

Ely Cathedral

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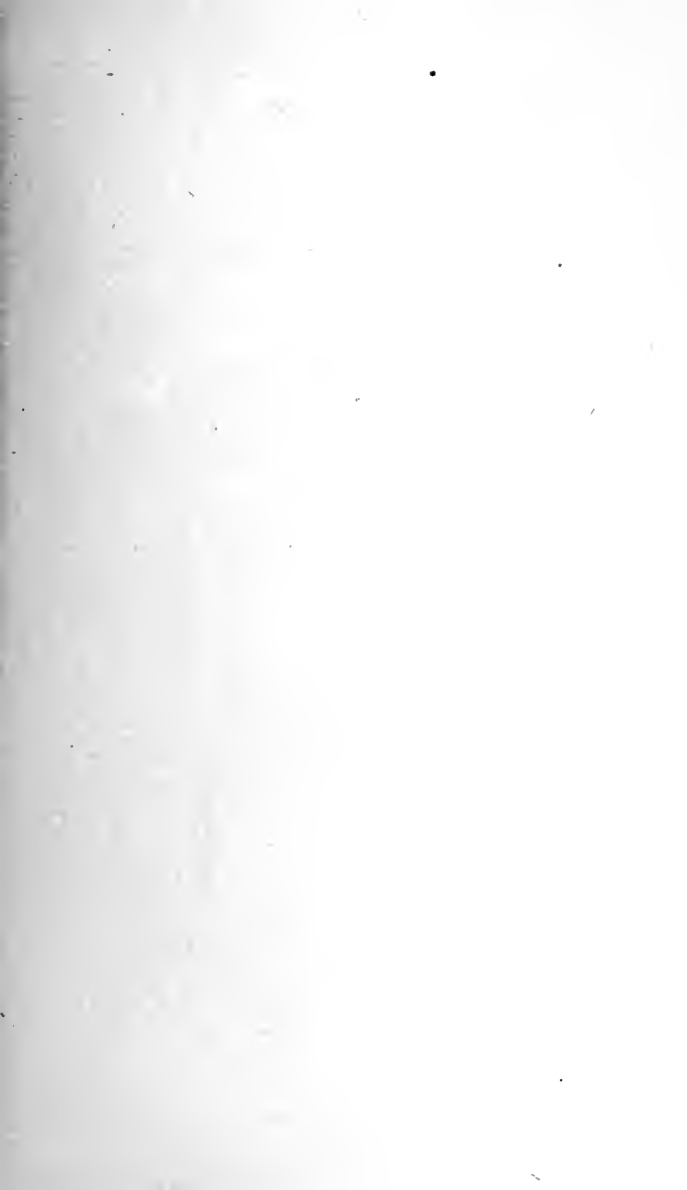
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Ely
Cathedral







The West Front,
from Palace Green

Ely Cathedral

By

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Hon. Canon of Ely

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Ely Cathedral

“HIGH Art in Low Countries” was the title of a lecture delivered some years ago by a distinguished Dean of Ely in one of the principal towns of the East Anglian Fenland. He had no lack of architectural illustrations of his subject, familiar to his audience. Besides his own grand church, with its grand sister-churches of Lincoln and Peterborough, the Fen district supplied him with a surprising number of examples of high art as applied to ecclesiastical buildings; and many parish churches may have been cited by him in the course of his address, as proofs of the existence, in the

Ely Cathedral

Middle Ages, of a very high degree of artistic excellence in the architects who devised them, and in the workmen who carried out the plans and executed the delicate and exquisite details which have happily been in many cases preserved to our own day.

The special wealth of the Fen country in churches of the highest class, some of them almost cathedral-like in dimension, far exceeding the needs of the sparse agricultural population now around them, must impress us with something like astonishment, when we remember that building materials, whether stone or timber, were necessarily brought from less watery districts. In the course of some drainage operations in Lincolnshire many years ago, an ancient barge was discovered laden with blocks of stone. Its timbers were black with age and long immersion, like the well-known "Fen oak," and there can be no doubt that it had been accidentally sunk in the "leam" or water-course, dug, perhaps, for the express purpose

Ely Cathedral

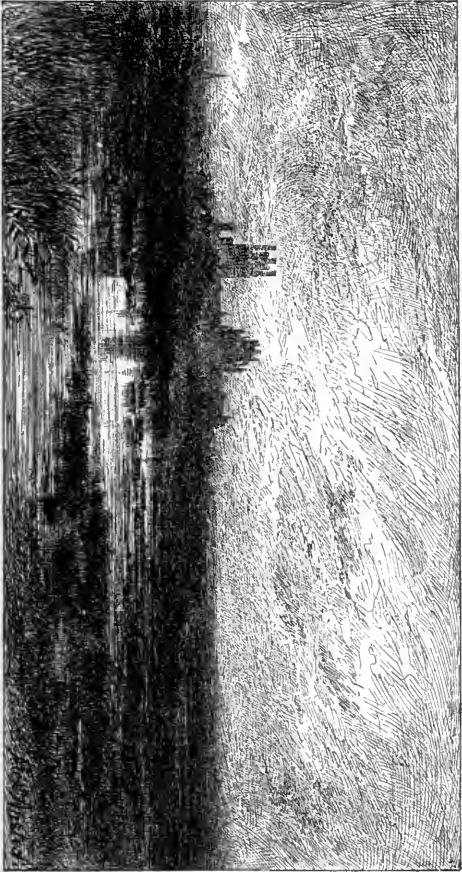
of conveying heavy materials by water-carriage to one of the churches or abbeys in course of construction five or six centuries ago. The Fabric-rolls of Ely Cathedral bear testimony to the determination and perseverance with which our forefathers encountered the difficulties presented by remote position and marshy subsoil; and it is on record that an illustrious Ely architect of the fourteenth century, after finding in a neighbouring county some oak timber trees of a scantling large enough for his needs, had to wait for their delivery at Ely until a road or causeway specially made across the marshes had become sufficiently consolidated to bear the weight of the trucks.

It is in the recollection of these difficulties, overcome with such marvellous energy, courage, and skill, that we would invite our friends to accompany us in a visit to Ely. Our appreciation of the great church will be enhanced if we associate

Ely Cathedral

with it, as we go on, the names of some of those who patiently raised the massive walls of hewn stones brought from distant quarries with infinite pains and labour. We shall try to connect the several epochs marked by architectural changes with the men and manners of the times; for it is only thus that we can read the history of past ages written in edifices founded by the first Norman abbots and bishops, and carried on through some four or more centuries by a long line of successors until the Reformation.

Distant views of the Cathedral, looming in the hazy distance like some huge vessel at sea, are gained from low eminences near Cambridge, from Newmarket Heath, and from various points on the roads from those places. But we shall doubtless arrive by railway, and on leaving the train, and emerging from the station, we cannot fail to be struck by the picture before us. Lincoln on its hill, Durham on its rocky cliff, may have



Distant View of Ely from the South



Ely Cathedral

positions more imposing, but Ely has a charm of its own, rising, as it does, above masses of foliage, with humble low-roofed dwellings in the foreground, nestling amid gardens and orchards, and sheltered by timber trees. The vast church presides and dominates over the houses of the citizens, and dwarfs into insignificance the parish church with its spire, hard by, though this is of fair dimensions and altitude. Lord Macaulay was wont to say that a visit to Ely was a "step into the Middle Ages": probably he meant by this remark that the idea of the old ecclesiastical and monastic supremacy was irresistibly forced upon him by the contrast between the huge abbey-church and its secular surroundings. Ely has never expanded beyond the rank of a small market-town or large agricultural village, and this character is abundantly evident as we gaze at the view before us, and as we advance on foot towards the summit of the gentle eminence crowned by the Cathedral.

Ely Cathedral

We resist the temptation to turn in at the abbey gate-house, which we find on our right at the top of the hill, and follow the street or lane, flanked by ancient buildings, which brings us opposite to the west front. Stepping across the open green on the left, we take in the imposing view from its extremity. From this spot, we have on the right the picturesque buildings of the episcopal palace, raised by Bishops Alcock (1486-1500) and Goodrich (1534-1554); and on the extreme left, in the background, we see the western gable of the Lady Chapel, which occupies a peculiar and perhaps unique position at Ely, as we shall have occasion to note. But we should not see this gable at all if a lamentable mutilation of the west front had not taken place. The northern arm of the façade, which would have hidden it, has disappeared, we know not when or how: its absence cruelly mars the effect of an elevation which in its complete state must have possessed great dignity and grandeur. We note, too,

Ely Cathedral

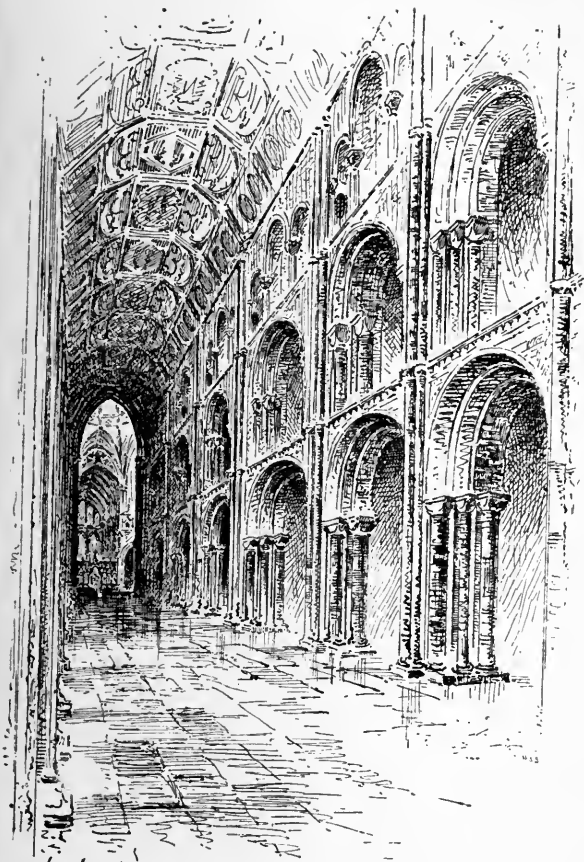
as we take this first general survey of the scene before us, that a porch of large size and of a later style of architecture breaks the line of the façade. Above it rises the great tower, the production, evidently, of two distinct periods—the upper storey, with its corner turrets, being manifestly an after-thought or subsequent addition to the massive structure below. These are first and hasty impressions of the great church which we have come to see, and which we are about to examine in detail.

As we stroll back across the grass, we may receive a first and hasty impression also of its origin and history, if we mention here that not a stone remains of the buildings erected by the great Saxon princess, Etheldreda, who founded the abbey in the year 673, and that there is some reason to doubt if they stood upon the site of the present church. Her convent had been destroyed by the Danes in 870, and had been reinstated, a century later, by Ethelwold, Bishop

Ely Cathedral

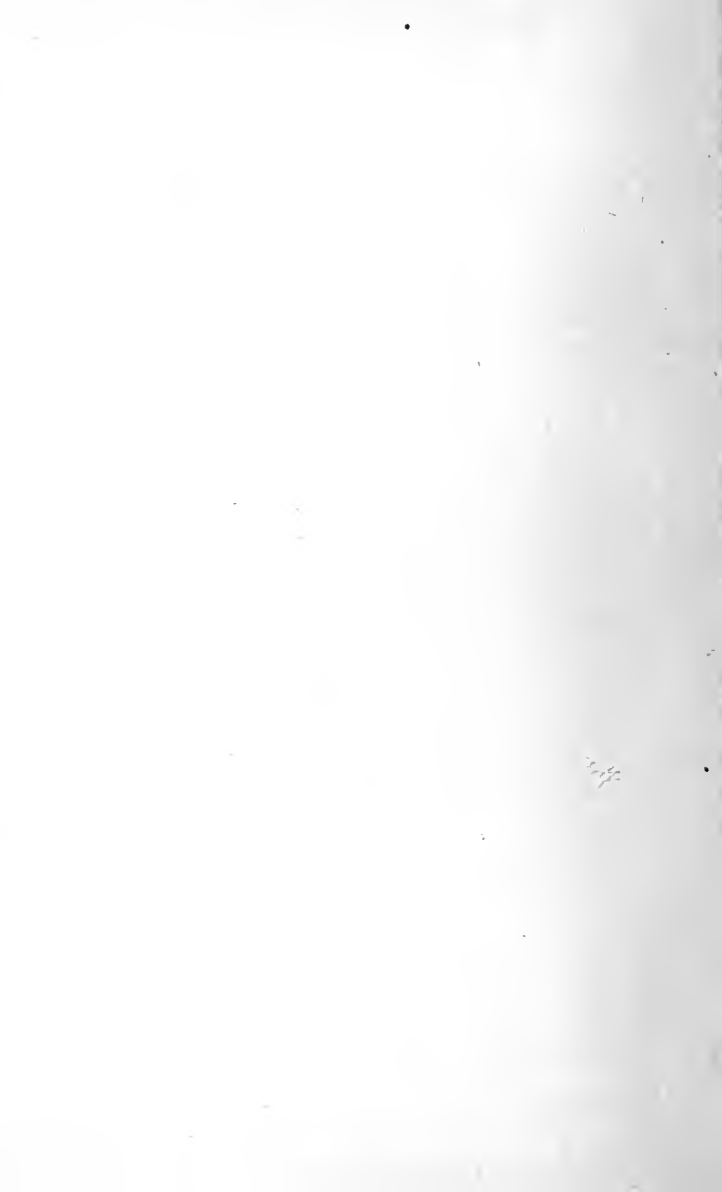
of Winchester. Of Ethelwold's church no recognisable vestige remains, and our thoughts must range over another hundred years, until, in 1082, the first stone of the stately structure before us was laid by Simeon, Abbot of Ely, a relative of William the Conqueror. Simeon was ninety years of age, and we learn with pleasure that he lived ten more years to witness the gradual growth of the mighty edifice which he had founded.

And now we pass through the western porch, erected by Bishop Eustace (1208-1215), without lingering to note its beauty, and stand within the west door, on the threshold of the great church. We have been dealing, thus far, with first impressions, and we may fairly doubt whether any second impression, however well matured, can surpass or equal that which is made by this superb view of the interior, open as it is to us from our standpoint on the doorstep to the distant glass of the eastern lancets. Under favourable effects of light and shade,



Alex. Ansted

The Nave, from the West



Ely Cathedral

this interior, with its long nave of a somewhat light Norman, the lofty terminal arch opening to a central crossing of most unwonted spaciousness, the richly carved screen, with its glittering brass gates, and beyond it, again, the graceful vaulting of the choir, and the stained glass of the eastern windows, must be said to have few rivals among the great churches of England or of France. Its unquestionable charm is not by any means entirely, or chiefly, due to its immense length, unbroken by solid screens. We should be disposed to attribute it very largely to the sense of loftiness suggested by the graceful arches, about 85 feet in height from pavement to apex, carrying the eye upwards to the central lantern, from which light streams down through windows 150 feet above the floor. This sense of loftiness is promoted by the narrowness of the nave, about 32 feet from pier to pier, the height of the painted ceiling above our heads being 86 feet 2 inches. A somewhat light Norman,

-Ely Cathedral

we have said, characterises this nave, light, that is, compared with the Norman of Durham, and strangely different from the Norman of Gloucester and of Tewkesbury. The great naves of Norwich and of Peterborough may be instructively compared with it.*

We note, as we advance along the central alley, that the arches of the triforium are equal in height to those of the lower arcade; and we must call special attention to this, as it gives a peculiar character to the whole of the subsequent additions to the church. The triforium galleries extend over the aisles, and it is impossible to deny that their roofs of rough timber intrude themselves on the eye in an unwelcome manner. In many foreign examples (we may cite Tournai, Laon, and St. Rémi at Reims), these galleries are vaulted. Possibly, too, we may allow ourselves to wish that a stone vault had been

* See Murray's "Handbook to the Eastern Cathedrals," p. 65.

Ely Cathedral

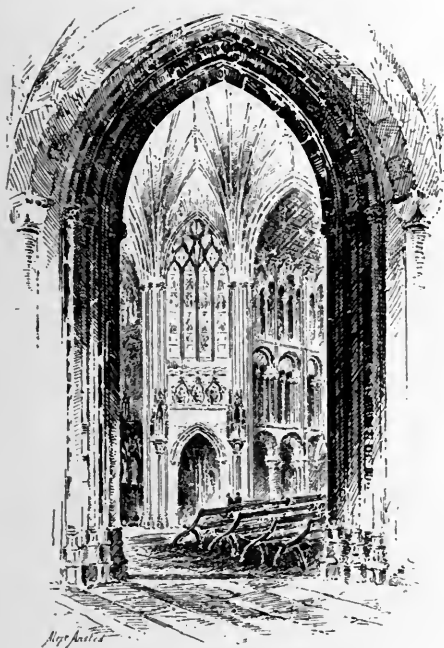
placed upon the nave itself, as at Durham. Our English builders seem to have mistrusted their powers when confronted with the task of covering wide spans with stone roofs. Peterborough retains to this day its interesting but hardly pleasing flat ceiling of wood, with its original decoration. The nave of Ely, as first completed (about 1174, or somewhat earlier), was probably covered in with a similar ceiling. Subsequent events, however, led to the removal of this wooden covering, and it is very possible that a vault may have been contemplated by the architects of the fourteenth century, as at Norwich, where a beautiful example of late vaulting was most successfully executed. They allowed the roof of their nave to remain in a most unfinished condition, as if inviting improvements, and it is in the recollection of the present writer that the plain and rough rafters had no kind of adornment, and that the massiveness of the walls appeared to be out of all proportion to

Ely Cathedral

the weight which they had to carry.* This eyesore was removed between the years 1845 and 1865 by the introduction of a boarded ceiling of pentagonal section, painted as we now see it by two accomplished amateurs, Mr. Styleman le Strange and Mr. Gambier Parry, who had been schoolfellows at Eton, and had long shared the same artistic tastes, and the same gift of technical skill in draughtsmanship.

The great specialty of Ely Cathedral, its octagon, is opened before us as we reach the eastern end of the nave. We think it probable that some or many of our readers are aware that it owes its origin to the downfall of the central tower in the year 1321. The tower, erected by Abbot Simeon's masons, "had long been threatening ruin, and the monks had not ventured for some time to sing their offices in the choir, when, on the eve of St. Ermenild (Feb. 12, O.S.),

* See the engraving in Winkle's "Cathedrals," vol. ii.



Looking across the Octagon from S.W. Angle

Ely Cathedral

as the brethren were returning to their dormitory after attending matins in St. Catherine's Chapel, it fell with a mighty crash."* A similar disaster had befallen Winchester in the year 1107. In our own day, the central tower and spire of Chichester suddenly became a heap of ruins. In both these cases, the re-builders limited themselves to an exact reproduction of the original fabric. The Abbey of Ely, however, possessed in its Sacrist, Alan of Walsingham, a true artist, who saw his opportunity in the ruin which had overtaken his church, and who availed himself of it to such purpose that we may search Europe without finding a grander example of original design, bold construction, and charming detail than is presented before our eyes in this octagon. Mr. Beresford Hope, indeed, in a very interesting passage of his "English Cathedral of the Nineteenth Century," p. 195, thinks that "the octagonal lantern at Ely, though

* Murray: "Eastern Cathedrals," p. 191.

Ely Cathedral

unique in England, has parallels (inferior though they be) both at Antwerp and at Milan, two churches, generally speaking, of the fifteenth century, and, by the way, possessing common features of general resemblance." Mr. Fergusson, however,* holds that "Alan of Walsingham, alone of all the architects of Europe, conceived the idea of getting rid of the tall, narrow opening of the central tower, which, though possessing exaggerated height, gave neither space nor dignity to the principal feature. Accordingly, he took for his base the whole width of the church, north and south, including the aisles: then, cutting off the angles of this large square, he obtained an octagon more than three times as large as the square upon which the central tower would have stood." He covered this large area with a vaulting of wood, and on a massive structure, which is a model of masterly carpentering, he raised a lantern of oak, covered with lead.

* "Handbook of Archæology," pp. 869, 870.

Ely Cathedral

The central boss of this lantern is 150 feet above the pavement.

The immense strength of the walls and abutments has led some observers (among them Mr. Fergusson) to the conclusion that Alan intended ultimately to vault his octagon with stone. This may have been the case, but there is certainly nothing temporary or make-shift about the existing structure ; and, as we have seen, we have it on record that infinite pains were taken to procure oak-trees of a size sufficient for the corner-posts of the lantern. However this may have been, there can be no two opinions about the combined grace and grandeur of Alan's work. Perhaps the best point from which to view it is the south-west angle near the door of the verger's vestry. The many lines and levels of piers, windows, and roofs are almost bewildering in their intricacy, and now that colour and gilding have been added to their embellishments, they make up a whole which has been styled by a very competent

Ely Cathedral

judge,* “perhaps the most striking architectural view in Europe.” “It is unsurpassed in Europe,” says another authority,† “in originality of conception as in dignity of design.” We will add that it was finished in 1342. The great architect died, Prior of the Abbey, in 1364. The sculptured heads which support the hood-moulding of the north-west arch of the smaller side of the octagon are believed to represent those of Alan and of his master-mason.

It is not to be supposed that the large floor-space gained by Alan’s masterly device was valued by him and by his compeers for purposes which we should now call “congregational.” So far was this from being the case, that he did not scruple to carry across it the long lines of stalls and fittings of his ritual choir, completely cutting it up and sacrificing both its dignity and

* Mr. R. J. King. See “Murray.”

† Rev. H. H. Bishop.

Ely Cathedral

utility according to our modern notions.* Our survey of the interior would be imperfect and superficial if this were overlooked. Ely Cathedral was no exception to the rule observed in other great churches subject to the Benedictine monastic system, which placed the ritual choir in the centre of the church, under the lantern, and crossing the transept, as at Westminster Abbey, at Winchester and at Norwich, and as re-instated in our own day by Mr. Pearson at Peterborough. The vista from the west end would have been broken, in Alan's time, by a rood-screen, stretched across the nave at the third bay from its eastern extremity. Careful observers may discover, if they please, on the main pier of this bay, on the south side, a small oblique notch left in the masonry, indicating, no doubt, the place of the newel staircase leading up to this rood-loft; and the pier has evidently been repaired or made good

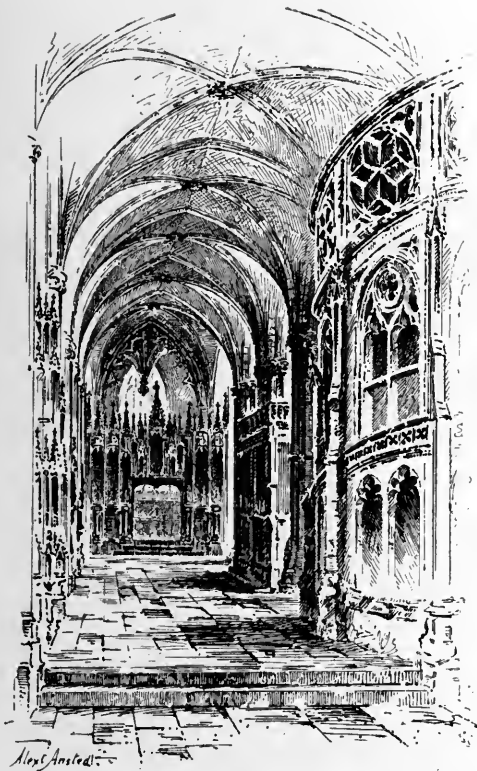
* See plan in Browne Willis, vol. iii., published in 1742.

Ely Cathedral

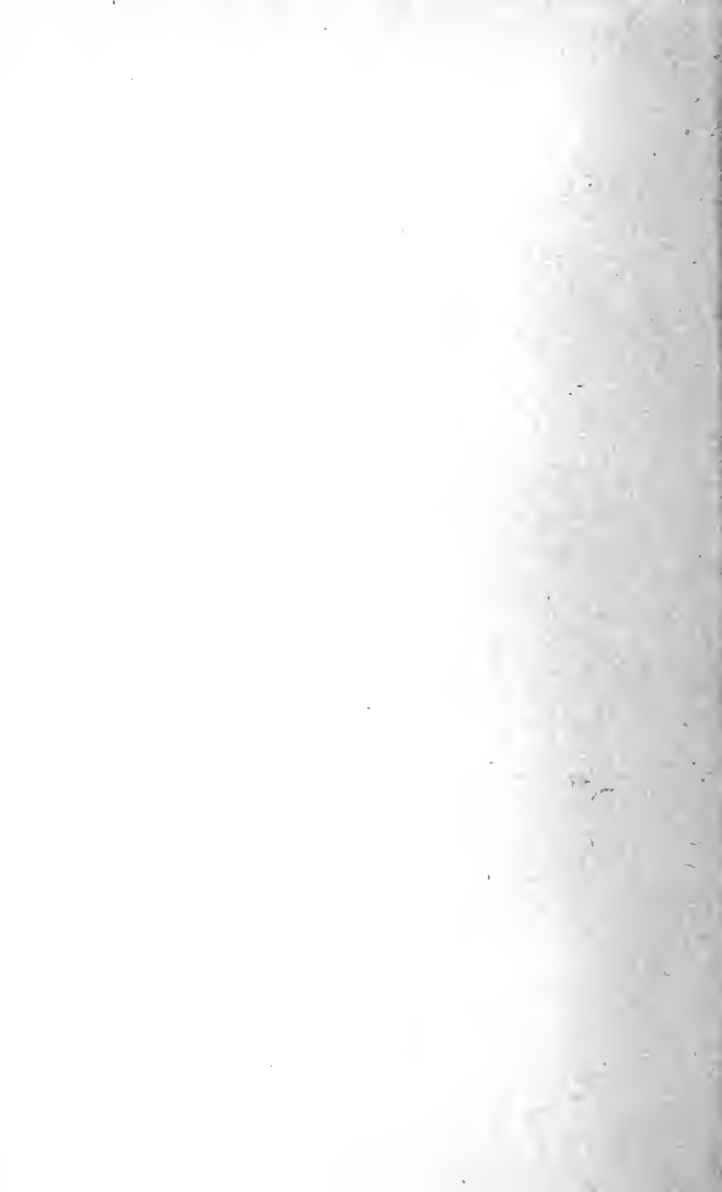
after the removal of some structure abutting upon it. Profuse traces, moreover, of mural decoration in colour will be noticed on these arches, and on the vaulting of the adjacent aisles. It is believed that on the western side of this rood-screen stood a parish altar, with side-altars, for the use of the inhabitants of the city as distinguished from the brethren of the abbey. Of this, however, we are unable to adduce any direct proof. The arch of the triforium in this bay, on the north side, has been much cut away and widened, as if to admit some bulky object. This was probably one of the "pairs of organs," of which the abbey possessed three.* After the Reformation, the organ probably took the place of the rood, or crucifix, in the centre of the screen, as now at York, Lincoln, Exeter, and elsewhere.

The Cathedral of to-day, solid and stable

* Among the fabric rolls, there is a very curious account of the cost of one of these organs built in 1396.



North Aisle of Choir and Staircase to Organ-Loft



Ely Cathedral

as when it was built, is not the cathedral of the Middle Ages as regards its internal arrangements. The ritual choir was removed so recently as 1770, by James Essex of Cambridge, to the six bays of the Presbytery, the altar being placed against the east wall of the church ; the organ, on a screen of his design, interrupting the view of the eastern windows. In this condition the present writer well remembers the church. The existing arrangement was made by Sir G. Scott in the course of the great alterations under Dean Peacock.

Proceeding to the east end, and passing along the north aisle of the choir, behind the stalls, we may note the pretty newel staircase leading up to the organ-loft. This is modern, and is imitated from a well-known example at the church of St. Maclou at Rouen. We turn into the Presbytery, passing through the canopied monument of Bishop Redmayne, with its little altar at the good bishop's feet, and place ourselves at the foot

Ely Cathedral

of the steps, looking west. The view of the whole church from this point is hardly less impressive than that which is gained from the western threshold. Let us try to explain clearly the history of the Cathedral as written in the arches, piers, windows, and vaults which are around and above us. The central tower, we have seen, fell in 1321, and its fall ruined the Norman choir, which had four bays, and was terminated by an eastern apse. But a century previous to this downfall, Bishop Hugh of Northwold (1229-1254) had removed the apse, and had extended or lengthened the Norman choir by six bays of most admirable design in the style of his period, the Early English or First Pointed, which had then superseded the Norman. About 1250, therefore, we should picture to ourselves a great Norman church, with an addition of six eastern bays in the new style, and with a lofty porch of two bays in the same style at the west end. Two styles, thus far, there-

Ely Cathedral

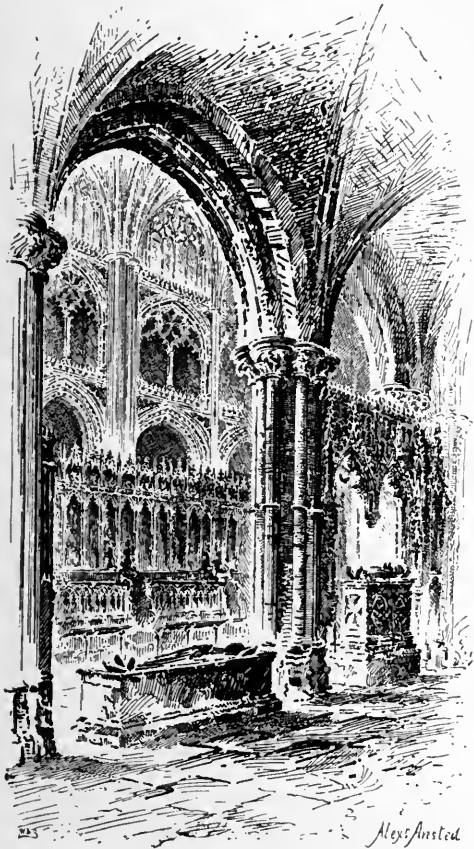
fore, were nobly represented. But the tower fell eastward, utterly wrecking the Norman choir, and a third style, the Decorated or Edwardian, makes its appearance as a matter of course. Alan of Walsingham joined his Octagon to Northwold's Presbytery or retro-choir by three bays of lovely design and most elaborate workmanship, executed between the years 1345 and 1362. In these three exquisite bays the stalls, also designed by him, are now arranged, and a modern screen of oak, with brass grilles and gates, not unworthy of association with the old woodwork, closes in the ritual choir, thus adapted in our own day to modern needs by the zeal, energy, and skill of George Peacock, dean, and George Gilbert Scott, architect, between the years 1845 and 1858.

At Lincoln, at Salisbury, at Amiens, at Chartres, at Reims, Wells, or Exeter, we have complete artistic conceptions, carried out for the most part in one style, and owing their incomparable grace and beauty

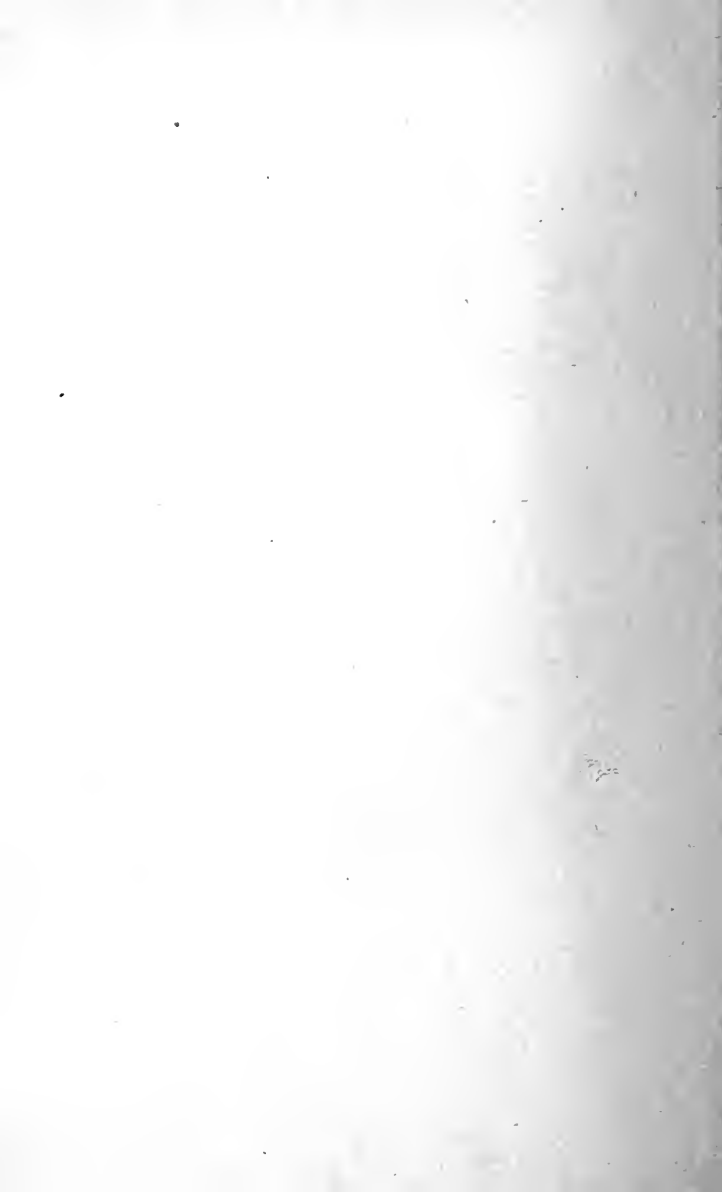
Ely Cathedral

to the general consistency of all their parts. At Ely, on the contrary, we have grace and beauty equally admirable, derived from quite a different source, namely, from comparison and even contrast between the several portions of the church ; and happily the three styles may here be studied, each in a presentment of the highest order of excellence. The Presbytery is deemed by very competent judges to be absolutely perfect as well in its design as in its details. Mr. Beresford Hope says of it,* “Salisbury Cathedral is usually regarded as the typical church in England of the Lancet style but I should place the eastern portion of Ely Cathedral on a much higher level of beauty.” We marvel as we reflect upon the amount of patient labour which must have been bestowed upon those clustered columns of Purbeck marble, now cleaned, repaired, and re-polished, boldly carved as to their capitals with profuse masses of foliage, and

* “English Cathedral of the 19th Century,” p. 36.



View of Walsingham's Choir, as seen from
the North Aisle



Ely Cathedral

having the well-known curious ornament called the "dog-tooth" between the deep mouldings of the arches. The long corbels, or *culs-de-lampe*, which carry the vaulting-shafts, should be particularly noticed.

The beautiful vaulting itself is noticed by the accomplished French architect, Viollet le Duc, who gives an exquisite drawing of part of it in his great work on the architecture of his country.* Alan's bays afford a very early example, possibly the earliest in England on a large scale, of the lierne † vault. The comparison, or contrast, with the plainer vaulting, without liernes, of Northwold's time, close by, is interesting; and we may note here that in the aisles of the choir the gradual development of the English style of vaulting is very apparent. The vaults of the

* "Dict. Rais. de l'Architecture Française," tom. iv. p. 119.

† Liernes are short ribs inserted between bosses on the main vaulting ribs. The term is borrowed from carpentry.

Ely Cathedral

aisles have no central rib; the central vault has it, to the great improvement of the effect; the more complicated liernes follow in Alan's work. While we are on the subject of vaulting, it may be well to complete our study of it by visiting the two chantries of Bishops Alcock and West, at the eastern extremities of the north and south aisles respectively. English vaulting may be said to have "run wild" in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as we see it on a magnificent scale at King's College Chapel in Cambridge, Henry VII.'s at Westminster, St. George's, Windsor; and Christ Church, Oxford. Ely has its example of the fan vault, with pendant boss, in the chantry of Bishop Alcock (1486-1501). The mass of rich tabernacle work cut in the easily wrought material called "clunch," produces a marvellous effect, but will not bear comparison with the refined work of the earlier periods. The bishop's tomb, parted off by a screen—a chantry within a chantry—should

Ely Cathedral

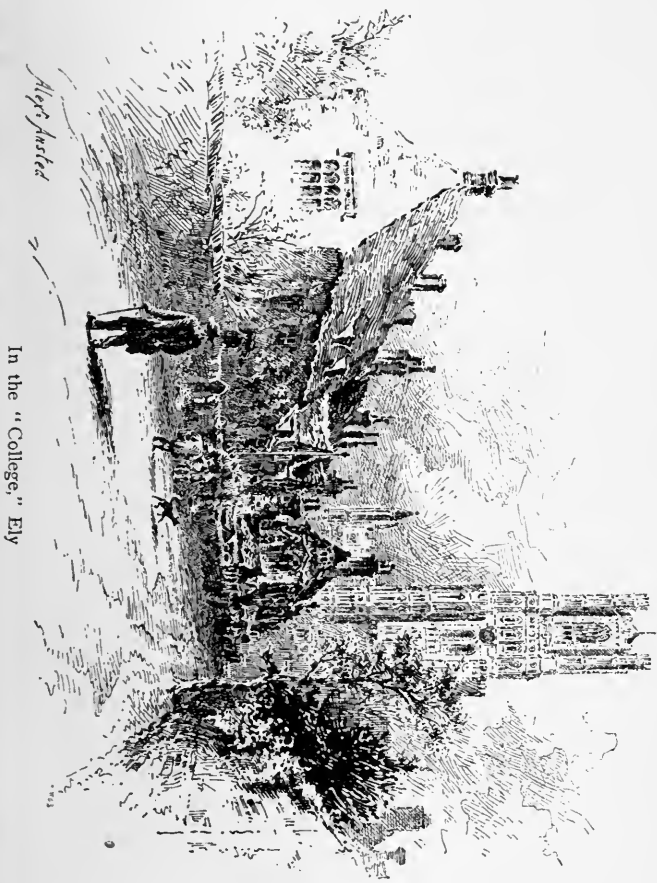
be particularly noticed. The old altar remains *in situ*, a still older slab being let into the wall above. Bishop West's chantry, opposite (1515-1534), lined with niches now empty, and perhaps never filled, shows the influence of the approaching Renaissance in its panelled vault, having deeply moulded ribs with pendant bosses.

Turning to take a last look at this most charming interior, ere we leave it by its brass gates, we may ask ourselves if the peculiarly English feature of one vast window, filling the whole eastern wall, as at York, Gloucester, or Carlisle, could be more impressive than the three great lancets before our eyes, with the five above them, worked so ingeniously into the curve of the vault. We may venture to wish, however, that the apse had found greater favour in the eyes of our architects. In France it is nearly universal, and gives opportunities for the exercise of constructive skill and artistic beauty of the highest order. One great

Ely Cathedral

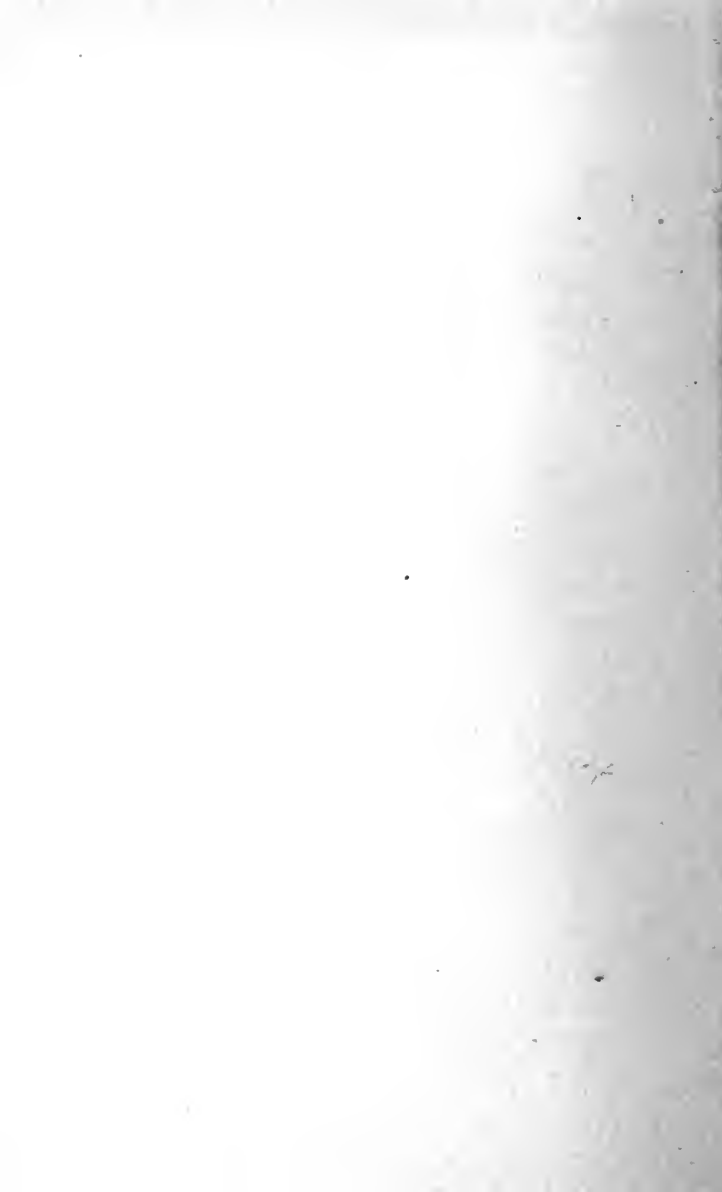
French cathedral is a notable exception—that of Laon. Its square eastern end, with three vast lancets, will forcibly remind travellers from Ely of their own church in the Fens.

Bishop Northwold might well be proud of his work, and at the dedication feast (September 1252) he entertained magnificently King Henry III., his son the young Prince Edward, then about thirteen years of age, and a great number of nobles and prelates. The *menu*, or bill of fare, of some of the great feasts has come down to us. Fish and game figure largely among the dishes served up by the cooks of the Lord Bishop, assisted, no doubt, by those of the Lord Prior, whose establishment was on a sumptuous scale. The king and his son, arriving, no doubt, on horseback, though possibly by state-barge on the river, and attended by a train of knights and esquires, were met by the great churchmen with their swarm of attendants, and were escorted to their



Alex. Jasted

In the "College," Ely



Ely Cathedral

quarters in the palace and abbey amid crowds of the citizens and villagers from all the country round. Such pageants—any pageants—were rare in quiet Ely, and it was fortunate for the purses of the abbot-bishops and priors that it was so, for the cost must have been enormous. The shrines of the sainted abbesses, Etheldreda, her sister Sexburga, and her niece Ermenilda, were translated with great pomp into the new building, and two specially rich bosses in the vaulting overhead, larger than the others, are believed to indicate the place of the shrines on the floor below.

We should be quite inexcusable if we left the Presbytery without calling attention to a feature which distinguishes the Pointed styles at Ely from those styles as presented elsewhere, and from which they possibly derive a great part of their special charm. This feature, stated in two words, is the *lofty triforium*. "All Englishmen,"

Ely Cathedral

says Mr. Hope,* "ought to know the grandeur of these [triforium] galleries at Ely and Peterborough." Again, "At Ely, the preservation of the triforium throughout the Cathedral is one of its grandest features."† We owe this preservation of the lofty triforium in the eastern portions to the good sense and sound artistic feeling of Bishop Northwold's architect. The Norman choir, like the nave, had a triforial arcade equal, or nearly, in height to the main arcade below. When Northwold pulled down the apse and planned his superb Presbytery as a prolongation of that choir, he followed the Norman lines in the Early English work; and in his lower arcade, his triforium, and his clerestory, he copied the relative dimensions which his predecessors had laid down. Thus the Early English of Ely is an Early English built on Norman lines; a style peculiar to this Cathedral, and dissimilar, in this important respect, to the Early English

* Page 217.

† Page 215.

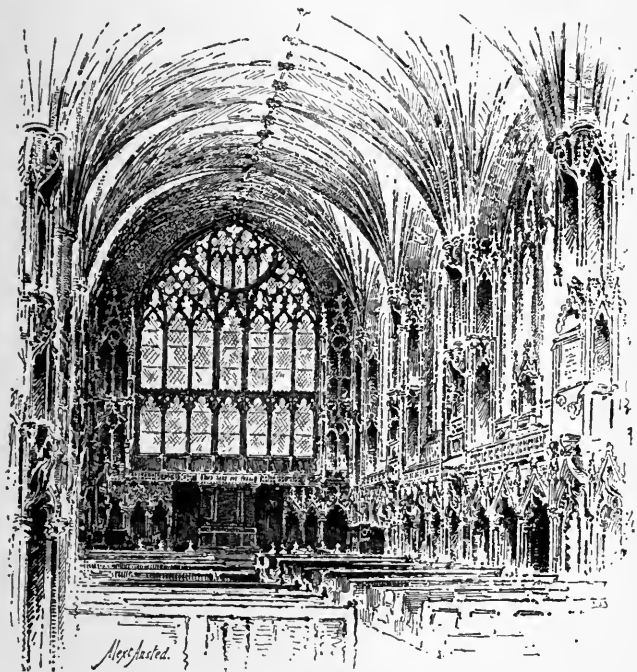
Ely Cathedral

of Salisbury, of Lincoln, of Westminster, or of Wells.

That true artist, Alan, was not the man to despise the example thus set before him. Bold innovator and original thinker as he had proved himself to be by his octagon, he followed with implicit obedience the lines drawn by the rude Norman masons, and repeated by Northwold's men; and when the ruins of the choir had been cleared away he built his three exquisite decorated bays in strict alignment with the six bays of the Presbytery, only employing the more ornate and luscious, but less vigorous, style which belonged to his day. The foundations of the Norman apse, we will only add, exist under the pavement of the Presbytery; and two tall Norman piers of wide-jointed masonry, which flanked the apse, were allowed to remain, and must be noticed by even a cursory observer, dividing, as they do, the work of Walsingham from that of Northwold.

Ely Cathedral

A door in the north-east corner of the transept leads us into the Lady Chapel. Those who enter it for the first time will probably be astonished by the exuberance of its ornamentation, surrounded, as it is, by sedilia or stone stalls of most elaborate design, profusely adorned with sculpture of a very high order of refinement and beauty. The statuettes throughout the chapel are, alas ! headless, having been defaced by order of the Protector Somerset in 1547. It is vain to hope for the complete restoration of this gem of the Decorated period, begun in 1321, just before the fall of the tower, and continued, with energy and perseverance characteristic of the times, during twenty-eight busy and anxious years marked by vast and costly works. Since the Reformation it has been used as the church of the parish of the Holy Trinity in Ely, and we may rejoice that it is thus utilised, trusting that the days of apathy and negligence are quite gone by, in which the disfigurement of



The Lady Chapel, Ely



Ely Cathedral

such a building by high pews and wretched benches could be approved or tolerated.

We pass into the open air at the corner of the transept, and, turning to our right, saunter round to the east end. Again, now, from the outside, we admire the great lancets. The three which appear in the gable give light to the attic above the vaults. The path leads us to an open space in which the Chapter House once stood, and as we round the corner of the wall on the left, we see, perhaps not without surprise, a series of Norman arches, adorned with the zigzag moulding, and in good preservation, though now partially embedded in the walls of modern dwelling-houses. This church-like arcade belonged to the infirmary, or hospital, which in all great monastic establishments was located near or close to the church itself. But it had its own chapel, which here retains its vaulted roof, and serves as the library of one of the prebendal residences. Nearly opposite, on our right as we face the south,

Ely Cathedral

is the Guest Hall, converted at the Dissolution, or soon after, into a deanery, and much modernised. Adjoining it was the house of the prior, with the very charming chapel or oratory built by John Crauden, and probably designed by Alan of Walsingham. The "low windows" of this beautiful little building, one on each side, have long perplexed antiquaries. In ordinary cases, such windows are supposed to have been inserted for the use of lepers, who, though excluded from the sanctuary, might witness the sacred mysteries from outside. But these windows are some ten or twelve feet from the ground, the chapel being built on a lofty crypt. Besides, care for lepers could have no place in designing a private oratory for the prior, within the precincts of his monastery. They must be considered a freak of fancy of the illustrious Prior Crauden and his friend the great architect. The chapel is abundantly lighted without them by six tall and graceful windows. A curious pavement, representing



The East End and Lady Chapel

Ely Cathedral

the Temptation of Adam and Eve, remains undisturbed. The "lioncelles" of the Plantagenets are conspicuous among the heraldic ornamentation.

Most of the buildings round us belong to collegiate houses, altered from the old buildings of the abbey, or occupying their sites.

The abbey! The very word seems obsolete, as we hear the merry laughter of little children playing in the gardens of these houses. The grand old Churchmen, with their architects and masons, had their day; right well they played their part; their noble works form their indestructible memorial; but the time came when other men, with other manners, were to fill their places.

The great change, the dissolution of the monastery in 1531, fell gently upon Ely. The revenues of the suppressed abbey were given by Henry VIII. and his advisers to a new corporate body, no longer bound by monastic vows; to a "Dean and Chapter," as it was then styled, and as it has been

Ely Cathedral

styled ever since that day. The last prior became the first dean; of the first eight canons, three had been senior monks; eight minor canons, eight lay-clerks or singing-men, two schoolmasters, an organist and singing-master, with servitors of various degrees, were supplied from the ranks of the junior and subordinate members of the abbey. To the citizens generally, the change must have been little more than nominal. No doubt the tenants on the abbey lands brought in their rents as they had ever done; it is believed, however, that the revenues had been much diminished by various causes; the state and dignity kept up by the old priors had long given place to more modest housekeeping. At the time of the Dissolution, the number of monks in residence within the precincts had fallen from seventy to fourteen, according to the estimate of some authorities. But the estates were sufficient to furnish adequate stipends for the working staff of the new collegiate establish-

Ely Cathedral

ment, and before the close of the sixteenth century the relations between "town" and "college" must have been adjusted nearly as in our own day.

But the reverent care bestowed upon the great church had come to an end. Bishop Goodrich, the last episcopal Lord Chancellor, a zealous promoter of the Reformation, carried out ruthlessly the injunctions of the Privy Council, which ordered that "from wall and window every picture, every image commemorative of saint or prophet or apostle shall be extirpated and put away, so that there shall remain no memory of the same." Happily the order was not always perfectly obeyed. The iconoclasts seem to have strangely missed, for instance, a most curious and interesting series of eight groups of sculpture, forming the corbels or bases of large niches adorning the eight main piers of the octagon. To this day, these bas-reliefs relate the legendary history of Queen Etheldreda to all who choose to read it.

Ely Cathedral

Treated with consideration by Henry, Ely was fortunate indeed in receiving gentle treatment from Oliver Cromwell. The potent Protector had a soft corner in his stern and hard heart for the old city and its Cathedral, for he had resided for some years in Ely, in a house known until recently as the "Cromwell Arms," and is said to have acted as a bailiff, or collector of rents, in early life, for the Dean and Chapter. There was no stabling of horses in the nave, or other gross profanation of the sacred building, as in many of the cathedrals. But the daily prayers were suspended in 1643-44, and it is probable that full choral service was not resumed until 1682, when a zealous and able musician, James Hawkins, was organist.

The See of Ely was filled, after this sad time, by a succession of learned and godly men; the Dean's stall was occupied by great scholars from the neighbouring university; but the fabric of the church, on which Northwold and Alan, Hotham, Crauden,



The Prior's Door

Ely Cathedral

Montacute, had lavished such loving care, was utterly neglected. Defoe, in his "Tour through the Islands of Great Britain," published early in the eighteenth century, speaks of the Cathedral as evidently tottering to its fall, and likely in a very few years to become a total ruin.

This fate, however, was averted by the timely exertions of Bishop Mawson (1754-1770) and of Dean Allix (1730-1758); they called in the aid of James Essex, an ingenious and skilful builder or architect of Cambridge, under whose direction the most pressing and necessary repairs were ably carried out. And now, when we attend the daily service in Alan's choir, or when we join the large congregation which assembles thrice on each Sunday, under the vault of his octagon, we may well be thankful that we have fallen upon days when loving care and generous gifts are once more lavished upon the church of Etheldreda.



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