

CHURCH OF ST. MARY ALDERMARY, BOW LANE.

BY JOHN WHICHCORD, ESQ. F.S.A.

[Read at the Meeting at Guildhall, June 14, 1859.]

IT is difficult, in contemplating the City of London as we now see it, with the bustle of its crowded thoroughfares, with its buildings, *public and private, having the exclusive aspect of business and commercial use*, to picture the same city before the Reformation, when, amidst streams and gardens, rose the numberless spires and pinnacled towers of the churches and monastic establishments as a very principal feature associated with the high-pitched roofs and the carved gables of the half-timbered houses. To form an idea of London at that period, we must let our imagination fly to one of our least altered cathedral towns, omit from our view all the modern houses with their plate-glass shop-fronts, and the smooth stone paving of the streets, imagine such a town, infinitely larger, and confined, as it were, within walls, with ecclesiastical buildings far more numerous over a given space, and we shall then form some idea of what must have been the picturesque character of this modern Babylon in its mediæval dress.

Previously to the Reformation, we read that the churches and monastic establishments in London occupied two-thirds of the area within the walls; and that the average extent of a parish did not exceed three acres. It seemed, indeed, to be consistent with our forefathers' notions of piety to erect a church for each separate guild, to have a place set apart for worship for the little society in which each man moved, and to regard it as a loved object upon which to lavish his superfluous wealth.

Interesting, as retaining some small amount of these old associations, is the church of St. Mary Aldermary, although, unhappily, little of its ancient character remains in the present structure ; but, inasmuch as it is supposed to be reproduced by the hand of one of the greatest architects, it is a subject well worthy of attention to consider in what way this great mind has addressed itself to the task imposed.

The Church of St. Mary Aldermary is situated in Cordwainers' Ward, and on the south side of Budge Row. The ancient name, "Aldermarie," has given rise to some speculation. Stowe says, "Because the same was very old, and elder than any other church of St. Mary in the City." Harrison, in his *History of London, 1776*, says, "It is a rectory founded before the Conquest, and one of the peculiars belonging to the Archbishop of Canterbury."

With the known antiquity of the neighbouring church of St. Mary de Arcubus, or Bow, the opinion of the above authorities should be accepted with some caution. Of this "elder" church, however, no remains are now visible, and the *foundation* of the "new and very faire church" referred to by Stowe as having been "laid of late yeres" must have been very literally the truth.

The second church was commenced about the year 1510, by Sir Henry Kebyll, grocer, who was Lord Mayor in 1511, and who left it unfinished at his death in 1518. Such is the statement distinctly made in a set of verses, written in 1570, and suspended over Sir Henry Kebyll's grave, "on the outside of the folding tables which hang in the upper end of the Chauncell," by way of substitute for his monument and epitaph, which had then been destroyed.

These verses, which are characteristic of the period and minutely bear upon the subject, are as follows :—

"Heere is fixt the Epitaph of Sir Henry Kebyll, Knight,
Who was sometime of London Maior, a famous worthy wight,
Which did this Aldermarie Church erect and set upright.

ТНООН death preuaile with mortal wights and hasten euery day,
Yet Vertue ouerlies the grave, her fame doth not decay ;

As memories doe shew reuiu'd, of one that was aliue,
 Who being dead, of vertuous fame none should seek to depriue ;
 Which so in life deseru'd renowne, for facts of his to see,
 That may encourage other now of like good minde to be.
 Sir Henry Keeble, Knight, Lord Maior of London, here he sate,
 Of Grocers' worthy Companie, the chiefest in his state,
 Which in this City grew to wealth, and unto worship came,
 When Henry raigu'd, who was the seventh of that redoubted name.
 But he to honor did atchieu the second golden yeere
 Of Henries raigne, so called the 8, and made his fact appeare
 When he this Aldermary Church gan build with great expence,
 Twice 30 yeeres agon no doubt, counting the time from hence.
 Which work began the yere of Christ well known of Christian men
 One thousand and five hundred just, if you will add but ten.
 But lo, when man purposeth most God doth dispose the best,
 And so before this work was done God cald this Knight to rest.
 This Church then not yet fully built, he died about the yeere,
 When III May Day first took his name, which is down fixed here, 1516.
 Whose works became a sepulcher, to shroud him in that case,
 God took his soule, but corps of his was laid about this place.
 Who when he dyed of this his work so mindful still he was,
 That he bequeath'd one thousand pounds to haue it brought to passe,
 The execution of whose gift, or where the fault should be,
 The work as yet unfinished shall shew you all for me,
 Which Church stands there, if any please to finish up the same,
 As he hath well begun, no doubt, and to his endless fame,
 They shall not onley well bestow their talent in this life,
 But after death, when bones be rot, their fame shall be most rife,
 With thankful praise and good report of our parochians here,
 Which have of right Sir Henries fame afresh renewed this yeere.
 God move the minds of wealthy men their works so to bestow,
 As he hath done, that, though they dye, their vertuous fame may flow.

*Inclita perpetuo durabit tempore virtus,
 Et floret fato non violanda truci.*

This appeal, or sentiments such as it describes, appears to have had its effect after the lapse of another half-century: for the edition of Stowe in 1633 relates that, "First, Mr. William Rodoway, one born and buried in this parish, though from his youth to his end he lived in another, viz. Michael Bassishaw, at the time of his death, which was in the year of our Lord 1626, gave, towards the re-building of the steeple of this church, then greatly decayed and perished, the sum of 200*l.*; and in the same

year died in this parish one Mr. Richard Pierson, who, towards the better and more beautiful building of this steeple, gave 200 marks, with this condition, that the steeple thus to be built should follow its ancient pattern, and go forward and be finished according to the foundation of it laid one hundred and twenty years since by the founder of this Church, Sir Henry Keeble; which within three years after was so finished, the cost of it amounting to 1,000*l.*, all which, except the gifts of those two worthy benefactors, was raised by the parish."

In the mean time, as Stowe relates, the grave and monument of Sir Henry Kebyll had met with ungrateful injury. It would seem that, as the church was unfinished, no monument was erected for him for some years; but in 1534 his son-in-law, William Blount, Lord Mountjoy, desired by his will a stone to be laid over him, "for that he had been a special benefactor to the building of Aldermary Church, to the value of 2,000*l.* and above."

In 1545 Charles Blount, fifth Lord Mountjoy (son of the former), was also buried here, who "made or glazed the east window, as appeareth by his arms;" and his younger son, William, seventh Lord Mountjoy, was here buried in 1594.

But in the disorders which took place after the Reformation, when extraordinary liberties were taken with the spoliated churches, Kebyll's bones "were unkindly cast out, and his monument pulled down," in favour of the corpse of Sir William Laxton (Lord Mayor in 1545), who died in 1556; and in 1583 the body of Sir Thomas Lodge, son-in-law of Sir William Laxton (and Lord Mayor in 1563), was placed in the same vault.

In 1632 the church was "repaired, richly and very worthily beautified, at the cost and charge of the parish."*

It was consumed by the Great Fire of 1666, but almost immediately rebuilt by the munificence of Henry Rogers, Esq., "affected by the almost irreparable loss of religious edifices, and actuated by sincere motives of piety," who gave 5,000*l.* towards rebuilding it on the model of the former one. The following inscription over the west door records this:—

* Stow's Survey, edit. 1633, p. 847.

ÆDES HÆC DEO O M. JAM OLIM SACRA,
 QUÆ COMMUNI URBIS INCENDIO IN CINERES REDACTA,
 IMPENSIS UNA MANU SED LARGA & SANCTISSIME PRODIGA,
 INTEGRIS QUINQUE LIBRARUM MILLIBUS
 SURREXIT DENUO MULTO MAGNIFICENTIOR,
 TAM PIAM BENEFICENTIAM HENRICO ROGERS ARMIGERO,
 EDVARDI ROGERS DE CANINGTON MILITIS,
 ET SUB MARIANA PERSECUTIONE CHRISTO MILITANTIS,
 PRONEPOTI, ET PIETATIS ETIAM HÆREDI,
 HONESTA HAC ET INGENUA FRONTE PALAM FATETUR.
 A.D. MDCLXXXI.

Memoria Justi in Benedictione.

The edifice which we see now is, excepting the tower, the restoration of Sir Christopher Wren, built upon the ancient model as directed by Sir Henry Kebyll. The lower part of the tower is evidently of the date of Kebyll's work; as shown by the old four-centre-headed door, leading from the tower into the staircase turret, and also by the Caen stone of which this part of the tower is built, which has indications of fire upon its surface.

The upper portion of the tower was rebuilt in 1711; the intermediate portion is, I think, the work of 1632, and if that is admitted it is curious, as an example of construction at that period, in an older style than that prevalent and in fashion at the time. The semi-Elizabethan character of the detail of the strings and ornamentation seems to confirm this conclusion, as they are just such as might be looked for in Gothic work in the time of Charles I.

In dealing with the restoration of the Church, Wren must have not only followed the style of the burned edifice, but in part employed the old material. On examining the tracery of the window-heads on the south side, I find they are worked in Caen stone; and from the freedom of the lines of the tracery, and the absence of anything Wren-like even in the minutest details, I believe these heads to have been part of the Perpendicular church of 1510. With this exception the remainder of the

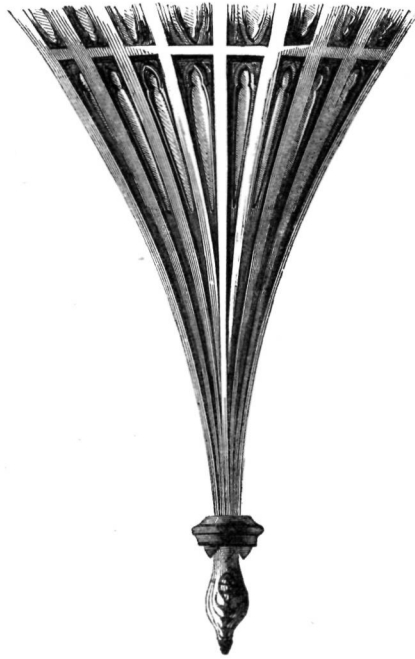
church bears the stamp of Sir Christopher's handiwork ; and, while I direct your attention to points which we, in this age of mediæval revival, know to be crude and incorrect, and inconsistent with the spirit of Gothic architecture, we must take into consideration the time at which this labour was undertaken, and under what circumstances it was performed, and I think we shall arrive at the conclusion that the genius of the architect is not diminished in his treatment of a subject so new and difficult, and so discordant with his style and practice.

The time, too, at which this task was imposed upon him,—immediately after the Great Fire,—when such an enormous amount of work was at once thrown upon his hands, when, in addition to the general laying out of a great city, commissions for the re-edification of palaces, public buildings, as well as the bulk of the fifty churches upon which his talent was employed, were pressing upon his attention ;—when, also, it was not only the pencil of the artist and the calculations of the mathematician that were required of him, but oftentimes an application of construction to meet pecuniary deficiency, and consultation with guilds and bodies of citizens forming the committees of those days ; and it appears that they were little more tractable than Church commissions or churchwardens of the present age.

Amidst such overwhelming occupations, the instructions to Wren to restore the Church of Saint Mary Aldermary *in its Gothic type* must have caused him a great amount of thought—a style in which he had not practised ; for (with the exception of the Church of St. Alban's, Wood Street,) Wren has not elsewhere left any record of his Gothic restoration of an entire church—a style exploded in England. It is nevertheless to the credit of the great architect that he so thoroughly entered upon his task as to produce so good a restoration as we see, with so much that is in the spirit of the original, at the same time that it is so unmistakably his own.

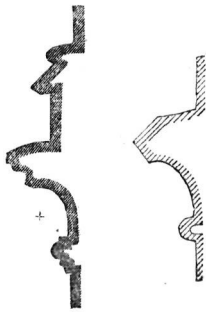
The church is of ample dimensions, being 100 feet long and 63 feet broad, and consists of a nave and side aisles. The east end of the church is not at right angles, and there is no chancel

arch, which produces a very *gauche* effect towards the east end of the building. The ceiling is very singular, being an imitation of fan tracery, executed in plaster; the detail of this is most elabo-

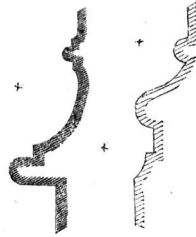


rate, but the design is odd, and, being an imitation of stone construction, the effect is very unsatisfactory. It is probable that the old roof was of wood, and entirely destroyed in the Fire; consequently, no record of it remained as a guide in the rebuilding—as was the case with the clustered pillars, which are good and correct in form, and only mongrel in their details. I have represented on the next page several of the mouldings as they were left by Wren, and shown by the side the correct outline that such mouldings should have in a Perpendicular church.

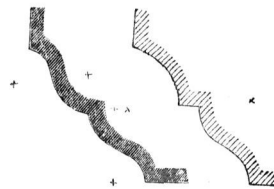
In some of the furniture of the church, such as the pulpit and the carving of the pews, the Gothic style is not followed, and in



INTERIOR STRING.



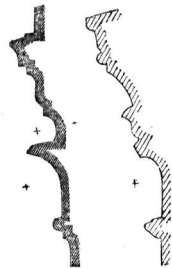
BASE MOULDINGS TO PIERS.



JAUMB MOULDINGS.



EXTERNAL STRING AT LEVEL OF ROOF PLATE.



MOULDINGS TO PIERS.

* * The darker-edged mouldings are Wren's.

these, as in the other parts where the great master's genius is left unshackled, we perceive the exquisite taste that guided him, even to the minutest details, in his own peculiar style. The Sword-holder represented in the margin is a favourable example of the careful thought which he bestowed upon his decoration. It is free and artistic in design, and exquisitely carved.

The Sword-holder is almost universally found in the city churches, and more or less prominence and elaboration is given to it, as the parish is more or less subject to civic visitation, or the church more or less decorated.

The City Swords were four in number: 1. The Common Sword, borne at the Courts of Session, as well as the Courts of Aldermen and Common Council; 2. The Black Sword, used on Good Friday, all Fast days, and on the Anniversary of the Fire of London; 3. The Sunday Sword, and 4. The Pearl Sword, the two latter of which were carried on very rare occasions.

The Sword-bearer was the first of the four Esquires attached to the Household of the Lord Mayor, and his duty was analogous to that of a master of ceremonies, as he advised his Lordship upon points of precedence and etiquette upon all state occasions. He presided over the gentlemen of the household, had apartments allotted to him, and a grant of £1,500 a-year for the maintenance of his table. The office of Sword-bearer is a remnant of the baronial establishment of the city, at a time when the household of noble families was composed of the scions of great houses, and when gentlemen of rank



HOLDER FOR THE CITY
SWORD.

and position eagerly sought offices in which they could be prominent in gallantry and politeness.

Amongst the gifts to this church, is one by Richard Chawcer (supposed by Stowe* to be father to the great Geoffrey), who gave his tenement and tavern, with the appurtenances, in the highway, at the corner of Keirion Lane. Richard Chawcer was buried here in 1348.

After the fire of 1666, the two parishes of St. Mary Aldermary and St. Thomas the Apostle were united; and, as the advowson of the latter belonged to the Cathedral Church of St. Paul's, the presentation is now made alternately by the Archbishop of Canterbury and by the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul's.

It is impossible to quit such a subject as the re-edification of this church by Sir Christopher Wren,—in which we can only award a limited amount of admiration to the result he has produced in his Gothic labours, and that, too, after taking into consideration the difficulties with which he was beset, and the fashion of the time in which it was done,—without associating him in our thoughts with the more congenial employment in which his genius took such flight, and which produced, in the exquisite churches which adorn this great city, buildings constructed for the purpose of the services of the reformed religion, with an unrivalled fitness for the uses to which they are applied, and with a range of constructive and decorative beauty unsurpassed in any age or country.

* Sir N. H. Nicolas has remarked that "Chaucer's parentage is unknown, and the conjectures that have been hazarded on the subject are too vague to justify the adoption of any of them; nor is it certain that the Poet was a native of London." *Life of Chaucer*, 1846, pp. 10, 11. At p. 119 Sir Harris Nicolas has given an abstract of the will of Richard Chawcer, the Vintner; he had a son, named John, of the same occupation; but there is no trace of the famous Geoffrey.