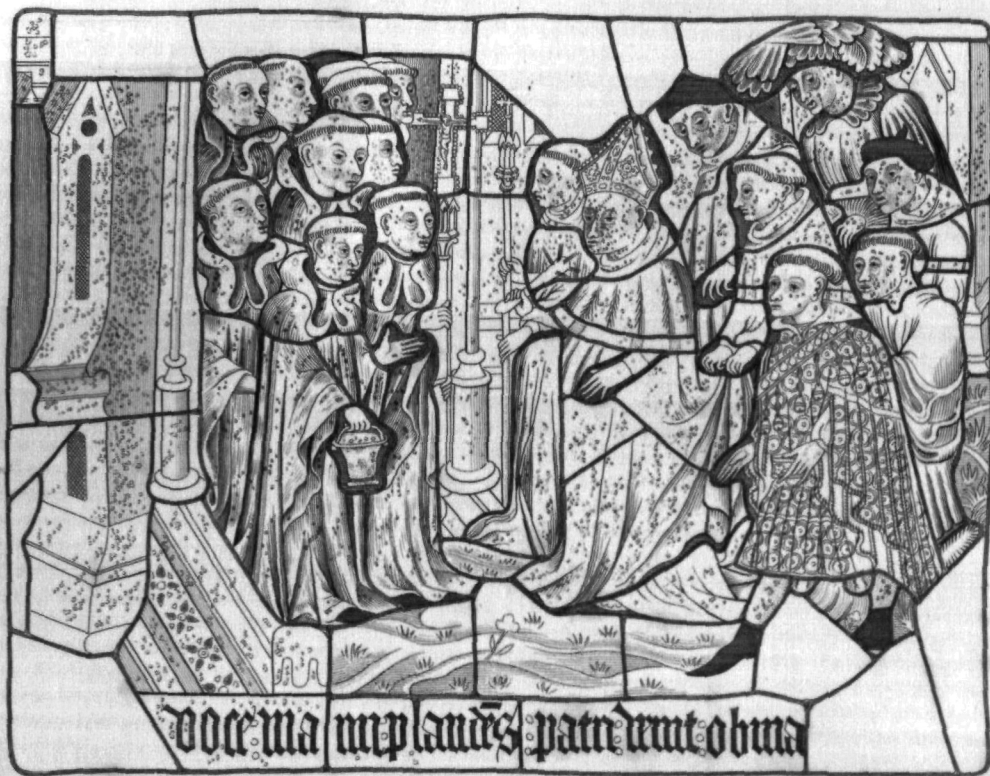




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IN NETTLESTEAD CHURCH.

ON A FRAGMENT OF GLASS IN NETTLESTEAD CHURCH.

THE remarkable group in stained glass, represented in the accompanying plate, is at Nettlestead Church, near Maidstone, and stands now in the east window of the chancel. Previously, however, to some repairs made not many years ago, during which much of the fine glass in this church was unfortunately shifted, this and another fragment representing sick people at a shrine, now also in the east window, are well remembered to have stood in the westernmost window on the north side of the nave. Its great beauty and the striking and characteristic figures and costumes which it contains, induced one of our members to bring it under the notice of the late lamented Mr. Charles Winston, who brought his irreplaceable resources of knowledge and criticism to bear upon its history, and made from it one of those marvellous drawings with which his widow has enriched the British Museum. Our plate was taken from his drawing, by his own kind wish and under his own minute supervision, and he was engaged upon a paper to illustrate the subject for our Society. I shall offend none of our valued contributors, if I say that in losing this paper, we have lost what could not have failed to be the gem of this volume.

The plate is uncoloured, by his own advice; the original being, as a picture, no very good specimen of the

colouring of the period, and marred in effect by the mass of blue drapery on the left. There is nothing to note in the colouring of the right-hand group, but that the dress of the curious figure in the foreground, with bells hanging to his collar, is apparently of cloth of gold, according oddly with a tonsured head. We may suppose the word "gaudens" for the end of the rhyming legend, with "ecclesia" or some such substantive in another line, or perhaps merely understood.

From conversations with Mr. Winston, and from his correspondence, I have ventured to gather up and put together what may just serve to introduce to our readers the plate which he would so well have illustrated.

The date of the glass he at once fixed as early in the reign of Henry VI., and the architecture of the window in which it originally stood exactly confirmed this opinion. To justify or correct it, he further collected all the remains of heraldry from the contemporary nave-windows, with records of other shields now lost from them, and took great pains in appropriating the various coats to their bearers. His notes on this subject are not full enough to enable me to produce them, but he gave his opinion on them thus:—

"Everything points to a date for the nave glass somewhere between 1425 and 1439, which quite bears out the idea I had formed of the date from the character of the glass alone."

His next clue to its history was from the will of a former lord of the manor of Nettlestead, John Pympe, dated 1496, which, among other benefactions to this church, directs as follows:—

"Item, whereas there be certayne blanke Skyggyns (escutcheons) in the wyndowe of *St. Thomas* within the saide church, I will that there be putt in those Skocchyns the arms of . . ."

(—specifying some names connected with his family, *St. Legers*, *Guildefords*, etc.). Now there remain to this

day, in the upper part of the window to which this glass properly belongs, eight blank escutcheons, supported by angels; identifying this window beyond reasonable doubt as "the wyndowe of St. Thomas" mentioned in this will, the direction of which seems to have been for some reason neglected.

Mr. Winston continued his reasoning in this way, in a letter to the member before mentioned:—

"I conclude that by 'St. Thomas' he did not mean the Apostle, for he would be found at the *end* of the creed; but St. Thomas of Canterbury—Becket. This idea wonderfully squares with your observation respecting the likeness of the canopy in one light to the centre tower of Canterbury Cathedral, and which struck me also when pointed out, though then I thought the resemblance was purely accidental. And if you recollect, I told you at the time that probably the two easternmost windows on each side were figure-and-canopy windows, containing the twelve Apostles saying the creed; and that the first from the west, on the north side, and the opposite window on the south, over the door, might have been filled with small subjects."

This evidence and argument were pretty conclusive that the window in question was commemorative of Thomas à Becket; and thus the other group contained in it,—the sick at the shrine, with the legend "*Hic jacet egro(rum) medecina salus miserorum*,"—became at once intelligible as part of the history of St. Thomas and his shrine. It became clear, too, that the Archbishop's figure, in the group before us, represented Becket himself; and it remained only to identify the scene of his life thus portrayed.¹

¹ It seems not inappropriate to draw attention in this place to the great loss of value and importance constantly resulting from the common practice of destroying, shifting, shaping, and otherwise tampering with, under the much-abused name of restoration, such relics as architecture, glass, carving, monuments, etc., found in churches and other ancient buildings. There is history, more or less evident and minute, in all such remains; often national history, but local and parochial if no other; and to deal with them in the random manner often adopted by the best-intentioned

Following up his clue, Mr. Winston writes later:—

“It appears from Lord Lyttelton’s ‘Life of Henry II.’ that Becket, on his quarrel with the King, fled to the Abbey of St. Bertin, near St. Omer’s, and that until his reconciliation with the King, some eight years after, he was an inmate of several foreign abbeys. Now I do not think that any of these visits can be the one depicted. Certainly not that at St. Bertin’s Abbey, for he entered as a fugitive with but two followers and in evil plight. Therefore I conclude that the picture commemorates his triumphal entry into Canterbury after his reconciliation with his Majesty, and which only by a very short interval preceded his death.

“Of this entry Lord Lyttelton writes (vol. iv. p. 347), after describing his landing at Sandwich,—‘He went to Canterbury, and on the road thither was met by all the poor of the county, who in great multitudes attended him to that city. The parish priests also came in solemn pomp to meet him, with their crosses in their hands, and the pageantry was closed by the monks of Canterbury, who received him into their convent with ringing of bells, with the music of organs, and with hymns of praise to God.’ And he adds that his secretary, John of Salisbury, had previously written to give them notice of his arrival, and to exhort them to meet him with all due honours, as their predecessors had met St. Anselm when he came back from banishment.

“If, therefore, we must indulge in a conjecture, I apprehend we are justified in supposing that the picture has reference to his triumphal entry into the convent. And considering the fewness of the remains in England of any legend of St. Thomas, this fragment becomes the more interesting.”

restorers is exactly equivalent to maltreating an old volume of records, tearing a few pages from it to make it neat, or binding it up with a title not its own, or with fragments of another work fitted ingeniously to its defective pages. In the present instance of Nettlestead Church, it is only from the accidental notes of a zealous antiquary, fortunately taken before the changes mentioned above, that we now know with any certainty the original position of the glass; and on this alone hangs all its history, and our power to assign to it its very interesting subject. To resist such tendencies as these is part of the great local good which may be achieved by a Society like ours, and I hope I may be permitted to take this opportunity of impressing the point earnestly upon our members.

Other passing remarks of his on the group will be of interest.

"It is surprising even to me what an air of individuality the different heads possess. Still I am certain that they must not be regarded as portraits."

"One thing we must discard, that is, the idea that any of the figures is a portrait. They are simply the figures of the period, done after a regular receipt. If there was anything of portraiture in them, I should say that they were portraits of Italian monks."

I will only add to his description a passage from the MS. Life of Becket by William of Canterbury, lately discovered in the library of Winchester College, the unpublished extracts from which are given by Canon Robertson at the beginning of this volume. I quote the passage in full, taking from the 'Quadrilogus,' where they are already published, the words omitted by Mr. Robertson.

"Ad portam quæ ducit in cimiterium ecclesiæ Christi Cantuariæ devenit. Et ingressus monasterium, toto corpore prostratus formam et humilitatem exulis exhibuit. Deinde fratres omnes, a minimo usque ad maximum, cum lacrymis et osculo pacis suscepit. Nam,—quia quosdam ex eis excommunicatis communicasse audierat cum peregre esset, qui dum res episcopii ministrabant, pro nihilo confusionem suam ducentes, sese passim et imprudenter ingerebant, ubi et quando non decebat, non communionem sacrorum, non missarum solemniam reverentes,—per magistrum Johannem Saresberiensem et coexsulem, mense uno præ se præmissum, fratri Thomæ venerabili viro potestatem solvendi injunxerat, ut quod contagionis in grege fratrum ex scabie schismaticorum contractum fuerat, antidoto reconciliationis evaderet."¹

This extract adds much life to our picture. It fixes the exact spot of meeting, the old cemetery gate of the monastery, which stood in Burgate a few yards to the east of the existing gateway of Prior Goldstone.

¹ See p. 27, supra. 'Quadrilogus,' ed. Lupus, 113.

It enables us to understand the full import of the letter of John of Salisbury mentioned by Lord Lyttelton. It puts before us the very thoughts which must have been passing in the minds of the Archbishop and the welcoming monks, between whom there had been a difference during the banishment, respecting certain persons whom Becket had excommunicated, but of whose excommunication the monks had taken no heed—a gross insult to their exiled primate. He had now sent his secretary in advance with messages of forgiveness and absolution, and the joy of the meeting must have been greatly increased by feelings of reconciliation and peace after quarrel. The monks were soon called upon to shew their renewed devotion to their archbishop in a widely different manner.

T. G. F.



Badge of the Staffords, Earls of Buckingham, Lords of Nettlestead; being the nave of a wheel (most usually represented burning) within a circle of knots.

Sketched from a window in Nettlestead Church by W. J. Lightfoot, Esq.

[For a curious figure of St. John with an eagle's head, remaining in another window in this church, the reader is referred to the late Mr. Winston's 'Art of Glass Painting,' just published, plate vii. fig. 1.]