SUBSTANCE OF A LECTURE DELIVERED BY THE

VEN. ARCHDEACON BICKERSTETH, D.D., ON GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE,

AT LINSLADE, FEB. 29, 1864.

The ARCHDEACON said—I assure you it has given me great pleasure to come here to endeavour to give you such few thoughts as I may be able to offer in the course of an hour, on the subject of Gothic Architecture. It is one which concerns us all as churchmen. I might say it has a national interest to us; for we can go nowhere in this favoured land of ours, and not meet with examples of different periods in the history of this great and interesting science. To myself, personally, the subject possesses a special interest; for an Archdeacon ought, surely, to know something of the principles of this science, that he may be able to exercise a wholesome check on the barbarisms which might be perpetrated, if there were no controlling influence to guide zeal in the right direction, and to restrain sciolists from exhibiting their ignorance in dealing with our glorious national fabrics.

It is best, in treating of any matter, to begin at the beginning; and if I say anything which is perfectly familiar to those who have had the opportunity of studying the subject, I hope they will pardon me, since my wish is to make this lecture so clear as to be capable of being understood by the youngest and least informed. To begin, then, at the foundation, we must go to ancient Rome for our starting point in Christian architecture. I believe it is now an acknowledged fact that the models of the first buildings erected for Christian worship were the Roman Basilicas. The Basilica was a large edifice to be found in all the important Roman cities; it was the place where justice was administered, and matters of commerce were transacted. It was an oblong building, divided into three parts by rows of columns, and thus forming, I might venture to say, the nave and aisles in embryo. At one end of the building was what, in the church, is represented by the apse, where, in ancient times, the Prætor sat to administer justice, attended by the lictors and other Roman officers. Here, too, was the altar, on which sacrifice was offered before entering on any important business. The Basilica was, in fact, the type and model on which the earliest Christian churches were founded. I need not remind you that, in the first ages of Christianity, the Christians, in days of cruel persecution, could have no buildings in which to worship. They worshipped in the catacombs, and in other secret places, wherever they might; but when persecution ceased, they began at once to raise suitable temples for the worship of God. Some persons have attempted to ground on this what seems to me a very futile argument—that because, in those dreary times, Christians worshipped where and as they could, therefore God is better pleased to be worshipped in a mean and paltry structure, than in one which is elevating to our spirits, and befitting the place where His Honour dwells. But, at all events, we find that, when Constantine gave his powerful hand to aid the cause of Christianity, then sumptuous and spacious edifices began to rise everywhere; and the first model after which they were designed was the Basilica. There are still extant the remains of two interesting buildings of this kind—the Basilica of Trajan, and that of Maxentius. There are also remains of a Basilica at Pompeii, and there is one at Treves, which to this day is used as a Christian church. The next step was to throw out from this oblong building what we now call transepts, at right angles to the nave. According to the nature of the extension, this would constitute a cruciform church, either of the Latin or the Greek form. If the transepts were equal in length to the chancel and the nave, it assumed the Greek form; if the nave was longer than the transepts, then it formed a Latin cross.

This being the origin of Christian temples, we have so far cleared our way towards an enquiry into the character of the first Christian churches in this our own island. We have little, if any, information with regard to the buildings in which Christians worshipped during the time of the Roman occupation. That there were Christians in this country during that period there can be no doubt whatever; but the buildings where they worshipped can scarcely be said to exist. There are few, if any, Roman remains of Christian edifices to be found in this land.

Probably when the Saxon invasion took place, whatever buildings there were of this kind were swept away by the ruthless hands of the invaders. The question then arises next: Where are the Saxon buildings? Are there any Christian temples of the Saxon period? There has been a great deal of learned investigation on this point, but it is now generally admitted that there are *some* Saxon remains. Probably the greater number of Saxon churches were wooden. This island was at that period very much covered with woodland, and wood furnished the most readily accessible material for all buildings. The old Saxon terms seem to imply this: the expression signifying to build a house is *getymberen;* and our word *beetle,* or *bytel,* is derived from *bylidn,* to build. Besides, there are records showing that, as a matter of fact, most of the churches were of wood; at the same time, where building-stone prevailed, particularly in the latter portion of the Saxon period, we find that stone was used. (The lecturer here exhibited a number of views of various Saxon churches, from the time of Edward the Confessor, including those of Bradford in Wilts, Stow in Lincolnshire, Deerhurst in Gloucestershire; and pointed out the early development of the pointed arch, the first form being simply two slabs or stones placed obliquely against one another. For the loan of these valuable drawings the Archdeacon expressed his obligation to Mr. Parker, of Oxford.)

Coming down, then to the time of Edward the Confessor, we find very few remains of Saxon buildings. But I may mention that there are in the county of Buckingham two or three undoubted examples of Saxon still existing. Such instances may be seen in Wing church, in the church of Caversfield, near Bicester, and in that of Iver, in the south of the county. But as time advanced, a new spirit seems to have come over the church builders in this country. Before the Norman conquest (A.D. 1066) there were edifices of a decidedly Norman character. No doubt the intercourse which began to take place between this country and the Continent was not without its influence on the buildings of the period. I should have mentioned, when speaking of the Basilica, that the roof was semicircular, like the barrel of an ordinary drain; and there are in Ireland several buildings, called Oratories, well known to antiquaries, having this circular roof, with the stones set as the voussoirs in an arch, with the keystone. In our groined roofs in this country at a later period we usually placed a roof over the stone to protect it from the weather; but in these older buildings the stone roof itself formed the outer covering, being merely cemented over to keep out the wet. These oratories may be suggestive as to the source from whence Ireland derived its Christianity.

At the period of the Norman Conquest, we find that there were several Norman cathedrals existing in this country; but it is remarkable that soon after the Conquest most of the old Norman cathedrals were re-built. As we enter on the twelfth century, we find the work of church building going on at an extraordinary rate. It is an interesting fact that as soon as the first thousand years of Christianity were completed, there seems to have been a remarkable impulse given to church building, which is to be accounted for in this way. There was a prevailing notion among Christian people that the world would come to an end at the close of the first thousand years after Christ, and that, therefore, it was superfluous to bestow much pains or attention on buildings. But as soon as the Millennium panic, so to speak, had passed away, churchmen took courage, and building began to go on at a gigantic pace; and so it comes to pass that it is to this period that we are indebted for many of the most beautiful naves in our fine old cathedrals. I do not know whether most present are acquainted with the general characteristics of a Norman building. If not, you have only to go to the little village of Stewkley. I remember making a pilgrimage out of Shropshire to see that church—long before I had the least idea that I should ever have any official connection with this county—as an interesting specimen of a Norman church. You will observe in the Norman architecture the heavy capitals, the general solidity and massiveness of the whole structure. Certain ornaments are very freely used; the zig-zag moulding, the billet-moulding, and, not indeed the dog-tooth moulding, but that which became the dog-tooth of a later time. I must beg you to fix firmly in your memories the successive phases of our architecture. The Norman, we have seen, prevailed chiefly in the twelfth century; the Early English in the thirteenth; the Decorated in the fourteenth; the Perpendicular in the fifteenth. But it should be remembered that the last quarter of each century was a period of transition to the next stage. In Norman architecture, though, generally speaking, we find the circular arch, this is not an invariable rule; there are buildings of the Norman period which exhibit the pointed arch. At Fountain's Abbey, in Yorkshire, which is unquestionably Norman, we find the pointed arch. This leads to a most interesting question, the origin of the pointed arch. Some persons have thought that it was formed from observation of the natural interlacing of the boughs in an avenue of trees. Others, again, have supposed that it was formed by the intersection of two semicircular arches. This, however, is involved in doubt, and we can only admire the beauty of the pointed style.

In the course of the twelfth century, the Norman period, very considerable changes took place in the mode of structure. In the latter part of the century the work was, generally speaking, far better executed than at an earlier period. There is a remarkable illustration of this in Canterbury Cathedral. Happily for us, the records of that cathedral exist, so that we know almost to a day at what time each portion of the building was completed. The greater part of the first Norman Cathedral was burnt down, and the second was finished some fifty years afterwards, A.D. 1180. The old ornaments are very rough and coarse, but those in the other part much finer. We know as a fact that the earlier ones were wrought, not with the chisel, but with the axe. Another interesting circumstance is this: it is only at a later period of the style that the builders seem to have learnt to employ machines to lift the great stones. The stones in the earlier period appear to have been such as a man could carry up to their place on his shoulder; but those of the later period must have been wound up by machinery—showing considerable progress in the mechanical part of the work. It is rather the fashion to underrate Norman architecture, and even Mr. Hallam, in his "History of the Middle Ages," as I venture to think, too much depreciates it. Of this, however, I am very sure, that it was out of Norman architecture that our beautiful Early English was evolved, just as many of our noblest works, moral and intellectual, sprang out of the stern strength of our old Saxon ancestry.

We come next to the Early English period. The pointed arch, which had already been invented, became the great feature of this style. We find three different kinds of pointed arch—the lancet, the equilateral, and the drop arch—formed respectively on an acute angle, the angle of an equilateral triangle, and an obtuse angle. But there are many other interesting characteristics in the Early English period. In the windows, we find shafts, standing out from the jambs of the windows. Wherever you see a triple lancet window—the middle light perhaps a little above the others, and the shafts standing out from the jambs of the arch, that is unmistakeably Early English in its character. Besides this, there is another thing which it is desirable to understand—the peculiar character of the mouldings, which may often as certainly lead you to the date of the building as any historical record. You may notice the great depth of the mouldings, and the little fillet on the rounded portion, which mark the period certainly as somewhere in the thirteenth century. If you wish to see a good specimen of Early English moulding, you can hardly find one more interesting than the doorway in the south porch of Aylesbury church—you will there see such a wealth and depth of moulding, producing its beautiful results of light and shade, as is seldom to be found in an ordinary parish church. There is the deep hollow, the rounded outline, and the little fillet in the centre; and such as these are the crucial evidence, by which persons acquainted with the subject know directly where they are.

We now arrive at the Decorated period, which prevailed through the fourteenth century, the time of the three first Edwards. I hardly know whether to give the preference to the Early English or the Decorated. There is something so exceedingly beautiful in the Early English, especially in its transitional period, that I will only say this; in the one we have our Gothic architecture in the bud, while in the Decorated we have it in its full blossom and perfection, leaving it to your own taste or fancy to settle the comparative merits of the blossom and the bud. There is a marked difference in the windows of the two periods. In the Early English we have splay windows, with pointed arches—either the lancet, the equilateral, or the drop arch—sometimes, but very rarely, cusped. But when we come to the Decorated period we find the cusped arch prevailing largely, and we find also what is called geometrical tracery. The upper portion of the window, from the point where the spring of the arch begins, is filled with different combinations of geometrical forms. There is also a very great difference in the mouldings of the Decorated period. We saw that the chief features of the Early English moulding were the deep round hollow and rounded projections, with the fillet on the top. But in the Decorated we get a totally new form of curve, the ogee moulding—consisting of a concave and a convex line. This is frequently found in the Decorated, seldom if ever in the Early English. We sometimes see in the modern imitations of Early English churches this kind of curve inserted; but we may in such cases settle it in our minds that the designer did not accurately know his profession. Another interesting feature in Decorated architecture is the introduction of ornament into the hollows of these mouldings. There is the ball-flower, rarely, if ever, found in Early English, and the four-leaved flower. These are placed in the hollows, sometimes with extraordinary profusion, and give a great richness to the whole. Another feature of the Decorated style is, that whereas in the Early English the shaft stands out distinct from the wall, in the Decorated the shaft begins to retreat into the jamb. Another interesting characteristic of the Decorated period is what is called a hood moulding, over the architrave of a window, giving very great richness to the whole.

We come, in the fifteenth century, to the fourth great division,—the Perpendicular, which takes its name from what has been rightly styled the "perpendicularity" of the whole of the details of the architecture of this period. In the Decorated we noticed the flowing character of the tracery, which is based on some geometrical figures; but if you look at a Perpendicular window, the mullions run straight up to the architrave. This is by no means the only difference: there is also a vast difference in the moulding. In the Perpendicular period you have no longer the depth of light and shade: the mouldings become wider and more shallow. There is less room for ornament: the whole becomes thin and shallow as compared with the earlier periods. I do not think a better name than Perpendicular could possibly have been chosen; the windows often seem nothing more than panels knocked out to let in the light. Not that there is not a great deal of ornament in the Perpendicular period. In some parts of England it is so overlaid with ornament, that the proportions are destroyed. Hence it has been termed the Florid Gothic, which is the same as Perpendicular. It is a principle quite worthy of the attention of every one interested in drawing—and, indeed in every study that engages your attention—first get your outline right, and the details will take care of themselves. There is nothing I have admired more in travelling through Scotland than the great boldness of outline in some of the old Scottish cathedrals. There is little or no ornament; they are built of granite which will not easily admit of the finer touches of the chisel. But you are impressed with the idea that they who designed these cathedrals knew perfectly well what they were about. The great mind looks to the outline, gets that clearly, and the detail takes care of itself. The little mind runs into details, and forgets the outline, and the result is a spoiled and foolish affair. It is surprising what mistakes are made for want of due consideration of outline. A man sees a beautiful window, and he says, "I should like that to be put into my church." He gets a drawing, and puts this window into some little structure where it looks like an oak in a flower-pot: it is not the right thing in the right place, because, in order to adapt it to its new position, every single line ought to have been drawn again, and the whole window reduced, in fact, to its proper proportions.

I have endeavoured to give you a very sketchy outline of the progress of Gothic architecture, brought down to the close of the fifteenth century, and the beginning of the sixteenth. After that I cannot point to much that is worthy of our admiration. There is certainly in the Debased style, which begins to manifest itself at this time, a boldness of outline; but you feel that the spirit and elegance of the science are passing away. If I may revert again to my own church, you have a fine specimen of the Debased period in the west window of Aylesbury Church. The term Debased expresses exactly what it is: it looks as if some immense weight had been put on the top and pressed it down. It is a four-centred arch, struck from four centres, and gives a flatness to the whole thing, which spoils it as a work of beauty. You will at once see what I mean, if you stand in front of this window, and allow your eye to bisect it vertically. You will then perceive that it is lop-sided. I do not mean to say there are not some beautiful buildings erected early in the sixteenth century. Certainly some of that period, and even of the Jacobean, are worthy of imitation; but we feel that we have passed out of the range of the highest art so far as Christian buildings are concerned. Attempts were made from time to time to revive Gothic architecture, but with little success. Even Sir Christopher Wren, with all his knowledge and talent, seems to have been constrained to succumb to the low taste of the period. He had an eye to the details of Gothic architecture, for he did a great deal in Westminster Abbey, but he was overcome by the prevailing taste of the day, and his buildings are all in that classical style which we all, I hope, agree is not the most suitable for Christian worship.

Within the last fifty years we have to rejoice in the regeneration of Gothic architecture. This science has become the study of men of great intellect and power,—I need hardly mention such names as Scott, Street, Woodyer, and others,—men who have lifted it into its proper position, and have succeeded in reviving in the minds of the intelligent people of this country a true love and veneration for the architecture which our ancestors have bequeathed to us.

I should have liked, had time permitted, to say a few words about French architecture in relation to English. The Early French architecture is very similar indeed to our Early English. There is a difference, though not very marked, between the Decorated English and the Decorated French, but between the Perpendicular English and the corresponding period of the French there is a very marked difference. The French is called *flamboyant*, from the character of the tracery, the lines exhibiting the wavy character of flame. Some of this character, or very similar, may be seen in Great Horwood Church, and other churches in England; but it is still peculiar to France.

I hope I have succeeded, in however slight measure, in giving you some idea of the origin and progress of Gothic architecture. It is quite impossible, in an elementary lecture, to do justice to so great a subject; and indeed I feel that I ought to apologize for the light texture of this address; but if you wish for further information, I cannot do better than recommend to you Mr. Parker's excellent work, "An Introduction to the Study of Gothic Architecture"—a little 5s. book, in which you will find a full and copious account of the various periods of architecture, such as will be a safe guide to you in the study, up to a certain point, and will assist you very much in applying your knowledge to various examples wherever you go. For there is this point of interest attaching to the study of Gothic architecture; you can go nowhere where you will not find means of applying your knowledge. Amongst our many thousand old parish churches, while there is such an endless variety, you will generally find portions of these different styles in happy combination. There is scarcely a single church of a certain date which does not possess something that will interest the lover of Gothic architecture. Our old parish churches, in their variety of detail, with their general unity of structure, are a happy and beautiful type of the English church, varied in its circumstances, and yet possessing that general unity by which it has held, and I trust will long hold us together in the bonds of a common faith and common worship. It is an interesting fact that, at this period, when the Church of England, by God's goodness, has so risen in influence and power—(risen, I hope, through the efforts and self-denial of the clergy, assisted by a more intelligent appreciation on the part of the Christian laity of our doctrine and ritual)—that at this period there should have been such a revival in the knowledge of the structure of the buildings with which this doctrine and ritual are identified. It should teach us this very instructive lesson,—that Art in its highest and purest form is intimately connected with the progress of Religion, and that in proportion as man rises in moral and religious excellence, in that proportion he will rise in the knowledge and exercise of the kindred Arts. Religion and Art, as I believe, God has joined together, and "what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."