

ICONOGRAPHIC AND ARTISTIC
REMARKS
UPON THE
Remains of the Mediaeval Stained Glass
IN
WEST BRIDGFORD CHURCH,
NEAR NOTTINGHAM,

BY
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NOTTINGHAM.

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CHAP. I.

Amid the contending feelings and almost universal desire for an advance in art now growing up in matters of architecture, and what may be termed decorative ornamentation, it should be our duty to seize upon even the faintest shadows of *by-gone works*; and if we give them careful examination in every light, they will invariably be found to contain a fund of knowledge. These relics of the past, and their quaint features, trifling as they may at times appear, are, in a great measure, capable of directing us in the true and proper path leading to the home of the beautiful.

In the present instance, we do not treat upon a subject that will be interesting to *all*, but, nevertheless, it may, in some measure, be consulting the true interests of art, and be the means of inducing *some* to study little matters of antiquity with the attention they deserve. In submitting this paper to the criticism of the public, we may be accused of introducing matter foreign to the subject; but, nevertheless, we have purposely done so, the more clearly to elucidate our observations, and cause the different points of interest to be viewed in every bearing.

Our previous papers show that West Bridgford church is, in many respects, a fine one, and that it repays an antiquarian to bestow upon it a visit. The foregoing remarks will indicate that our purpose is not to speak of it constructionally, but simply to make a careful examination of the scanty remains of the mosaic glass now in the windows. We may also observe that they should be looked upon as highly valuable, from the fact that we cannot boast of the possession of much original glass of this date and quality in the neighbourhood; indeed, we much doubt whether a parallel can be found in the whole county. One question arises. Why is it so scarce? The reason may thus be given. It has passed through troubled times and great dangers, the greatest of which were the Reformation and the subsequent fanatical devastation.

All lovers of art have good cause to regret that reform should have been carried out in such a spirit. It was not considered sufficient to strip our churches of all the old furniture and fittings (in the replacing of which hardly anything was plain or common enough), but those ill-advised men must destroy the stained glass, caring nothing for its preservation as a work of art; influenced by the erroneous impression that the figures and symbols represented were there for purposes of worship, and, as such, detracted from the pure and direct worship of God. After these unfortunate vandalisms, in which kings did not even hesitate to take a part, we find that what remained of the ancient glass was cared for very little or totally neglected. Church authorities would look upon the lingering remnants, and attach no more value to them than to the ordinary plain glass; they would see a variety of causes working their destructive power, and not lend a helping hand to counteract them. The day came when, perhaps, the choicest portion of a window would be knocked or blown out, purposely or inadvertently, and these guardians of the church felt no further regret than would be caused by having to pay for the insertion of plain glass in its stead. However, we must thank the churchwardens of Bridgford that they did not hold it in value, as in that case their first act would, undoubtedly, have been to collect the different portions spread about the church and make out of them an incongruous piece of patchwork, for one of the two eastern windows of the chancel, on a somewhat similar plan to that pursued with the ancient glass at Papplewick church. This church has, without doubt, suffered more than it otherwise would have done had there been no foot-road through the sacred grounds. This privilege, or right, which was one nearly universal in church-yards, caused them in a great measure to become the play-grounds of the village urchins, and one source of amusement for the young rustics has been, time out of mind, the pleasure of throwing stones upon or over the church-roof and the flat of the tower. That this has been a great item in the destruction of the glass there is no doubt, and perhaps is so to a less extent in our own day. But alas! there is very little cause for stopping this foot-path now upon that score; nevertheless we should feel some concern in seeing the very small remaining portion of the old stained glass destroyed. Enough, however, has been said upon this part of the subject, and we now pass on, premising that we intend first to draw attention to the easternmost window on the north side of the nave. It is a four light

square headed window, with flowing tracery, the internal part of the opening being splayed and covered by an obtusely pointed arch; the spaces formed by the mullions which trellis the upper part of the window into tracery, resemble in form the "Oval" or "Vesica Piscis," each cusped to form elongated quatrefoils, and, as they are pierced over the mullions, there are but three entire and two half spaces. It is, plainly speaking, net tracery of pure geometric character, and represents the best period of Gothic art, say A.D. 1350. (There is a similar window in the same wall towards the west end, but the ancient glass is gone; indeed, there is not much left in this particular window to enlarge upon, as it simply consists of portions in the tracery just described, patched and mended in a rude manner.) The mosaics or patterns are enclosed in the ancient lead, which is of a much narrower kind in the leaf than any used at the present day, it having been simply cast in a mould, and afterwards trued up by hand; and we may add that it is wanting in the rigidity that we now obtain by the improved system of applying rollers in the formation of the fret lead. The peculiar shapes into which portions of the glass are cut must have been to these ingenious men a difficult and laborious work, as the diamond was not brought to bear upon that craft until three centuries later; they were necessitated to obtain the requisite outlines by grinding and the aid of flints. So far as the glass is concerned, the centre quatrefoil is the only one that is in any way perfect, and is sufficiently so to enable an opinion of the former general arrangement to be conceived; it contains a circle struck to intersect or touch the points of the cusps, and the intervening spaces or spandrils are filled in with blue and red glass of plain deep colour, much spotted by corrosion; abraded upon the surface is a beautiful running design composed of the thorn leaf (*crataegus oxyacantha*). This circle contains the portion upon which the principal point of interest is centred. The subject is a sitting figure of Jesus Christ, and belongs to the same period of art as the stonework of the window enclosing it. We especially noticed that the glass shewed evident marks of its near approach to fusion, during the progress of annealing or vitrifying the surface colour.

This sitting attitude was the usual arrangement introduced by the Gothic artists into a circle, or medallion, while full length or standing figures were reserved for the vesica, oval, or gourd shaped outlines; these outer frames, or spaces, if enclosing a representation of the

divine being, had a symbolical meaning, and were termed *Aureole*, or outer glory, the groundwork being treated in a variety of forms, generally with radiating or flamboyant rays of light striking from the figures. The groundwork of the *Aureole* in this instance is yellow, which colour likewise conveys a meaning, and it is surrounded by the ruby to harmonise and give increased brilliancy to the yellow. This latter colour was held in such esteem, and was thought most precious, therefore forming the most suitable groundwork for a representation of our Saviour, and it was one of the most difficult colours to produce—hence its value. Success in the production of it was not attained until shortly before this period, when the difficulties were overcome by the application of silver and antimony, prepared with salts, free from any admixture of tartar. This colour claimed further value, as it represented that of the sun, the king of the planetary system, and likewise the colour of gold, the first and most precious of metals. The introduction of these colours was a matter of much study, and was all subservient to an accepted rule, as may be seen, for instance, in their application to the nine orders of Saints, as we find that Virgins, Apostles, Martyrs, and Confessors being considered the most exalted, were represented by yellow or gold colour; next in point of consideration were Prophets, Patriarchs, and Saints, and were symbolised by white or silver, as representing the moon, the second amongst the planetary bodies; the chaste were represented by red, the colour of fire and attribute of those, who struggle against passion; green was applied to the married, as emblematic of hope; while black, the lowest in the scale, was reserved for the portraits of the traitor Judas, and those of a similar character.

These remarks will, to some extent, give an idea of the character or class of this work of early art, and we may now proceed to describe the figure itself. It is pencilled in outline, with vitrified enamel brown upon the internal surface of the glass (while the yellow stain previously described is upon the outside, an usual arrangement), and the whole, with the exception of the hair, is left white or transparent; this was the usual or accepted method of portraying angels, and as such was appropriate to the Son of God.

The hair falls in luxuriantly flowing lines over the shoulders, and is long and abundant; the face has a fine oval form, is regularly marked, and wears a sweet and



benign expression, not at all bordering upon the severe type that prevailed in the previous century. The beard is short and forked ; and the whole portrait bespeaks that of a man from thirty to thirty-five years of age. In this matter, as in other trivial points, there has been a great disparity of views, as He is represented variously at different periods as being a man from twenty to fifty-five years of age. The hair is the only part of the figure bearing colour, which is yellow, the same as the groundwork of the Aureole, and conveys the same symbolical meaning. Homer describes Apollo as having hair of gold. This was held by the ancient artists as a mark of adoration, and clearly denotes that they, in this case, intended to represent the Son of God as being most beautiful to look upon ; though this was not always an accepted theory, as Christ was sometimes purposely delineated with red hair and deformed figure, thus indicating the doctrine of the church, that he bore the load of our sins, and took upon himself all our iniquities ; his likeness was, therefore, occasionally conveyed to us with distorted form, and disfigured features. Red hair is supposed by some to be in imitation of the Jewish form, and was considered by that people as being the reverse of beautiful.

The head will not call for further remark, except that it wears a cruciform nimbus, or glory, which was universally held as a divine symbol or attribute throughout the whole of the middle ages, and is generally delineated in the form of a circular disc, in some instances transparent, and in others opaque, though there are different arrangements to be found ; and we may here remark that, at the advent of the Renaissance period of art, the nimbus took the form of a luminous ring of light, encircling the upper part of the head, though clearly detached from it. The particular kind under notice is a rich cruciform nimbus, containing four rays ; the inner lines are drawn lighter, and enclose the wing of a thorn leaf, and the outer edge has a double line, the groundwork being diapered with cross hatchwork. This external double line indicates it to be of the richest class, as in cases where two persons are represented, the superior one has a nimbus with a double line, the other having only a single one. This shape, cruciform, is always admitted to be a valuable archaeological characteristic, and for the information of our non-professional readers we may add that under the ancient system a nimbus served to denote a saint by the same rule as a crown indicated a King, or a

crozier a Bishop, though ordinary saints were sometimes represented wearing the nimbus, as the performance of what were termed the six works of mercy was held as a sufficient step to obtain that mark of distinction; these acts of charity consisted in having nourished the hungry, refreshed the thirsty, entertained strangers, visited the sick, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison, though the nimbus decorating the head of a saint was usually more or less plain in character, the cruciform shape being reserved more especially for the these persons of the Holy Trinity.

Recurring to the figure under notice, we see that the arms are each extended, the right is somewhat uplifted, the hand partly open, with three fingers only fully extended; this represents the act of shedding blessings or the granting benediction in the Latin form; the left hand likewise fully extended represents the act of bestowing (*donatrice*), which attitude is also used when Jesus is delineated as shewing his wounds. (This in portraits of angels is a token of admiration.) The body is enveloped in a robe or mantle, the ordinary garb of the Apostles, and he is seated upon a seat or bench of very elaborate workmanship, indicative of the fourteenth century period of gothic art. This bench has in it some suggestive features and quaint details that we do not commonly see in our own day of repetition, and upon each side are, what we should suppose, arms composed of the branches of the vine, terminating in a leaf; the right one, as occupying the greatest post of honour, is the richest, which was the usual arrangement in almost every branch of early art; the object of thus introducing the vine will admit of sundry versions. No doubt the principal one is analogous with the favourite Greek inscription used in similar cases, of which the following is a translation: "Lord, Lord, look down from Heaven, behold and visit this vine and the vine-yard which thy right hand hath planted."

We have not reserved much space in which to describe the glass yet remaining in the other windows, and can only allude to that in the eastern window of the south aisle, which, we regret to say, is much mutilated and neglected. It is certainly a splendid piece of early art, exhibiting a much better class of drawing than is usually found in the representations of the figure at that remote period; the cutting of the glass, and the workmanship to be observed in the lead, are of the best description, and it is worthy of

note that the whole of the colours, where not obscured by dirt or whitewash, are as deep and rich as when first executed, though slightly less brilliant, owing to the spots of corrosion on the exterior.

The upper quatrefoil contains a portion of a sitting figure of Christ, in the act of shewing His wounds to the people and giving His exhortations to the faithful: the front of the seat is coloured green, symbolical of the earth, and the top diapered with brown enamel on a white ground, as though representing wicker-work or corded ropes. The whole of the glass upon which the face and breast were depicted has disappeared, common white glass being now substituted, but the nimbus surrounding the head, worked in green and yellow, still remains; the arms or rays of the nimbus are yellow, decorated with a three-winged leaf, as emblematic of the Trinity, while the green portion has a running ornament of semi-circles, enclosed by a double lined margin on the outer edge. The ground work is a brilliant ruby, ornamented with a prettily executed design in a lighter shade, having for its foundation the thorn leaf, which has always been accepted as the type or symbol of the crown of thorns which was placed upon the head of our Saviour on his way to crucifixion. The raiment is composed of an outer robe or mantle of a golden yellow, that colour being the highest mark of distinction which could be paid to his apparel. The lining visible where the robe falls over the arms is green, symbolical of hope, an unusual arrangement as applied to a figure of our Saviour, as green is generally an attribute of the secular and the married. The hands are extended and open, displaying all the fingers; the feet, white in colour, like the hands (and therefore suggestive of the celestial, and also emblematic of purity), are resting upon an orb with horizontal bolts running round and across it, intersecting each other, this being a similar mode of treatment to that used in the ancient method of depicting the orbs held in the left hand of kings. Each foot shows the print of the nails used in crucifixion, and also blood trickling down the flesh. The lower quatrefoils are filled in with a similar arrangement of coloured glass, though, of course, with different subjects. That on the left hand contains the remnants of a figure enveloped in a yellow mantle and white tunic, which bespeak it to be some one connected with the life of our Saviour; one hand holding a clasped book, is strongly suggestive of one of the four evangelists, viz., St. Matthew. The upper part of the figure is destroyed, and also the whole of another figure in the same quatrefoil.

The glass in the corresponding section of the tracery is even still more defaced, small portions of the yellow drapery of a figure being all that is discernible; the outlines of the lead, however, are sufficient to prove that, like the quartrefoil previously described, it contained two figures, and we are of opinion that we should not be far wrong in coming to the conclusion that these four represented the Evangelists, and are strengthened in this supposition by the presence of the book in the hand of one of the figures, and also by the fact that profile sketches of birds are introduced in the side spandrels of the tracery, which may represent the eagle of St. John, though they may be representative of the dove, symbolical of the Holy Spirit.

As an analogy to the foregoing remarks, and a conclusion to the whole, we may be allowed to introduce at this point a few observations; and first as to the likeness or portrait of our Saviour, for it is clear that we have an accepted form of face, which can be clearly recognised even by the most illiterate persons; the thought will naturally occur, "What brought about the likeness?" It must be reducible to this rule, viz., that it must have a foundation. Upon examination and research we find no proof further than legendary lore, and, to add to our difficulties, there appears to be a dark interval of several centuries at the commencement of the Christian era, during which time we have little if any positive information. To these legends, however, if only from curiosity we may turn. Thus St. John Damascenus, who wrote in the eighth century, mentions a tradition anciently believed, by which Jesus was himself recognised as the author of one of his own portraits. He says, "Abgarus, King of Edessa, having learnt the wonderful things related of our Saviour, became inflamed with divine love; he sent ambassadors to the son of God inviting him to come and visit him, and should the Saviour refuse to grant his request, he charged his ambassadors to employ some artist to make a portrait of our Lord. Jesus, from whom nothing is hidden, and to whom nothing is impossible, being aware of the intention of Abgarus, took a piece of linen, applied it to his face, and depicted thereon his own image." "This very portrait," continues Damascenus, "is in existence at the present day, and in perfect preservation."

At the same epoch, a minute verbal description of the appearance of Christ was in circulation, the following description was sent to the Roman Senate by Publius Lentulus, pro-consul of Judea before Herod. Lentulus had seen the Saviour, and had made him sit to him as it were,

that he might give a written description of his features and physiognomy. His portrait, apocryphal though it be, is at least one of the first upon record; it dates from the earliest period of the Church, and has been mentioned by the most ancient Fathers. Lentulus writes to the senate as follows :—" At this time appeared a man, who is still living and endowed with mighty power : his name is Jesus Christ. His disciples call him the Son of God : others regard him as a powerful prophet. He raises the dead to life, and heals the sick of every description of infirmity and disease. This man is of lofty stature, and well proportioned ; his countenance severe and virtuous, so that he inspires beholders with feelings both of fear and love. The hair of His head is of the colour of wine, and from the top of the head to the ears, straight and without radiance, but it descends from the ears to the shoulders in shining curls. From the shoulders the hair flows down the back, divided into two portions, after the manner of the Nazarenes. His forehead is clear and without wrinkle ; His face free from blemish, and slightly tinged with red, his physiognomy noble and gracious ; the nose and mouth faultless. His beard is abundant, the same colour as the hair, and forked. His eyes blue, and very brilliant. In reproving or censuring He is awe-inspiring ; in exhorting and teaching, His speech is gentle and caressing. His countenance is marvellous in seriousness and grace. He has never once been seen to laugh, but many have seen Him weep. He is slender in person, His hands are straight and long, His arms beautiful. Grave and solemn in his discourse. His language is simple and quiet. He is in appearance the most beautiful of the children of men." The Emperor Constantine caused pictures of the Son of God to be painted from this ancient description.

There is little doubt that the above account formed the groundwork of the accepted likeness of Christ, and was the form adhered to down to the period of the Renaissance, at which time the portraits assumed a severe and more common-place form, principally brought about through the influence of the works produced by Michael Angelo and Orcagna; and it may be added as rather noteworthy, that the art of glass painting at the Renaissance attained its greatest perfection through the influence of such men, and by the discovery of the laws of perspective ; this was indeed the only branch of art that did not decay with the Gothic feeling, but continued to flourish for upwards of another century in great excellence.

We rejoice to say, however, that there is now a revival in art, and that we are pursuing the praiseworthy path of attempting to bring our representations of the Saviour to the same beautiful type under which He was depicted at the period the glass under notice bespeaks, and that there is an evident desire to restore to his features their early sweetness and benevolent expression.

It might not be out of place in a paper of this character to allude to the principles that influenced the introduction of depicted and eculpinresque forms in our sacred edifices; as earlier in this article we touched upon the great causes that led to their destruction; the introduction of figures and pictorial representations can be clearly traced to the earliest period of Christianity, and they undoubtedly were intended for the purpose of educating the mind in matters of Holy Writ through the medium of the eye. We are afraid that we too often look upon them (in consequence of subsequent abuses) in an erroneous light, as though they were forms intended to be worshipped in a somewhat similar light to the idols of the Pagans; but careful investigation will prove it otherwise. The venerable Bede, speaking of Benedict Biscop, Abbot of Wearmouth, says "he adorned his church with paintings brought from Italy; he wished that all on entering the House of God, especially those who knew not how to read, should have before their eyes the ever beloved image of Christ and his saints. S. John Damascenus, a great defender of the ancient faith, who wrote in the 8th century, says "Every painting that meets our gaze in a church relates, as if in words, the humiliation of Christ for his people, they open the heart and awaken the intellect, and in a marvellous and incredible manner engage us to imitate the persons they represent." The figure of Jesus seems to have engaged the most of his attention; he says "there is nothing to prevent men from representing Him, since He, who is invisible, has been pleased to assume a material body and to make himself visible to man. His image may be made since He has clothed himself in a corporeal form. There is no doubt that as these feelings and sentiments became more settled, and were combined as it were into an institution, they were to some extent abused, but this should not bias our minds, or deter us from contemplating the pure motive for which they were originally introduced.

Ecclesiastical art served to divert the eye from all vain and profane objects, it presented the ignorant with a lesson,

and the believer with a sermon. There was not a leading subject in the Old or New Testaments, or a passage in the lives of the saints that was not laid under contribution by the sculptors and painters' art for the moral purposes we have illustrated. The art of the painter was thus a happy medium: it was reputed to possess the power of leading by the hand, as it were, the unlettered people to the remembrance of Jesus living in the flesh, suffering and dying for our salvation, and thus obtaining the redemption of the world: it served also as a lesson or example by placing before the laity the representations of the saints and other persons distinguished in Church history, who, by their virtues or the services they had rendered to religion, had earned a title to respect.

It was an extension of these sentiments that influenced S. Augustine to visit this island, viz.: the words of the Saviour "Go ye therefore and teach all nations."

It is clear also that in our studies of these ancient examples we should look upon the means of teaching at that remote period as being very limited—printing was not known—books were written by hand, and were consequently very costly. The few that were educated cared not to write in the mother tongue. These combined causes rendered the state of society dark indeed, and the only means of furthering religion were the pictorial representations we have been alluding to, combined with the exhortations of the priests. Church decoration in its many varied forms of beauty, whether we view it in the glorious colours which diapered the walls, the carving and sculpture applied to the wood and stone-work, the ingenuity of the workers in gold, silver, and the baser metals; the craft displayed in the manufacture of the richly embroidered textile fabrics, all tended to one result, viz., the adornment of the House of God, thus marking the distinction between His House and the ordinary abodes of men.

In closing these remarks we may ask, can any adequate advantage be attained from the study of these ancient features? Can these curious and interesting relics, considered by our forefathers as analogical to Holy Writ and as a section or part of their accepted form of worship, teach us no lesson? We think they can, and that the investigation of them must prove an incentive to progress,—nay, that it has already resulted in good, for no careful observer could have examined the specimens of what is now termed mediæval art, as exhibited



in the Industrial Exhibition of 1862, without remarking the one simple fact—that we have already surpassed in this class of art-workmanship our old competitors the French. But we must strive still to retain this lead, and in doing so, let us each hold up to the other that most excellent motto “Excelsior.”

Derby-road, Nottingham,
May, 1864.