

## THE CHURCH AND PRIORY OF ST. HELEN, BISHOPSGATE.

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BY

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It is my privilege to-day to welcome you to this ancient church. Some of you (perhaps many of you) are already familiar with it, but for the sake of those who are not, I venture to give you a short account of its history. If we allow our minds to travel back 700 years, we find ourselves in the reign of King John and almost precisely at the granting of Magna Charta. Well, 700 years ago this Church was *refounded* and added to. *Refounded*, I say, because, even if it is impossible to verify the ancient tradition that Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, built the first church on this site in honour of his mother Helena, the finder of the True Cross, it is clear from its mention in ancient documents that a church stood here in the 12th century, and it is reasonably probable that a church had existed here from Saxon times. But, at any rate, whatever its earlier history, the northern part is not, as might be supposed, an aisle of the church, but it is historically a separate church (which was built later), being the conventual church of the Priory of St. Helen, which had then been recently founded by William, son of William the Goldsmith; and this northern part of the church is to this day commonly spoken of as the Nuns' Choir. The Nuns were Black Nuns, i.e., their habit was black and they followed the rule of St. Benedict. In mediæval English, they were spoken of as the Mincheons of St. Helen; and from the fact that they possessed

property in Mincing Lane, that street (so Stow tells us) came to be so called. There are but few architectural features of the present Church which belong to the 13th century, but there are some—e.g. the arch nearer to you of the two which divide the chancel from the Nuns' choir, the doorway in the N. wall of the Nuns' choir which led from the Nunnery into the church, and the lancet window at the W. end of the N. wall. Of the devotions of the Nuns and the religious observances of those days, there are some reminders still extant. There is a very beautiful hagioscope or squint with six apertures, through which the Nuns, prevented from attendance at Divine Service in Church, were enabled to join in the celebration of the Mass from the seclusion of their own cloisters. Above this squint is an Easter Sepulchre for the reservation of the Host over Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the stalls now used by our choir are the original nuns' stalls, and some of them are furnished with misericord seats. Also there remains in the N. wall, part of a stairway which led to the dorter and sleeping apartment of the Prioress. Two large openings in the North wall should be noticed. They were originally barred with iron stanchions and are now, since the recent discoveries on the external face of the North wall, believed to have been communication-grates between the Cloister (or a sacristy chapel) and the conventual Church. In the middle ages, the Nuns' Church was quite shut off from the Parish Church by a screen which followed the course of the central arcade from end to end. The Parish Church underwent many changes in its early centuries: two chapels, one of the Blessed Virgin, the other of the Holy Ghost, and a chantry chapel, were built to the south of the choir about the middle of the 14th century, and remain singularly complete examples of that period, each chapel being furnished with a piscina and very beautiful niches. The very elegant arcade which divides the parish church from the Nuns' Choir was built, it is supposed, at the end of the 15th century, soon after the death of Sir John Crosby in 1475, with money (500 marks)

left in his will for the improvement of his parish church. The low-pitched roof also dates from this time.

Then, half a century later, in 1537 in King Henry VIII's reign, came the dissolution of the Priory. The King gave the Priory and its church to one of his courtiers, Richard Williams, *alias* Cromwell, great-great-grandfather of Oliver Cromwell. Soon after, the Priory Church was thrown into the Parish Church, while, in 1542, the Priory conventual buildings were sold to the Leathersellers Company. But alas! In 1799 these and the ruins of the other buildings of the Priory were demolished to make room for a new Leathersellers' Hall and St. Helen's Place, and now nothing remains of the Priory but its Church.

The early 17th century gave us the characteristic Jacobean pulpit, a two-decker originally, and in 1633 the South door was rebuilt by Inigo Jones, who also designed the inner porchways of the West and South entrances of the Parish Church. Later in the 17th century, in the mayoralty of Sir John Lawrence (1665, the year of the plague), who was distinguished for his benevolence to the poor during that terrible visitation, the beautiful and almost unique Mayor's sword-rest in carved wood was set up in the church. It is now placed on the South wall of the chancel. Our organ belongs to the 18th century. The 19th century contributed several smaller restorations and towards the end of it, my predecessor, the Rev. J. A. L. Airey, got together and spent on the church no less a sum than £12,000. Besides a general renovation of the fabric, all human remains were removed from the Church, the floor being lowered several feet, new vestries were built and the beautiful chancel and side screens, the gifts of City Companies, and the Reredos were erected. The chancel and sanctuary pavements, laid down at the same time, command our admiration. For these works Pearson was the architect. And even the 20th century has had its part, though a smaller one and not so much in the beautifying of the Church as in the strengthening

of its fabric, on which some £600 had to be spent in 1910. Four years ago the fall of a purlin from the roof of the Nuns' Choir showed that the roof was in a dangerous condition and needed immediate restoration. It was found that, owing to the ravages of the death-watch beetle, *Xestobium tessellatum*, almost the whole roof was affected—some of the principals even having large holes in them. The renovation, which was carried out under the direction of Mr. Frank L. Pearson, was of a conservative character—no new wood was introduced, but where necessary the old wood was strengthened by the introduction of steel fitch plates. The cost of the work was about £2,300 which was contributed for the most part locally. The demolition last year of houses in St. Helen's Place and the clearance and excavation of the site in preparation for the new building of the G.N.T. Co., revealed many features of interest connected with the former Priory buildings. I need not enlarge on this subject as it is to be dealt with exhaustively by other and more competent speakers. I may add, however, that access to the external face of the North wall has been secured by means of a corridor or passage. The provision of this and the necessary renovation of this wall have been obtained at the cost altogether of upwards of £600.

I say little about the interesting series of monuments which have given the Church the name of the Westminster Abbey of the City, because they can only be appreciated by a close examination. Some of them were originally in the church of St. Martin Outwich which stood at the corner of Threadneedle Street and was demolished in 1875. With a few important exceptions the monuments belong to the reign of Queen Elizabeth and form a striking illustration of those spacious days; and they also show that this parish was at that time both wealthy and fashionable. In it resided such men as Sir Thomas Gresham, the founder of London's world-commerce; Sir John Spencer, known to his contemporaries as *Rich* Spencer; Sir William Pickering,

Ambassador to the Court of Spain and in the early part of Elizabeth's reign looked upon as a likely suitor for the Queen's hand; and Captain Martin Bond, who commanded the City Trained Bands which were reviewed by Queen Elizabeth at Tilbury Fort on the approach of the Spanish Armada. In former times many of the Lord Mayors held their mayoralty in this parish, either at Crosby Place or at Gresham House, and this may be the reason why to this day, in the Mayor's Court in a suit for money due, the debt is said by a legal fiction to have been incurred "in the parish of St. Helen, London, and within the jurisdiction of this Court." The Royal Society was born and for many years held its meetings at Gresham House in this parish.

The parish has been rebuilt over and over again. Not one of its ancient houses remains, except this the House of God in its midst—Gresham House is no more except in name; Crosby Hall is no more; in spite of historical memories and architectural merits, it was removed in 1907. The Church alone remains to connect our generation with the generations that are past, and we hope and pray, those also which are to come. For 700 years at least, God's name has been honoured here, and under varying rites and differing ceremonials His worship has never ceased.