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FAVERSHAM SCHOOLBOY SCULPTURES

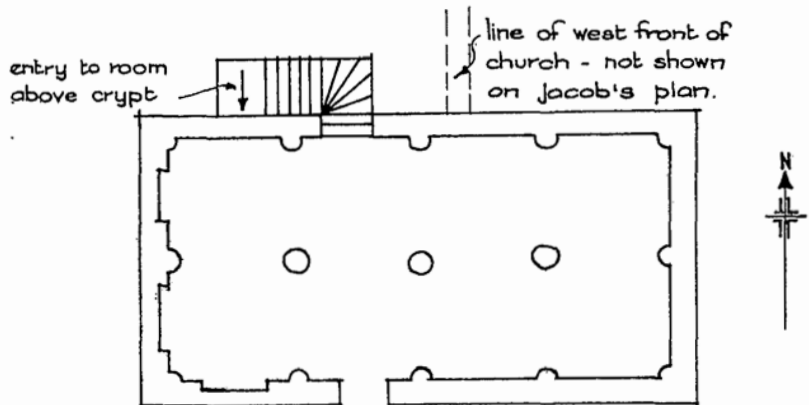
By CANON W. TELFER, M.C., D.D.

ADJOINING the south-west corner of Faversham parish church, beneath what is now used as a choir vestry, is a vaulted crypt: described, with line drawings, by Edward Jacob in his *History of Faversham*, London, 1774. This crypt and the original room above it would seem to have formed part of the great building programme at Faversham church in the opening fourteenth century, which absorbed a rude early Norman edifice into the fine and spacious cruciform church as it is today. As part of this programme were erected, outside the church, the crypt and a room over it.

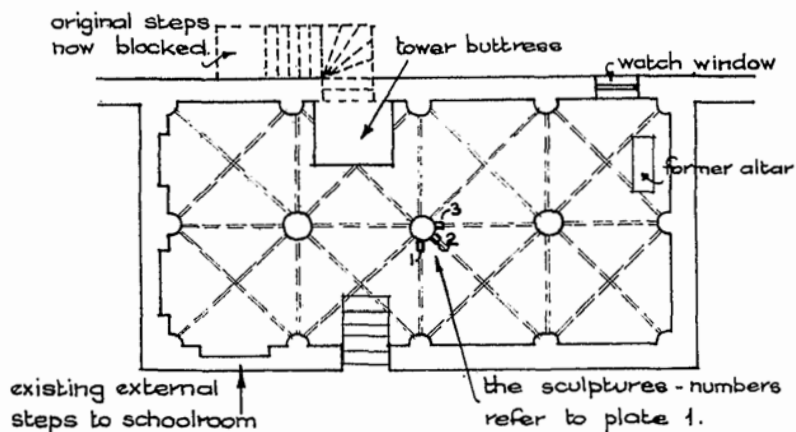
Jacob is no doubt right in identifying the crypt with the recorded chapel of 'St. Mary-in-the-churchyard'. Of the room above he says, 'wherein, as far back as I can trace any account of it, were taught reading and writing'.¹

It is now possible to get somewhat further towards naming the purpose or purposes for which this building was provided. The raising of the room upon a crypt indicates that it needed to be light and dry. When the party wall dividing the room from the nave of the church was demolished in 1902 for the purpose of transforming the room into a choir vestry, an iron grill was found embedded in the wall at the floor level of the room, 6 feet above that of the nave. Before the grill was plastered up, anything said in the room could be heard in the church, and this was clearly the purpose of the grill. When, in 1527, Master John Cole erected his new Free Grammar School inside Faversham abbey, he built it against a conventual building into the wall of which he set a grill, through which lessons given in the school could be shared by monks and novices sitting in the adjoining conventual room. This points to the grilled room at the parish church having been used in a similar manner. The room will thus have been the pre-1527 grammar school, and the beneficiaries of the grill will have been the church clerks and others willing to improve their Latin.

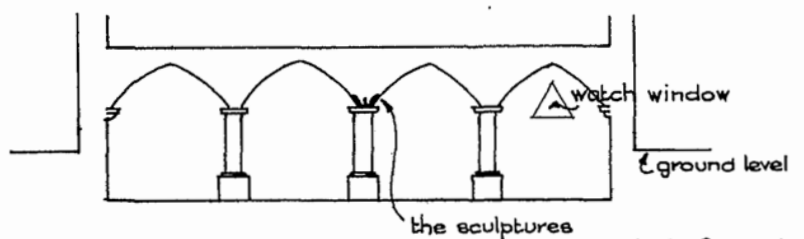
¹ The new school building of Queen Elizabeth's foundation, 1576, was not ready to use for six years. Elias Mede, Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, came unofficially to Faversham as a schoolmaster in 1570, and carried on the new school till he was refused the official mastership by All Souls College, Oxford, in 1582. Unlicensed schoolmasters in Faversham are revealed by archidiaconal visitations into the seventeenth century. We may have here the explanation of the continued use of the schoolroom, as Jacob says, 'to teach reading and writing'.



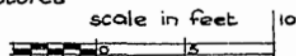
① J A C O B ' S P L A N . 1 7 7 4



② P L A N A S I N 1 9 6 3



③ A X I A L S E C T I O N
T H E C R Y P T



2

Figs. 1, 2 and 3.

Before Cole's foundation, any schoolmaster in Faversham must have lived on fees. But the church may have provided the room over the crypt for the recognized use of a grammar master, in return for the advantage received by the parish from the participation of adults in Latin lessons made possible by the grill. Jacob notes that wardmotes probably took place in this room, and we might expect it likewise to be used for meetings of guilds and the like. But these would be occasional meetings, and generally held on holidays, whereas the school use of the room would be on every working day.

It would be in accordance with custom that the crypt beneath should serve as a chapel. A mass could be said at an altar there at the same time that a mass was going on inside the church. But there is no sign of any attempt to embellish the crypt. Daylight entered it only through its doors, and then very little through the north door. Requiems might be said at its altar, and people might enter it from the the churchyard for prayer. But in the life of the parish church it would figure only as a supplementary chapel.

As is indicated in Figure 3, a small triangular watch-window was made on the level of the nave floor close to the north-east corner of the crypt. Through this the church clerks, from their watch-room on the opposite side of the nave, could see whether or not a light was burning before an altar as shown in Fig. 2. There is no sign in the vaulting of there having been a hanging lamp. But lamps or candles on stands or candlesticks are found prescribed in wills of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries for the maintenance of a living flame before altars or sacred images. The flame constituted a continual act of prayer on the behalf of the persons who maintained it. The church clerks would be charged with keeping the light before the crypt altar alight. Thus the crypt, while enjoying almost no sunlight, was probably never quite dark.

The crypt seems to have undergone no structural alteration until the building of the modern tower of the church, 1794-7. Then the former north door (Fig. 1) was closed by the foot of a new buttress (Fig. 2).

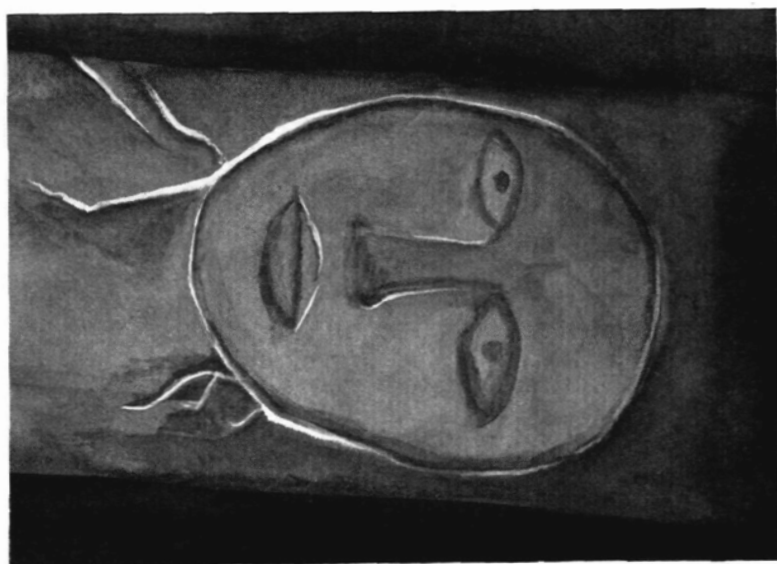
The room above underwent restoration early in the sixteenth century, when a piscina was inserted in the narrow strip of wall beyond the most easterly window. So the schoolroom was converted into a chapel when the grammar school was transferred to the abbey. The abbey, under abbot John Caslock, was competing with the parish church for the favour of the devout laity, and the parish clergy were no doubt glad to add another chapel to the attractions of their church. For the people of Faversham were supporting ecclesiastical projects generously, right up to the eve of the Reformation.

With the coming of the Book of Common Prayer, the crypt and the



PLATE II (a)







room over it lost their former status as sacred buildings. The crypt became a mere lumber shed. Inside it the watch-window was plastered up. The untouched state of its inner surfaces argues that since the days when it was a chapel it has never been open to the public, until the recent installation of a heating furnace in it.

In 1794 the door and window on the north side of the schoolroom were closed by the wall of the tower, while the room itself was invaded by the buttress of Fig. 2. A new doorway was broken through the south-west window, the roof of the room was removed, and the penthouse over the south aisle of the church was extended to the west to cover it. The vaulting of the crypt is borne up on three slender pillars (Fig. 3) spaced along the axis of the building. The ribs of the vaulting descend either onto wall brackets or, in a cluster of eight, onto the capital of one of the pillars. The walls of the crypt are of mixed flints and rubble left rough. The pillars, and the ribs and panels of the vaulting, are constructed of cut pieces of Kentish ragstone, while over the whole of the vaulting is a thick layer of paint, now sepia in colour.

This precaution was needful, because the crypt must always have been rather damp. And wherever a crack in the paint developed at a joint in the stonework the stone began to calcine, the paint crumbled and the decay crept slowly upwards, shelling off the paint as it went. There is extensive decay above the east and west pillars. The ribs above the middle capital are much better preserved, perhaps because the fresh air from the door dried them quickly. On four of these eight ribs, close above the capital, boys have attempted sculptures, working with a pointed knife or knives of very good steel. Their position, and the darkness of the crypt, together with the fact that the furnace pit comes to the foot of the pillar, makes direct photography impracticable. A photographic plate was obtained by substituting plaster of Paris casts for the original carvings. But this does not convey the artistic quality which the work is found to have, when studied under a strong light. It served, however, to show that the scraper-board and colour-wash drawings here reproduced are not works of fancy, though necessary to render the feeling of these carvings. For the boys were undoubtedly portraying their schoolmasters, as, in their eyes, very grim persons. They must have devoted hours of patient work to their carving. Our task, then, is to determine the time and circumstances in which the work was carried out. The native genius of the boy sculptors belongs to no age, and they have not represented definite period garments.

They must, however, have had sound stone under their tool when they did their work. Now the total period over which weathering in the crypt has gone on amounts now to six and a half centuries. The implied condition of the stone when the carving was done suggests a

date early in that period. On the other hand, the carvings themselves are in a fair state of preservation, which, seeing that the stone is soft, might argue their comparative modernity. Against this alternative, however, is the fact that the whole interior surface of the crypt (if we make exception of quite recent nail-scratching on the paint of the rib facing the entrance) is innocent of names, initials, or *graffiti* of any kind.

Even the work of the sculptors is unaccompanied by lettering or scrawling. In the light of such facts it is inconceivable that the crypt has, at any time since the Reformation, been accessible to boys, to amuse themselves there, in amateur carvings.

We must then put back the date of these sculptures into pre-Reformation times, when the crypt was indeed accessible, though in the character of a sacred edifice. Their carving must have been carried out by these boys surreptitiously, when there were no adults about. At the hour when boys would assemble for morning school it would be but rarely that the crypt would contain worshippers. So long, then, as the church clerks did not hear them, and provided that they had a sentinel posted outside, the young sculptors could work at their leisure. The master, when he came to open school, would enter from the north side (Fig. 1). From the steps he would get no glimpse of boys being present in the chapel below.

Moreover the carvings might go some while unnoticed.² People plunging out of daylight into the dark crypt would look to the light at the altar and not see the sculptures. The danger would come from people turning from the altar to come out; and it reached its height when the boys started to carve on the rib facing the altar. No doubt this was when their work was noticed and brought to a sudden end. Perhaps the boys only got a fright, and left off; for it is hard to believe that it was discovered by the schoolmaster or his brother clergy, who would surely have called in a mason to deface it.

The manner in which the boys proceeded is self-evident. They started on the face of the rib next the south door. Apparently they spoiled that carving and obliterated it. The next rib to the east bears the carving Plate I, the next Plates II, and the next Plates III. They could not have seen to do the last of these, if there had not been light coming from the direction of the altar. It is not certain that this was light from a flame. If the watch-window was unglazed, it would have supplied enough daylight. The neckless face (Plate II(b)) is at the very bottom of the fourth rib. Above it there is an unbroken smooth paint surface, on which is sketched with some sort of carbon pencil a slender-necked girlish face, Plate III(a), perhaps done in preparation for sculpture. Some hand less skilful than those of the other

² They escaped the notice of Jacob, and of those in more recent times who have worked (by electric light) in the crypt as a stoke-hole.

FAVERSHAM SCHOOLBOY SCULPTURES

sculptors seems to have made an attempt to begin sculpture, but had accidents and gave it up. And that is the end of the work. The other four ribs above this pillar are uncarved. The avoidance by these boys of lettering is remarkable. It suggests that they knew that lettering would betray their identity and expose them to punishment.

So, if we can give these sculptures a fifteenth century date, and knowing, as we do, that in 1420 a certain Master Lawrence Barry styled himself *regens* of the *scholae grammaticales* of the vill of Faversham,³ they tell us a coherent story. The *scholae* of Barry and his successors met in the room with the grill above the crypt-chapel of St. Mary-in-the-churchyard. Their boys stood in fear of them, with no visible admixture of affection. It may be significant that Cole, himself one of such boys, enjoined that the master of his Free Grammar School should dispense 'reasounable correccion and punyshment of hys scolers and not othrewise'.

But what turned the minds of these boys to retaliation by sculpture? The answer may lie in a block of carved stone now lying on a windowsill in Barfreton church. It is manifestly the keystone of a pointed arch, of high quality stone, and it is sculptured with the mitred head of a boy-bishop, his neck and knotted neckcloth. The stone was given in 1955 to the then Rector of Barfreton, Dr. C. J. Wright, by Mr. Wigley of Coldred Place, who had obtained it from 'the yard of an ancient inn in Faversham'. Whatever were the grounds upon which these gentlemen decided that the stone came from the ruins of Faversham abbey, it is hard to believe that they were right. In the first place, this stone must have been removed from its place by a mason, and laid by, as an object of interest. That is not at all the way in which abbey stonework was treated locally, at and after the Dissolution. Moreover there was no school in the abbey till 1527, when the boy-bishop ceremony had been long in abeyance. But the ceremony must have been observed in Faversham parish church in the fifteenth century. For the 1513 inventory of church ornaments includes the item '2 little vestments for Seynt Nicholas, with 2 course mitōs'.⁴ The place for a boy-bishop's head would be the schoolroom at the parish church where the parishioners might honour a clerkly boy by electing him 'bishop'. Now when the modern church tower was begun in 1794, one of the builders' first tasks was to close the north doorway of the schoolroom. If the stone now at Barfreton were its keystone, its preservation as an object of interest was quite natural.

We have reason enough, then, to conjecture that the authorities of Faversham parish in the fifteenth century had this stone made and placed over the school door to encourage the ambition of the boys for

³ Raymonde Foreville, *Le Jubilé de S. Thomas Becket* (1956), p. 135.

⁴ Jacob, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

FAVERSHAM SCHOOLBOY SCULPTURES

an ecclesiastical career. It bears a blatant representation of 'a good boy'. Might it not (boy nature being what it is) have prompted our young sculptors to their irreverent, though talented, *riposte*?

In any case, their carvings constitute an important document for the history of Faversham Grammar School.

Thanks are due to Mr. R. Ratcliffe, A.R.I.B.A., for the Figure drawing and Mr. Herbert D. Kendrick, F.D.S., for making the plaster casts photographed by Mr. A. J. Page, A.R.P.S., of 6 Bayford Road, Sittingbourne, corroborating the scraper-board and colour-wash drawings by Mr. D. G. Parker, Art Master at the present Grammar School, which of themselves justify this article.