

ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH, WOOD STREET.

BY

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THERE were originally seven churches in the City dedicated to St. Michael; of these four remain, namely, St. Michael, Bassishaw, St. Michael, Cornhill, St. Michael, Paternoster Royal, and the building in which we now stand. This church, although the tower, as we shall see, is in great part mediæval, and though it is doubtless built on old foundations, may be reckoned among Sir Christopher Wren's designs, and it has a melancholy interest for us just now, as under the Union of Benefices Act it is to be pulled down almost immediately. I should note, by the way, that it will make the sixteenth City church designed by Wren which will have been destroyed. Thus we see disappearing, one might say before our eyes, the great work of our greatest Protestant architect, who in the rebuilding of these churches had a unique opportunity which he turned to marvellous account. Besides St. Paul's Cathedral, only thirty-four of his City churches now remain, and several of these are threatened. From the artistic point of view the destruction of any one of them would be deplorable. They all show his original genius, they supplement each other and form parts of one harmonious whole. In a sense his simpler designs are as interesting as his more elaborate ones, because they prove what he could do when

hindered by want of money and by cramped and inconvenient sites.

The church of St. Michael stands, as you know, on the west side of Wood Street, at or near the south side of Gresham Street, formerly in this part called Maiden Lane, and along the north of Huggin Lane. It occupies the site of a mediæval church, repaired in 1392, and therefore presumably old at that date. Stow, in his quaint phraseology, calls it "a proper thing." After describing, among others, a monument there to the father of his friend William Lambarde, whose descendants still flourish in the neighbourhood of Sevenoaks, he tells us that the embalmed head of James IV. of Scotland, slain at Flodden, after being with the body for years at Sheen monastery, was "hewn off" by "workmen for their foolish pleasure," and eventually buried at this church. We cannot now test the truth of this oft-repeated anecdote which our good old chronicler relates with so much detail. It is a curious coincidence that after the Dissolution the monastery at Sheen came into the hands of Henry Grey, Duke of Suffolk, and that a head, by some supposed to be his, has been shown for years at Holy Trinity, Minorities.

The mediæval church of St. Michael, except the lower part of the tower, was almost consumed in the Great Fire. The work of reconstruction was entrusted to Wren, who completed it in 1673, at a cost of £2,554 12s. 11d., this being one of his cheapest City churches, and also one of the simplest. Externally the east end was and is the most conspicuous part of the church, for Huggin Lane on the south is very narrow, and since the Great Fire the north and west have always been masked by buildings. This east

front is faced with Portland stone, and decorated with four Ionic pilasters carrying a cornice and pediment ; between them are three round-headed windows. The clock which juts out into the street is a modern addition, placed there since Billings made his drawing for Godwin and Britton's "Churches of London." The interior of this small church is very plain, for it is more or less an unbroken parallelogram ; not absolutely so, as the two side walls widen out a little towards the east end, which is not quite square with them, the tower also, occupying the south-west corner, projects slightly at the west end. The length is about 63 feet and breadth 42 ; the ceiling, flat, and coved to the north and south walls only, is framed by a cornice with a pretty foliated ornament in plaster work.

St. Michael's was "restored" in a most tasteless manner some years ago, by men who entirely ignored the fact that the beautiful fittings of Wren's churches formed an integral part of his design ; and his keenest admirers can hardly say that the interior is now beautiful. The walls are still panelled to dado height, and the handsome oak altar-piece remains, flanked by pictures of Moses and Aaron, and surmounted by a good carving of the royal arms. The pulpit, also, is of carved oak, and a fair example of work coeval with Wren, but it has lost its sounding board, and its old stair balustrade has been replaced by a modern one. Originally against the north wall of the church, it has been removed to the south-east corner. The high pews disappeared in 1888, being replaced by yellow deal benches and chancel stalls with ends of pseudo-Gothic design ; gas-standards brazen to match were also provided. The organ, which I am told is a fine

instrument, was brought down from the western gallery, and placed on the floor at the north-west corner; that same gallery being mutilated, as you see, in order to make room for it. The organ-case has gone, and the pipes have been stencilled over with a diaper pattern utterly inappropriate. The marble font, more or less of the usual seventeenth century style, has, with its carved wooden cover surmounted by a pineapple ornament, been daubed over with paint, and is now in the south-west corner. Against the north wall there is a good marble monument, saved from the older church, to "William Harvie, citizen and grocer of London and deputy to the alderman of this ward of Cripplegate within, buried 20th March 1597, aged 68 years." He had three wives, who rejoiced in the names of Maudlin, Margaret, and Joan. His eldest son, Robert Harvey, some time comptroller of the customs, who resided in Old Jewry, was buried here November 9th, 1608, and is duly noticed on the tablet. Immediately to the east, on the same wall, is another monument, to the memory of William Harvey, son of Robert, who "fined for Alderman" and died in 1677, having as we learn from other sources, given £100 towards the rebuilding of the church, about which sum there was a dispute with the neighbouring parish of St. Mary Staining. Hugh Harvey, of the fourth generation, is also buried here, as are other members of the family. The rest of the monuments have no special interest. On the floor are ledger stones now covered up by wood pavement; they are all comparatively modern, a plan of them is kept in the vestry. There was formerly a good sword-rest, still here in 1887; but the parish authorities, wanting money to carry out their strange

ideas of church decoration, sold it to the Worshipful Company of Haberdashers, in whose possession it remains.

I have reserved till last what I have to say about the most interesting part of the existing fabric. The tower, as it now stands, is externally a square structure with a plain stone parapet. It is surmounted by a commonplace octagon spire, now covered with copper but formerly with lead, and rising to a height of 130 feet, which is not Wren's work, though the fact is generally forgotten. Hughson, writing in 1806, says that it had been added during a "late repair," and in Maitland's "History of London" (edition 1756) there is an illustration, in which the tower appears with a lantern instead of the spire, a far more effective design. A coloured drawing, done early in this century, shows a Gothic tower-window on the south side; this is now partly blocked, and the lower part, converted into what looks like an ordinary modern opening, serves to light the vestry—a panelled room occupying the ground floor of the tower. On mounting, by modern steps, into the gallery above the vestry, one finds on the north side of the tower, a pointed arch of considerable span, now obscured by paint and plaster. It no doubt springs from the ground, but the lower portion is screened off. There is a little turret staircase at the north-west angle of the tower, entered from the nave through a pretty doorway with fifteenth century mouldings, which shows us to what height the ancient masonry extends. Those who care to mount this staircase will find that it ends abruptly within three or four feet of the belfry floor level; and the building is carried up in brick, evidently Wren's addition after the fire. In his brick superstructure he has placed

pointed windows—rough imitations, I suppose, of those which existed before. The mediæval or lower part of the staircase was lighted by three little quartrefoil windows opening into the church ; they are now blocked. When the tower is being pulled down we shall probably come upon traces of a pointed arch on its eastern face ; this, if it exists, is now concealed by modern work. Enough has been said to prove what an interesting example of architecture we Londoners are about to lose, with no corresponding advantage that any of us will be aware of.

It has been thought well to print Mr. Norman's remarks on the Church as they were delivered, and to supplement them by the following note on subsequent discoveries which he has been good enough to furnish.

During the destruction of the Church of St. Michael, which took place within a few months of the visit of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society, further Gothic remains were exposed to sight. Of these the most beautiful and perfect was the engaged arch on the west side of the tower, which forms the most conspicuous object in the view, from a photograph kindly supplied by our President, Dr. Edwin Freshfield. This, Mr. Norman hopes to use, as one of the illustrations of an extended paper on the ancient church and its history, which he is about to read at a meeting of the Society of Antiquaries. He will therefore now merely say that he believes the building, in later mediæval times at least, to have consisted of a nave and south aisle, with tower standing on arches at the west end of the latter. This tower, as shown by the mouldings and from documentary evidence, was built in the early part of the fifteenth

century. In the process of demolition it turned out that the body of the Church, as rebuilt by Wren, was partly of brick on the old foundations, in part reconstructed from the old material, while portions of the ancient wall had been worked in. During the work of destruction some encaustic tiles were discovered, also many fragments of mediæval glass, mostly of the fourteenth century, and an oblong piece of stone with three quatrefoil openings ; for what purposes it was used is doubtful. These various relics are now in the Guildhall Museum. The mummified head of King James IV of Scotland did not appear.
