



Reading Abbey.

By Mr. J. Okey Taylor, J.P.

PRESUMING that any information relative to the above may prove of more or less interest to your readers, I venture to allude to circumstances which to the existing generation may not be known, but which may in some degree tend to elucidate certain questions which have been prominently brought forward through articles in your Journal, and by a recent lecture given by that ardent and intelligent Archæologist, the Rev. J. M. GUILDING. For many years prior to 1857 that portion of the site of the Abbey now the adjunct to the Public Gardens, together with the riverside land up to Blake's Bridge, was the property of private individuals, and was purchased by the Local Authority in order to preserve the Ruins, which previously had been but little cared for. About the same period, and soon after the purchase was completed, much distress existed in the town owing to exceptionally severe frosts. A relief fund was raised by public subscription, and with the sanction of the Corporation a large number of labouring men were employed in excavating the site of the Abbey Ruins. Under the supervision of a small committee (of which the author of this communication was a member, and upon whom this work chiefly devolved), the excavation was continued largely at the cost of the Relief Fund and after at the public cost, so that the entire area of the site was excavated to a depth varying from two to five feet, and the soil thus removed was conveyed to the river frontage and was chiefly the means of forming the embankment to Blake's Bridge, where the present avenue of chestnut trees now exists. These excavations led to the discovery of many objects of interest and antiquity. Numerous pieces of stone were found buried in the soil, the carved work upon which was in a greater or less degree worthy of preservation. Many of these appear to have formed either the base

or the cap of columns of various sizes, probably some belonging to window or door jambs ; these were discovered buried in the soil. Some of these are now placed about the Ruins, whilst others were worked in amongst the material used in the construction of the arch over the pathway leading to the Ruins from the Forbury Gardens. The excavations further brought to view the bases of three large columns upon the north side of the Abbey grounds, which are, I believe, rightly supposed to have been the supporting columns of the arches of the nave of the Abbey Church. These run east and west, and there may be seen corresponding bases of columns in the grounds attached to the Roman Catholic Church, now in the occupation of the Rev. Mr. Weale, the minister of this Church. Again evidence of the nature of the external casing of the flint and concrete ruins with stone was made visible in several places, and notably in the moulded work shewn about 18 inches above the present level of the pathway on each side of the arch or doorway at the North-Western corner under which you pass to the Chapter House or Great Hall. Within the walls of the latter was discovered the ledge or what probably formed a stone seat round the interior of this Chamber. Passing the Chapter House on the West side and turning through the arch to the left leading to the area where now the shows of the Reading Horticultural Society are held, and running due east commencing from this arch, was discovered some very interesting tessellated pavement, which when first exposed was apparently in a condition of good preservation, but after being open a little time, I suppose from the action of the air, it crumbled so much that it was thought better to re-cover it with earth, and there it probably remains to this day. Blocks of the walls were also developed by the earth around being removed, and in several instances were found lying in various shapes and angles, pretty clearly showing that explosives must have been used in the demolition of the Abbey walls. Some of these blocks especially may be noticed in the space to the south and west of the supposed South Transept. In one of the recesses here may be noticed the chimney-piece or as some call it a Tomb Canopy. This was presented by the late Mr. Lovejoy, who said that he believed it to be a Canopy of a Tomb, that it had been in his possession some time, and that it came from the Ancient Establishment of the Greyfriars. At the time of its presentation the carved Tudor flower was very prominent on many parts of it, and even now, though time and exposure have largely effaced these, they may be traced. Under this is the stone coffin which the then Forbury

gardener (Mr. Davis) received from an adjoining resident. At the time of its presentation it was in a very broken and dilapidated condition, not perhaps so much to be wondered at, inasmuch as, according to the statement of the donor, it had been lying about in his garden uncared for during a considerable period. At this time one side of the coffin was fully one-half broken away, the other side quite one-third, whilst the bottom of it was longer than it now appears and broken away irregularly, the feet end was quite gone and the head of it had a piece broken away. Mr. Davis took upon himself the responsibility of placing it where it now is; he obtained the aid of a mason and he had the two sides made up by the addition of new stone, the jagged bottom cut off square at the feet end and a new stone end put in, and a new piece fitted into the gap at the head. All this (as Mr. Guilding and others have pronounced it) may have been acts of vandalism, but it must be borne in mind that at this period, 1858-1860, there was no Berkshire Archæological Society in existence, neither was there a Mr. Guilding or a Dr. Stevens to waken or stir up an interest in such matters, or even a local Museum to educate the public mind. Here it may be said that there is nothing in this statement shewing that this coffin is not the one alluded to by "Octogenarian" in his very interesting publication, and by Mr. Guilding in the paper which he read at the annual meeting of the Archæological Association. Now that Reading possesses such an excellent Museum this relic of the Abbey certainly ought there to find a place, and it may fairly be hoped that yet some further evidence relating to it may be obtained from the prominence given to the subject. Unfortunately the residence or whereabouts of Mr. Davis (the late Forbury Gardener) or of Mr. J. G. B. Marshall (a former Borough Surveyor) is not known, or they might have furnished a corroboration of the above circumstances, even if one or both could not have added to the same in some material degree. It may be interesting to add that the Abbey Gateway became about this period the property of the Corporation by purchase, and it may not be inappropriate to allude here to the restoration of the Gateway thirty years ago, under the direction of the late Sir G. Gilbert Scott. For many years prior to 1860 this fine specimen of mediæval architecture had been rapidly falling to decay. With the view of staying this, and soon after the conveyance of the building to the Local Authority, Sir G. G. Scott was consulted. About this same period the magistrates of the county determined upon the erection of the Assize Courts upon the ground immediately adjoining, and in

order that the Gateway should continue to stand out prominently, and not be intersected by buildings of a different style of architecture, an arrangement was made by means of a conference between the Borough and County Authorities for the county building to be set back several feet from the line originally contemplated. I am fortunately enabled to furnish a copy of the report which Sir Gilbert Scott presented to the Corporation, as follows :—

“I have in compliance with your directions made a careful survey of the Abbey Gateway, in the first instance myself and subsequently by my experienced practical assistant, Mr. Burlison.

I find some parts to have suffered severely from structural failure, and the greater portion to be very much affected by time and decay as well as by deliberate injury and alteration.

The parts which have structurally suffered are especially the Southern Arch with the Pier on its Western side (these will have to be in a considerable degree re-built) also the Pier at the North Western angle, which will demand some considerable and very substantial reparation. Next to these I will mention the base mouldings of the exterior, which have been cut away, almost throughout, and must be renewed. The level of the ground has also been raised about one foot nine inches, which I would recommend to be restored to its proper level.

The next most prominent deficiency is the entire loss of the Parapet, both to the building generally and to its Turrets. This with the Cornice will have to be new. After these, the most marked deficiency is the removal or walling up of several of the smaller windows, especially in the upper storey: these will have to be renewed or restored as the case may be.

Beyond what I have above enumerated, the principal external works required are of the nature of partial restorations, underpinning and general repairs. The Roof is covered with lead, which is not in good condition, and its timbers will require to be, in many parts, renewed, its gutters re-modelled, &c. The Floors, Partitions, &c., will also demand considerable reparation.

The Gateway is a work of great architectural interest and value, and is well deserving of the most careful restoration. It seems to date from about 1250, and is an excellent specimen of the style of that period.

Many curious antiquarian questions suggest themselves in examining the ancient structure, but with these I will not at this time trouble you. It is not clearly apparent by what means the upper storey was originally approached, but I imagine that it must have been by a staircase in the North Eastern portion, and it might be placed again in that position. The upper stories would then become available for any purpose which might suggest itself.

I am of opinion that the cost of restoring the whole, as specified above, will approach closely to £1,000.

I have the honour to be, Gentlemen,

Your very obedient Servant,

GEO. GILBERT SCOTT.

London, March 30th, 1860.”

This report was taken into consideration in the month of April, 1860, and resulted in the Local Authority determining as follows :—

"That a sum of £500 be voted towards the cost of the restoration and that a public subscription be invited in order to raise the fund to £1,000, and Mr. J. Okey Taylor be requested to act as Hon. Sec. for the purpose of obtaining the same."

As the object to be effected (the restoration of the Gateway) was not only of local but of general interest, and inasmuch as at a then recent visit of the Members of the British Archæological Association to Reading this work was very strongly urged, it was hoped that subscriptions would have been forthcoming from this source, but the result proved that only local subscriptions were obtained. The amount subscribed, although considerable, was not quite equal to the requirement, consequently the works were somewhat curtailed chiefly in the substitution of a zinc roof covering instead of lead (this has recently been removed and lead again replaced) and in leaving certain work of carving in some of the niches of the building where it may be observed are placed square blocks of stone which should have been made to correspond with the carved heads existent in the others. As the building is now fortunately in the occupation of the Berkshire Archæological Society it is more than probable that whatever deficiencies may now remain will hereafter receive notice and attention.

