirmation also from the discovery of a similar wall in digging out the ground for the foundation of the houses in Albion Place, (formerly George Court,) the direction of which appeared to be north and south.

Of the early buildings, which were of the semi-Norman and Early-English style, there are, besides the crypt, a few remains in the south wall of the present church next Jerusalem Court, and fragments have been found built in the basement walls of St. John's Gate; the latter I exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries in 1856.

#### ST. JOHN'S GATE.

St. John's Gate was originally built at the foundation of the Priory, about the year 1100, and was rebuilt by Prior Docwra in 1504. This Prior, 1502 to 1523, was the immediate predecessor of the last Superior of the house, Sir William Weston, who died on May 7, 1540.

In Hollar's view of the Gate, the effect produced by the battlements, then complete, is shown to advantage. In some respects Hollar is not correct: the windows on each side of the large central arch and window in both fronts are in one light, while in the view they are shown in two lights. In alluding to the great multitude of prints of St. John's Gate which have been issued on the exterior of the *Gentleman's Magazine* during the previous hundred and fifteen years, the editor of that publication remarked, in 1845, that they probably, in all, exceeded ten millions of copies, and presented in succession a considerable variety, arising from the respective taste or talent of the draughtsmen employed whenever a fresh engraving became requisite. Hollar's view of the Gate is the earliest extant, and is the most picturesque, but not the most accurate. (The vignette in page 170 is copied from it.) It gives an undue altitude of proportions to the whole structure and to its parts.

In 1856 a view of the Gate, as restored, superseded the old cut on the Magazine.

Boswell says that "when Dr. Johnson first saw St. John's Gate he beheld it with reverence;" no doubt referring to the edifice itself, with its chivalrous memories, and not, as has been supposed, in allusion to the magazine. Johnson himself was oftener to be found at St. John's Gate, where the *Gentleman's Magazine* was published, than in his own lodgings.

The walls of the present St. John's Gate are about 3 feet thick, of brick, faced with stone 9 inches thick, brought from Reygate. This stone is of the same description as that used in building Henry the Seventh's Chapel in 1502.

Rickman considers the style of architecture of the Gate to be Perpendicular work of pretty good character. On the ground-floor is a central arched entrance, with rooms on the east and west sides. On the north front, next St. John's Square, is a projecting tower on each side, and on the south front is also a projecting tower on each side; and, as the rooms above-mentioned project beyond the centre, they form, in appearance, double towers, which give an imposing aspect to the south front, and constitute the front by which the Priory was approached from the city.

In Hollar's view of the Gate is shown an inner wooden erection, adapted to the admission of carriages and foot passengers by separate entrances, which was succeeded by a billiard-room, which filled all the upper part of the gateway from the springing of the arch. This was purchased by St. John's Paving Commissioners for 62*l.*, and cleared away in 1771, and the arch repaired and restored to its original dimensions. Sir William Staines restored the masonry for 25*l.*

In 1856, Mr. B. Foster, the occupant of the Gate at that time, discovered one of the original stone chimney-pieces, and a singular secret communication from the groined archway to the large room above. The chimney-piece, which is engraved in the *Illustrated London News*, Oct. 4, 1856, is neatly moulded, with spandrils containing cruciform gilt ornaments; the opening of the fire-place is 4 feet 6 inches by 4 feet 2 inches, and the stone is the same as that of which the Gate is constructed. Over the

chimney-piece is a relieving arch. The chimney-piece is restored and preserved, and also the chamber. The secret chamber, or communication, occurs in the inner side wall; the latter is 3 feet 4 inches thick, and the former is 1 foot 11 inches wide, and 2 feet 9 inches in length. At the base of the chamber or shaft is an arched opening (now filled up), communicating with the open archway beneath the gate, and the top of the shaft is immediately under the floor of the hall. This communication may have been formed for the purpose of entering the billiard room, although its appearance is not modern.

In the room over the bar of the tavern, on the east side of the Gate, another original chimney-piece, similar to the one above described, has been laid open.

In the interior of the Gate-house remain several stone arched doorways, recesses, &c. with ancient hook-and-eye hinges. The ceilings are mostly divided into compartments by large and boldly carved oak rib-mouldings.

On the south front of St. John's Gate are sculptured five shields in foliated panels. The central panel contains the arms of France and England, surmounted by a crown. The panels on each side of the above have the cross, the ensign of the Priory. On the outer panels are a chevron engrailed, between three roundels, and the cross in chief, for DOCWRA; and the same impaling a bugle-horn between three griffin's heads erased for Greene, being the arms of the Lord Prior's father and mother.\* Beneath the above panels was the following inscription:—*tomas + Docwra + Prior, Anno dni. 1504. Sans + roro.*

The north front has three shields in cinquefoil-headed panels. The central one has the cross; on the left hand side are the arms of Docwra, and on the right hand side the same arms, but with an impalement (probably Greene again). Beneath the shields was inscribed "Ano dni. 1504." In the groining beneath the gateway are sculptured bosses (and moulded ribs) ornamented with shields; on two are the Priory cross, and on two are the arms of Docwra; upon the central boss or keystone is the Paschal Lamb.

The arms of the Priory were, Gules, a cross argent. The arms

\* See the pedigree of Docwra in Clutterbuck's Hertfordshire, vol. iii. p. 83. A more particular examination of these shields of arms will be found in Dingley's History from Marble, (Camden Society, 1868,) p. 142.

of Doewra were, *Sable, a chevron engrailed argent, between three plates, each charged with a pallet gules.*

In each angle of the gateway is a slender attached column, with moulded capital and base, from which the groined ribs spring.

In the spandrils of the door-head to the north-west tower are the Priory cross, with a cock and a hawk, and Doewra's arms, with a hen and a lion.

Shields with the arms of the Priory and of Doewra are also very sharply carved in an oak door-head formerly on the south side of the north-west tower, in the ground story of the Gate. It was discovered in 1813 when this part was converted into a watch-house, and then used in a partition, which was taken down in 1866, and the room restored to its original proportion. The door-head is preserved in the Gate.

The staircases were constructed in the towers on the north side next St. John's Square. They were spiral, of solid stone from the ground story up to the first story, and of solid oak from thence to the top. The stone staircase in the north-west tower was removed in 1814; the solid oak steps still remain; as do the inner stone Tudor-headed doorways leading to the floors.

*St. John's Gate had a narrow escape in 1845, when the new Metropolitan Building Act came into operation. The old Gate was condemned as being dangerous, and it was proposed to repair and composit it; and, had I not formed a committee to restore it to its present condition, the Gate would have been destroyed. In 1846-7 the stonework was reinstated, the embattlements added to the north front, and partly to the south front, and the angular turrets partly rebuilt, with new windows, &c. under my superintendence, by public subscription.*

St. John's Gate had been at various periods spoliated and modernised to serve the requirements of a tavern, until 1865, when the freehold was purchased by Mr. Wickens, the present occupier, in whom the old Gate has found another friend anxious to retain the fabric as far as possible in all its integrity. With this view, in 1866, 350*l.* was expended upon its further restoration; the modern staircase on the west side was cleared away, and the staircase in the north-west tower, winding from top to



bottom with solid oak steps, and an oak newel, was restored; also the old stone doorway, formerly the entrance to Cave's printing-office, in the same tower, was raised 3 feet in height; the continued raising of the street paving having shorn this doorway of its fair proportions.

### ST. JOHN'S PRIORY CHURCH.

The dedication of the original church by Heraclius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, is recorded to have been in the year in which the Temple Church was also dedicated, and by the same Patriarch: "In y<sup>e</sup> yere of Christ 1185, y<sup>e</sup> vj Ides of Merche, y<sup>e</sup> dominical lettre being F, y<sup>e</sup> chyrche of y<sup>e</sup> Hospitall of St. John's Jerusalem was dedicatyd to y<sup>e</sup> honor of S. John Baptiste, by y<sup>e</sup> worschypfull fader Araclius, Patriarke of y<sup>e</sup> resurrection of Christe; y<sup>e</sup> sam dey was dedycatyd y<sup>e</sup> high altre, and y<sup>e</sup> altre of S. John Evangelist by y<sup>e</sup> sam Patryarke."—*Cottonian MS.*

The Norman or circular portion of the present Temple Church formed the building alluded to above, and there is no doubt that the masons engaged in sculpturing the arcade in the aisle of the circular portion of the Temple Church were also employed on the ornamental capitals, &c. of St. John's Priory Church.

The erection of the first buildings of the Priory occupied several years. It has been stated that, between the years 1274 and 1280, Joseph de Channey, Prior, built a chapel; and that William de Henley, Prior, erected a cloister, between 1280 and 1284. In 1338 it appears that some repairs were effected.

The original church, of which part of the crypt remains, was semi-Norman and Early-English. Some of the bases remain *in situ* beneath the present modern floor; and part of the south wall remains, in which can be traced narrow window openings, and a doorway also beneath the floor, formerly facing Jerusalem Court. In one of the houses in the court, built against this wall, can be seen a Norman capital in the wall.

With the exception of the crypt, all the Priory (including St. John's Gate) was destroyed in 1381 by the rebels of Essex and Kent, who set fire to the buildings, causing them to burn seven days.

After this calamity the Priory was rebuilt, Prior Docwra completing it in 1504. Docwra's church was in the Perpendicular style, and grafted upon the Early-English crypt, and consisted of nave, aisles, a great bell-tower, graven, gilt, and enamelled, a choir, with side chapels, &c. and the remains of the Early-English crypt. The present church is a part only of the ancient choir, and beneath it is the crypt.

The crypt (which has been frequently engraved) comprises a central avenue 16 feet 3 inches in width and 12 feet in height, with an aisle on each side extending from east to west, and is, with the aisles, of the same extent and length as the present church above. The west end of the crypt is bricked up; it originally extended westward, which has been proved from time to time when excavating for drains, &c.

The most interesting remaining portions of the crypt comprise the central avenue and a small compartment on each side of it by the entrance at the east end. The compartment on the south side is bricked up, and forms a private vault in which are deposited the remains of Simon Michell. It is 13 feet by 10 feet, and was inclosed in 1793.

This system of allotting portions of the crypt to other families as well as Michell's injured its fair proportions and lessened its original size.

The entrance to the crypt is at the east end by a flight of stone steps beneath a modern vestry. The crypt appears to have been originally above ground, and not subterraneous: an entrance to it may be seen in Hollar's view of the east end as it appeared in 1661 from St. John's Street, with the hospital gardens and boundary wall.

The central portion of the crypt consists of four severeys or bays: two are simple and plain, being semi-Norman, and two (towards the east) are Early-English, and very perfect, the details and mouldings being worthy of a careful examination. The voussours of the arch ribs are wrought in a similar manner to the voussours of the former nave, chancel, and aisles; these are often dug up in the vicinity of the Priory. The voussours are worked with great precision about 5 inches long, are not

arched, and their shortness enabled them to be set to the proper curvature with apparent exactness; while the frequent occurrence of the mortar joints between them has preserved them from fracture by settlement.

The ribs of the Early-English bays spring from triple-clustered columns, 3 feet 9½ inches high, in each angle of the bays, with moulded capitals and bases. An excavation was made in 1854, exposing the bases to view; the upper moulding is horizontally fluted similarly to some Grecian Ionic bases. The central shafts of the clustered columns are pointed, and the diagonal ribs have three mouldings; the central one is pointed, and the outer are rolls. This pointed bowtell occurs frequently in semi-Norman and Early-English work, and is coeval with the introduction of the pointed arch. Suspended from the keystone of each arch is an iron ring. On each side of the two western bays of the central aisle is a deeply-recessed pointed window; the opening was long and narrow, 3 feet 9 inches high, and 9 inches wide, and the inner splay is 7 feet 7 inches by 4 feet 2 inches wide; the wall is 4 feet thick. The trefoil-headed doorway on the west side of the north compartment has the large iron eyes of the door-hinges still remaining. The original pavement of the crypt is 1 foot 5½ inches below the present level. Clay introduced in modern times to prevent the damp from rising lies over the original pavement, and conceals the bases and part of the shafts of the columns.

A bird's eye view of St. John's Priory, Clerkenwell, restored, with its boundary walls, St. John's Gate, and the church, having its nave, aisles, transepts, tower, chancel, and chapels complete, may be seen in W. Newton's "*London in the Olden Time*, with a Pictorial Map of London *temp.* Henry VIII." folio, 1855.

In the 3rd of King Edward VI. in 1549, the church for the most part, the body and side aisles, with the great bell-tower (a most curious piece of workmanship), were undermined and destroyed with gunpowder, and the stone was employed for building the Lord Protector Somerset's house in the Strand, and the porch of Allhallows' Church, Gracechurch Street. That part

of the choir which remained, with some side chapels, was closed up at the west end (next St. John's Square), and otherwise repaired by Cardinal Pole in the reign of Queen Mary, when Sir Thomas Tresham, *knt.* was made Prior, with restitution of some lands; but the convent was again suppressed in the first year of Queen Elizabeth. Five years subsequently to the Dissolution, Henry granted to John Dudley, Lord Viscount Lisle, Lord High Admiral of England, "as well in consideration of his service as for the sum of 1,000*l.* sterling, the site, circuit, and precinct of this Hospital or Priory of St. John of Jerusalem; only the lead, bells, timber, stone, glass, iron, and other things of the church, were specially reserved to the King's Majesty." *Newcourt, Repertorium Londinense.*

James I. granted, by letters patent, dated the 9th of May 1607, "the scite or house of the late Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in England, in the county of Middlesex, and all the scite, circuit, and precinct of the same house, having thereon one great mansion-house and one great chapel, and containing by estimation five acres, to Ralph Freeman and his heirs in free and common soccage."

The choir passed by various deeds to as many persons: in 10 James I. to Sir William Cecill, Lord Burghley, son and heir-apparent to Thomas Earl of Exeter, by marriage with whose daughter, Lady Diana, it became (5 Charles I.) the property of Robert Bruce, afterwards Earl of Elgin, whose son Robert was created Earl of Aylesbury. It was now used as the Earl's private chapel, and for many years was called Aylesbury Chapel. In this noble family the estate continued till 1706, when it was sold by them. Being finally bought by Simon Michell, 1721, the chapel was by his instrumentality converted into a church for the intended parish of St. John; and, in 1723, having enlarged and repaired it, he built the present west front, of brick with stone quoins, (which has been since compoed,) and re-roofed the whole. Michell and Hutton his trustee transferred the church, vault, vestry-room, and adjoining grounds, together with two messuages fronting St. John's Street, for 2,950*l.*, to the Commissioners for building fifty new churches, usually called "Queen Anne's," of

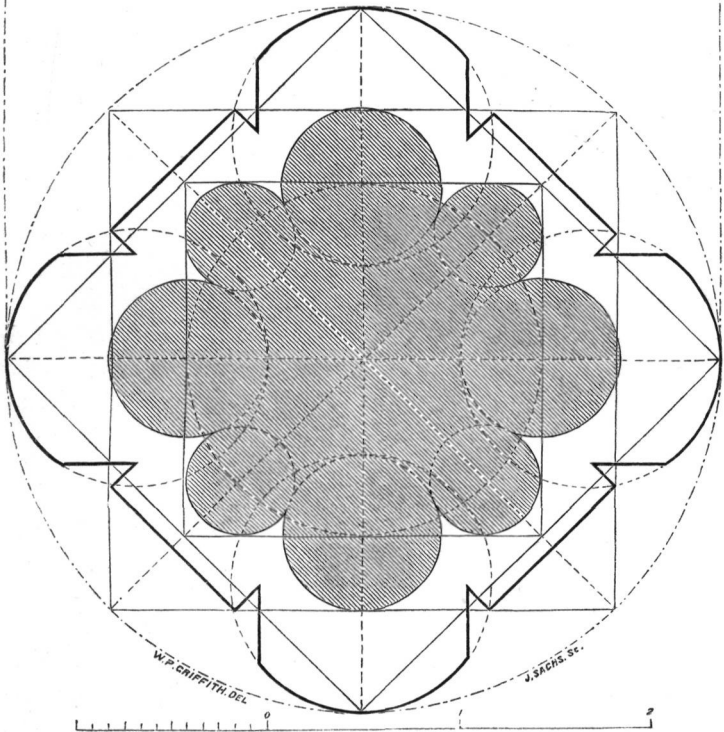
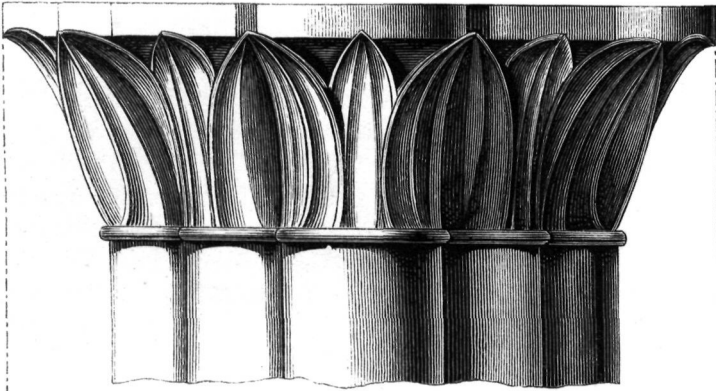
which St. John's, Clerkenwell, was the second in order of consecration, Dec. 27, 1723.

The turret was added in 1813, and the clock originally belonged to St. James's old church. The head of the beadle's staff also belonged to that establishment, and was used in James the Second's time; it has the following inscription: "Anno dom. 1685. Anno 2<sup>o</sup> Regni Regis Jacobi." It is silver-headed, and was made at "y<sup>e</sup> charge of y<sup>e</sup> inhabitants of y<sup>e</sup> east liberty of St. John of Jerusalem." A portable baptismal bowl formerly supplied the place of the font now in use; it has a scriptural quotation round its rim, with the name of the parish and "Deo et Sacris." It is engraved in Mr. Foster's "St. John's Gate."

The font is a white marble pedestal with bason (not capacious enough for total immersion), its date being probably coeval with Michell's alterations and additions in 1723.

In 1845 this church was repaired under my direction, and I took care to note the following:—

Upon removing the plaster from the inside of the east wall and central window, it was discovered that (Docwra's) masonry still existed from the ground to the middle of the said window-arch, in altitude 27 feet, all of the wall above that having been rebuilt in brickwork (by Michell). This window remains in the same state as shown in Hollar's view next St. John's Street. It has still its stone mullions, but the foils are gone. In the south aisle the pews against the south wall were removed, and it was found that Simon Michell, when he partly rebuilt the church, used portions of the former church to support the pews; these consisted of ribbed mouldings, parts of shafts, portions of the groining, capitals of clustered columns, coloured and gilt, and other remains of the former church. Several of these remains were presented by me to the Architectural Museum. The pew-front No. 82, opposite window-recess in south wall by west end, stands upon the capitals of eight clustered shafts. The accompanying illustration shows one of these capitals from actual measurement, and the plan upon which is marked the geometrical system employed by the mediæval architects in designing their edifices, and which has been propounded by myself during the last thirty



years. The bulk of the shafts, the capitals, and the centres for producing the large and small columns, are all accurately defined. There is no guess-work; the diameter of the pier being determined, the whole of the parts produced bear a proportion to each other and to the original unit.

The floor of the original church was 1 foot 2¼ inches below the present floor. In the south-east corner of the south aisle is an angular column and base. The south wall I found to have been built by Docwra on the remains of the Early-English wall, which latter now remains some few feet above the floor, and contains the narrow splayed openings of the original windows, and a doorway that opened into Jerusalem Court. These are not visible without removing the pews. Docwra's wall contains large Perpendicular windows. The upper part of the south wall was rebuilt by Michell. The north wall has been partly rebuilt, but still contains some of Docwra's windows. Upon taking down this wall, built by Docwra on the wall of the crypt, the angular capital above referred to was discovered built in the wall. This capital, now in the Architectural Museum, belonged to the original church, and by referring to the plates of ornamental capitals in Billings's *Account of the Temple Church*, it will be observed that the resemblance is striking. As the Priory and Temple Church are of the same date, 1185, the same masons may have been employed on both buildings. A small gilt capital was also found in the wall.

In the central east window is a coat of arms, a chevron between three combs, in painted glass, stated in Cromwell's *History of Clerkenwell*, p. 150, to be the coat-armour of Tunstall of Tunstall, in Lancashire. They are, however, the arms of Prior Botyll. Glover gives this coat, Gules, a chevron between three combs argent, for Robert Botyll, who was prior in 1439, and until 1469.

The church was considerably injured and interfered with by the erection of houses on the south side next Jerusalem Court, between 1600 and 1700. These contain the oak wainscoting of the period. The south entrance and windows of the church were unfortunately blocked up by these buildings. The old gabled

wooden building shown in Hollar's view of the Priory in 1661, next St. John's Street, and adjoining the south side of the church, is still standing.

In conclusion, any further comments upon St. John's Church, as spoliated by Simon Michell, will be mis-spent, as all real interest to the architect and antiquary ceased the moment Michell put his classic extinguisher upon the Gothic edifice. The day may arrive when this classic fungus will be removed, and Docwra's Perpendicular Church reinstated upon the ancient crypt.

