

STRAY NOTES ON THE CHURCH AND PARISH OF
S. MARY MATFELON, WHITECHAPEL.

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[Read before the Society, June 12, 1876.]

THE locality mentioned at the head of this paper is one which is not very promising to the archæologist, nor is it a neighbourhood now particularly rich in associations of a pleasant or agreeable character, whatever it may have been, and yet "down Whitechapel way" I want you to go with me to-night, only figuratively, for I have no intention of asking you to accompany me on a ramble among the fried-fish shops and shambles of Whitechapel; my desire is only to place on record the recent discoveries of the remains of the mediæval church brought to light during the demolition of the recent one. Whitechapel, as a separate and distinct parish, is not of a very ancient foundation; it was taken out of that enormous parish of S. Dunstan, Stepney, or, as it was styled in Saxon times, Stibbenhedde and Stebonhythe. Pennant states, but he does not give his authority, that the church was known as early as 1336, and Stowe mentions it under the name of the church of Blessed Mary of Matfelon. This word "Matfelon" is one of which I cannot give you now a satisfactory translation or meaning, for I have not yet arrived at any conclusion myself, except to utterly dismiss the meanings attached to it by different authorities, firstly, that it is derived from the Hebrew word Matfel, signifying a woman bearing a child, and hence being singularly appropriate to a church dedicated to the Blessed Virgin; secondly, that it is derived from knapweed, anciently also called matfelon, and that it was associated with "fullonica," a fuller's work-house or shed. In the days when Whitechapel church was first built, and was formed as a separate parish from Stepney, like Ratcliffe, Limehouse, Poplar, Wapping, and Shadwell, people were not such good scholars as to adopt a word from the Hebrew, an unknown tongue, and apply it to a mediæval foundation, nor was it the custom

of Londoners to go very far for the names they were in the habit of adding to the saint's names by which their churches were distinguished. They were much more likely to take the clue from some peculiarity in the architecture, as S. Mary-le-Bow, S. Andrew Undershaft, or their local position, as S. Stephen Walbrook, S. Anne's-in-the-Willows, S. Nicholas Shambles ; even from their proximity to any particular place, as S. Andrew Wardrobe, S. Lawrence Jewry ; or again from trades, as S. Michael Paternoster, S. Christopher-le-Stocks ; or the names of some families who were connected with them, as S. Mary Somerset, S. Vedast Foster, S. Lawrence Pountney, S. Martin Outwich. All these had a distinct meaning, easily understood by the populace, and most probably given by them, and to none of these categories can the word matfelon apply.

Whitechapel requires no explanation, for, after leaving the City by the Great Eastern Road from Aldgate to Bow Bridge, the White Chapel, standing in close proximity to the high road, and built of white chalk rubble, must have been a most conspicuous object. A road led off to the right towards the river immediately in front of it, called White Horse Lane, and terminated in Wapping close to Execution Dock.

The old church which has been lately removed was a quaint gabled and red-tiled building of no particular beauty, and yet thoroughly English in its very homeliness. The white rubble chalk chapel of ease had been rebuilt and remodelled in the seventeenth century, principally at the expense of a certain William Meggs, Esq., circa 1673, but in doing this the builders had been very careful to build on the old foundations. This building has, in turn, given place to a more magnificent structure, a noble monument of the munificence of one individual, Octavius Coope, Esq., M.P., and one of the Vice-Presidents of this Society.

On removing the brick walls of the seventeenth century church it was found that they had been entirely built on the old walls of the mediæval church, and so great had been the accumulation of the soil that the old floor level was eight feet below the then existing one. They then built their brick walls on these above the height of eight feet. The tower, also, had been partially taken down to that level, leaving the turret staircase with its newel steps existing below, and the lower portion of the west door with its plinth and mouldings, and also the tower arch. The plan, which has been most kindly supplied

to me for this paper by Mr. Ernest Lee, A.R.I.B.A., the architect employed in the re-building, will explain the form of the old church. From this you will see that it consisted of a nave and north and south aisles, with a tower at the western end, and a chancel with aisles of equal length. A respond of the nave arcade, with a three-quarter attached shaft, remained in situ at the north-west end of the nave, and at the north-east there were the remains of a wall running in a southerly direction, evidently the foundation of a division wall or arch between the north aisle of the nave and the chancel aisle.

Further to the west were the remains of a north door, and either a buttress or the wall of a north porch. The tower arch was of the full width of the tower, with late Perpendicular impost mouldings; the staircase turret was in the corner formed by the south wall of the tower and the west wall of the south aisle. This, as I have already said, remained very perfect below a certain level, the modern turret-staircase being smaller and only partly built on the old one, the newels not being concentric. No remains earlier than the fifteenth century were discovered in these walls, or anywhere else on the site, so that if, according to Pennant's assertion, a church was here in 1336, all trace of the building had disappeared. The mouldings of the jambs of the west door were not very remarkable, being the ordinary Perpendicular mouldings, and the design was rather meagre, agreeing with the late character of the work, and very similar to the west door of the neighbouring church of Bow; the hooks for the hinges of the door remained. The old floor remained, and was of concrete six inches thick, and the plastering on the old rubble walls, which were composed of clunch: on the plastering were the remains of some colour decoration in red, green, and yellow. The floor was originally laid with tiles, as many were discovered of plain red and yellow glaze.

Portions of the tower had only been re-cased, and the tower arch was perfect under the plaster.

Close to the north door, a little to the east, a well was discovered filled up by débris; it was not very deep, the water-yielding strata in London being pretty generally close to the surface, the depth being nineteen feet. The first part of the well was filled up with very fine black earth as fine as sand, and afterwards, from four to five feet from the bottom (which contained an oak core), black mud, and in this mud several Roman antiquities in the shape of urns, principally Upchurch ware, all very much broken, among which was this specimen in a

moderate state of preservation. There is a good peal of bells, which is to be replaced in the new tower. More or less spread over the whole area of the church were found quantities of tobacco-pipes, especially in the turret staircase.

In the reign of Queen Anne an incident occurred in this church showing to what length party feeling ran. We know from the writings of Swift in the *Examiner*, Steele in the *Guardian*, &c., that political animosity could be carried to any extent in the matter of mud-throwing, in the hopes that some of it might stick. The then rector, to show his zeal for his own party and his hatred of the other, more especially to one individual, who had particularly incurred it, White Kennet, dean of Peterborough, for his writings in defence of the succession being confined to the Elector of Hanover and his heirs, gave to the church then lately rebuilt an altar-piece representing the Last Supper, Judas, of course, occupying a most prominent place in the foreground; but, instead of following the style of drapery worn by the other apostles, Judas was dressed in cassock and gown and wig, and his face bore a most striking resemblance to the Dean; and to render this still more unmistakeable a black velvet patch which the dean was in the habit of wearing was placed on the forehead, and beneath it was written "Judas the traitor." The dean they say took no notice of this libellous and scandalous attempt on the part of the rector, but, coming to the ears of the Bishop of London, he caused the rector to remove it immediately, and after the portrait had been expunged the picture was allowed to go back with Judas in the ordinary accepted habiliments. I have been told that this picture was afterwards sold to the Abbey of S. Alban's, and formed the altar-piece there. In Mr. Gardner's collection of old drawings and prints connected with this particular district there is a print of this altar-piece without the amendment, showing the dean as Judas, and some epigrammatic verses rather cleverly turned.

Whitechapel, although not a very aristocratic neighbourhood now, was at one time a favourite resort of some of the nobility. Cromwell, Earl of Essex, had a house here, and, I daresay, some of you remember the splendid old house called the Spanish Ambassador's, formerly occupied by Gondomar, ambassador from Spain at the court of James the First, and the implacable enemy of Sir Walter Raleigh. Eastward of the church stood Whitechapel Mount, one of the redoubts thrown up in defence of the City by the Puritans; it stood just a little

to the west of the London Hospital, and in Mr. Gardner's prints there is a drawing showing it covered with trees, and in close proximity was one of those awful plague-pits which received the bodies of several thousands of the victims of that fearful epidemic, 1665-66.

Behind Whitechapel church in White Horse Lane, in some fields by the side of the road, were encamped in the reign of Anne, 1708, some thousands of distressed Palatines, who had left Germany in consequence of their country having been invaded and plundered by the French armies under Marshal Villars and the Duke of Berwick. Two thousand found their way to England, and were first supplied with necessaries, for they were in a starving condition, by the Queen's benevolence, and afterwards by the English nobility and people, and a subscription was started realising some £22,038, and they were sent to America and Ireland.

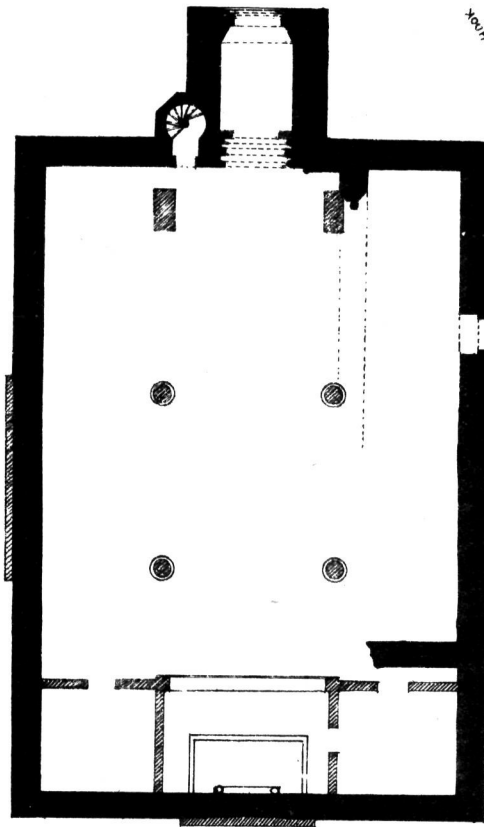
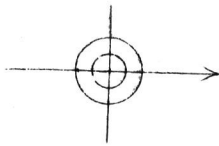
I append a few notices of Whitechapel from Pepys (Mynors Bright's edition).

"April 26, 1664. I took my wife out by coach through the City, discoursing how to spend the afternoon, and conquered with much ado a desire of going to the play; but took her out to Whitechapel and to Bethnal Green, so to Hackney, where I have not been many a year, since a little child I boarded there."

"March 5, 1668-69. Walked forward towards White Chapel till my wife overtook me there with the coach [his own], it being a mighty fine afternoon, and there we went for the first time out of town with our coach and horses, and went as far as Bow, the spring beginning a little now to appear, though the way be dirty, and so with great pleasure, the fore part of our coach up, we spent the afternoon."

CHURCH OF ST. MARY MAUELON - WHITECHAPEL

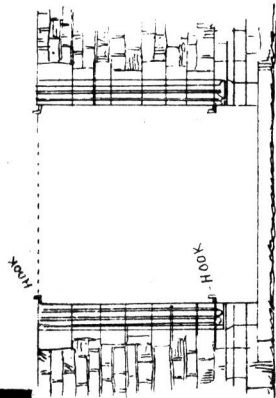
Ground Plan before its demolition in 1875



WELL

14^{ft} 10ⁱⁿ Gault

17^{ft} Gault



REMAINS OF WEST DOOR

George H. Birkbeck

Scale of measurements in feet

