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Remains of Stone Reredos, fourteenth century, formerly in Sutton Valence Church,
now in the Victoria and Albert Museum

A FOURTEENTH-CENTURY ALTARPIECE FROM SUTTON VALENCE.

BY R. P. BEDFORD.

THE Church of Sutton Valence, or Town Sutton, having, according to Hasted, been struck by lightning at the end of the eighteenth century, was ruthlessly demolished in 1823 to be replaced by a new structure, Sir John Filmer lending the money (at interest) to erect it. Fortunately there was at hand a person sufficiently enlightened to preserve certain fragments of the old building. A banker, Mr. John Newington Hughes, had in his garden at No. 7 High Street, Maidstone, a small collection of mediæval architectural details and sculpture, which he augmented by a number of new acquisitions from Sutton Valence. These included the beautiful Perpendicular tracery from the east window of Lambe's Chapel, and, as the available evidence seems to prove, the Altarpiece, which is the subject of this article.

C. F. Angell in his history of the church* gives a very full account of the erection of the new building, of which he appears not a little proud, and from his small book one can learn the names of the various subscribers towards the stained glass and other furniture, even down to the mason who was responsible for the east window! But, with the indifference characteristic of the times, his description of the old church which had been destroyed is very brief and unsympathetic, and there is no mention of the altarpiece, which must have been the church's chief glory. In the Library of the Maidstone Museum, however, there are two drawings made by Edward Pretty, F.S.A., in 1823: one of the east end of the old church (which Angell publishes in a woodcut) and another of the altarpiece, to which drawing he appends a note stating that the original came from

* C. F. Angell: *Some Account of the Parish Church of St. Mary's at Town Sutton, or Sutton Valence, in the County of Kent*, 1874.

Sutton Valence. The latter drawing is but a slight pencil sketch on tracing paper.

No. 7 High Street was later occupied by Messrs. Barling, jewellers, and it is now a music shop. The garden became a backyard used chiefly for the storage of packing-cases, but fortunately the altarpiece had been built into a wall with the window from Lambe's Chapel in front of it, and it was consequently preserved from injury.

Early in 1921 Mr. Aymer Vallance drew the attention of the authorities of the Victoria and Albert Museum to this altarpiece, which was then for sale, and the Maidstone Museum not being able to negotiate for its purchase, it was acquired for the Museum at South Kensington.

The work is executed in the close-grained stone which from early years—at least from the eleventh century—was imported into England in large quantities from Caen in Normandy. This stone is finer in texture and softer than the somewhat similar oolitic stone quarried at Bath, but on being exposed to the air it rapidly becomes harder, and from its nature it is especially suitable for internal work in which great delicacy of detail is required.* For exterior work it does not seem so satisfactory—witness the decayed condition of the west doorway of Temple Church, of which some fragments are in the Victoria and Albert Museum—and it could only be expected that the Sutton Valence altarpiece, on being exposed in the garden at Maidstone, would rapidly become affected by damp and frost. Since its removal to London it has been very carefully treated in the Museum workshops; all loose portions have been fixed down with shellac, and the whole work has been sprayed, and it is now protected from the air in a glass shade. Only the slightest traces of the original colouring with which it was adorned are now left in the deeper hollows of the carving; the climatic conditions to which it was exposed must soon have affected the gesso priming, mixed as it was with parchment size, on which the colours were laid.

* It is of interest to note that Robert of Caen, who was made first Abbot of St. Albans by William the Conqueror in 1077, used it extensively both in the great church at Caen and the Abbey of St. Albans.

A part only of the altarpiece has survived to the present day—three panels composed of four pieces of Caen stone, which, evidently at the removal in 1823, have been fastened with iron bolts to a slab of York stone. These panels measure: Centre, height 4 ft. 8 in., width 2 ft.; side panels, height about 3 ft., width 1 ft. 6 in., giving a total length of 5 feet. But there can be no doubt that two panels are missing from either side, and that originally the altarpiece consisted of five panels, *i.e.*, four side panels of equal dimensions and the larger central panel, which would give a length of about 8 feet, a very usual measurement for the mediæval altarpiece. Of the three now remaining, that in the centre is carved with a singularly dignified figure of the Virgin seated under a canopied niche on a tasselled cushion with plaited knots at the corners; on her left knee she holds the Infant Christ, and her feet rest on a moulded base. Above her are two angels in clouds, the one on her right playing a psaltery closely similar to one played by an angel in the fourteenth-century singing gallery in Exeter Cathedral. The Virgin is wearing a jewelled brooch set with ten cabochon-cut stones with a four-petalled flower in the centre. The characteristic Decorated canopy is supported at the back by two grotesque corbels, an old man with long hair and a woman wearing a hood. Nothing is left of the subject which was carved on the left-hand panel, in fact the background has mostly been renewed. The right-hand panel contains the Ascension, the Virgin with the Twelve Apostles in an attitude of prayer, with the figure of Christ just disappearing in the clouds above; one of the Apostles has a book on his knee. Over these two panels are canopies consisting of three crocketed finials with hexagonal battlemented towers between. These towers are pierced with narrow windows to suggest a spiral staircase within. Below the towers, and between the three finials of the centre canopy, are pairs of animals, apparently pigs, dogs and sheep, as corbels.

As has already been said, there can be no doubt that, as first executed, this altarpiece had five panels, and it seems equally certain that it represented a familiar subject in

England during the Middle Ages—the Five Joys of the Virgin, a subject obviously suitable for a church dedicated to Saint Mary. These panels would have been: (1) the Annunciation (now missing); (2) the Adoration of the Magi, of which only one slight trace is left—possibly, from its position, the guiding star; (3) the Virgin and Child, which, to the mediæval mind, would well represent the Nativity; (4) the Ascension of Christ; (5) the Assumption or the Coronation of the Virgin (now missing). This series is a common one in the alabaster reliefs executed in large numbers in the succeeding century; the altarpiece recently acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum from Singleton Abbey, near Swansea, has the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, the Holy Trinity, the Ascension, and the Assumption of the Virgin.

In spite of the damage which this altarpiece has suffered, enough remains to shew a work of great importance in the history of English sculpture, and one unique of its kind. In both figures of the Virgin the drapery is handled with the utmost skill—especially is this to be noticed in the foreshortening of the legs—and the artist exhibits the serious, devotional spirit which is characteristic of the best English work of the mediæval period. Judged both from the figure sculpture and the architectural details, the altarpiece is certainly to be dated in the second half of the fourteenth century: probably the middle of that period, and it was executed, without doubt, in one of the London workshops. Although the Black Death, which ravaged England in the middle of the century, caused a great shortage of skilled craftsmen and brought about a general decadence of art, yet, for a few decades, the traditions of the earlier periods survived, and sculpture especially retained its individuality. The Sutton Valence altarpiece is a sufficiently great achievement to be the work of a man trained in the days before that great catastrophe.

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