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The Priory and Parochial Church of S. Helen's, Bishopsgate

by G. H. Birch
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THE PRIORY AND PAROCHIAL CHURCH OF S. HELEN'S, BISHOPSGATE.

By GEORGE H. BIRCH, F.S.A.



THE City of London, in its busy, crowded precincts, has many a quiet nook and corner hidden away behind its main thoroughfares, where the ceaseless ebb and flow of the human tide scarcely reaches, and where there still lingers an old-world air of quiet and repose which the casual hurrying footstep rarely disturbs but for a moment, and as the echoes fade upon the ear, the chirp of the sparrow and rustle of the leaves of a few old trees are all the sound one hears. And such places, such nooks, are generally

fraught with an interest beyond the common one of quiet and repose. History lingers round them and consecrates them afresh, and old memories, old traditions of the forgotten past, mingle with their very atmosphere.

S. Helen's, Bishopsgate, is pre-eminently such a site. Out of crowded Bishopsgate Street, just past the famous

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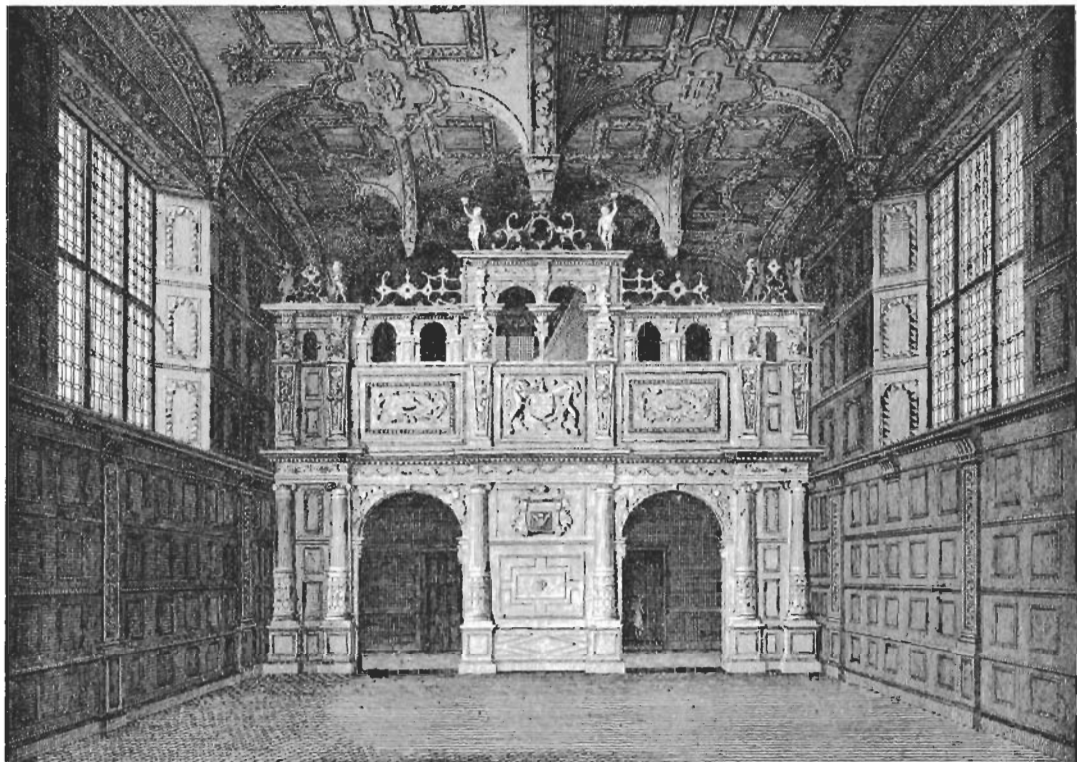
Crosby Hall, a covered entry leads to a quiet court, and in this, preceded by an avenue of limes, stands the priory and parochial church. A much-needed and necessary restoration may for the time have robbed it externally of its antiquity, for the corroding tooth of Time the destroyer rests not; but its very quaintness of outline, to which the lead turret so largely contributes, would be sufficient to arrest our footsteps and to make us at once inquire, What quaint old church is that? The old south door, a few steps further, answers us by the inscription over the lintel, "Laus Deo S. Helena." S. Helen! Why, that takes us back to Roman Britain; and not to Britain only, but to Imperial Rome and to the master of legions, and to "Christianity," and to the time when the hand of the persecutor had been stayed and the forces of paganism paled before the rays of the true Light.

This church reminds us of all this, for century after century it has kept watch and ward, and seen the Roman colonist, the Saxon, and the Dane and Norman within its walls, for as to when it was first founded no one knows; but its very dedication to St. Helen, a reputed British princess, is an argument in proof of its remote antiquity. In this part of London we stand where Roman remains of rich tessellated and mosaic pavements are richest, not originally within the first Roman wall, but included afterwards. Many a villa and Roman house must have lined this old Bishopsgate Street, and, on the introduction of Christianity, which saint would be more likely to be honoured above others by the Roman British colonist but S. Helen, "*Piissima et Venerabilis Augusta*," their own reputed country-woman, to whom Christianity owed so much.

We hear little of S. Helen's until Saxon times, and then the monks of Edmundsbury came fleeing to London with horrible tales of murder and fire and sacrilege by the dreaded Danes, and bringing with them among their costly treasures the body of the martyred King, S. Edmund, and that they placed it within these walls for the space of three years for safety.

In 1139, or a little before, a deed acquaints us of a transaction between the Dean and Canons of S. Paul's, and as Archbishop Thurstan of York is mentioned as living, it could not be later, as he died in that year. In 1181 S. Helen's is mentioned among the manors and churches belonging to the Cathedral, and as possessing a churchyard and paying synodal and archidiaconal fees. Up to the end of the twelfth century and commencement of the thirteenth the church had hitherto been parochial, and administered to the needs of the surrounding neighbourhood; but a change took place which rather altered the character of it, although the parochial part was not interfered with, and this was the foundation of the Priory or Convent of Benedictine Nuns. The founder was William, the son of William the goldsmith, or, as he was generally called, William FitzWilliam; he was patron of the living at the time, towards the end of King John's reign, about 1212.

The preceding century had been productive of many monastic establishments within and without the walls of the City. The Canons Regular of the Order of S. Augustine had been already established at the royal foundation of Christ Church or Holy Trinity, Aldgate, S. Bartholomew's, Smithfield, and S. Mary Overie; the Knights Templar at Holborn and in the Temple; and the Knights of S. John or Hospitallers at Clerkenwell. But the only religious house for women then in London or closely contiguous was the Benedictine Nunnery at Clerkenwell, Stratford, and Holywell (the Nuns of S. Clare or Minoresses came afterwards). So that at the time of the foundation of S. Helen's Priory there was not that plethora of monastic foundations within its walls which the advent of the Friars so largely increased. These Benedictine Sisters gave up some of their time to the education of the daughters of well-to-do citizens, and must have been useful people in their day and generation. The original deed of foundation is in existence, in which Alardus de Burnham, in the name of himself and Chapter of S. Paul's, grants to William the son of William that he may constitute nuns.

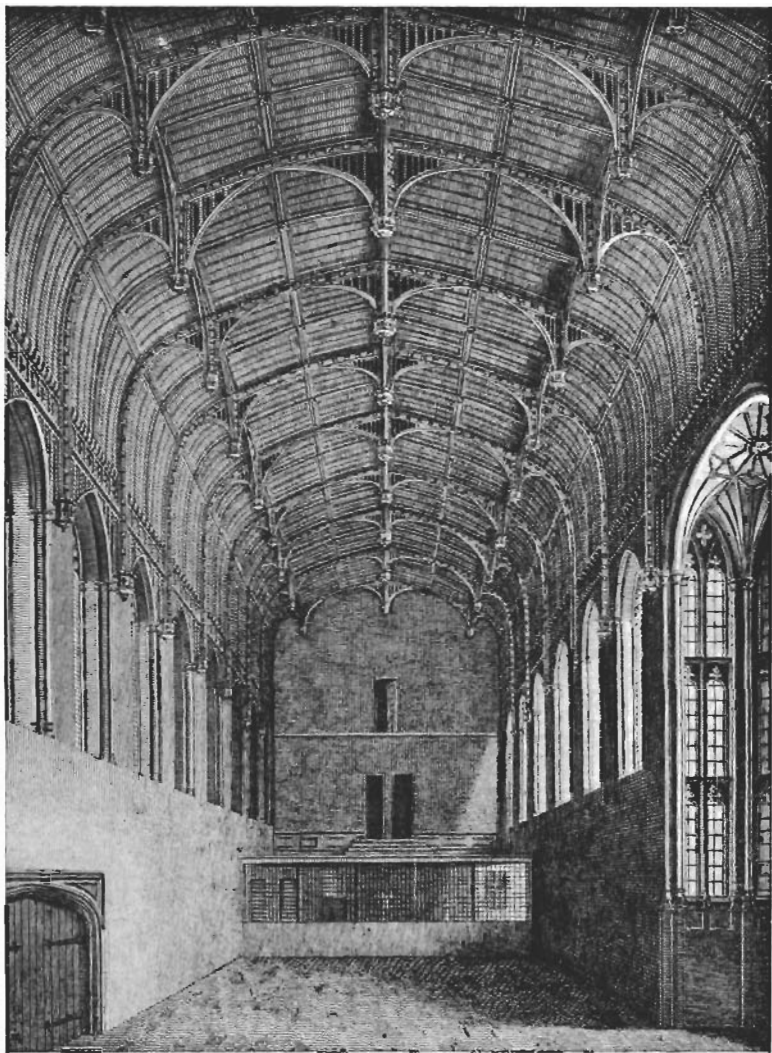


within the said church for the perpetual service of God, providing that the prioress or other governing such house after their election should swear fidelity to the said Dean and Chapter, and pay to them half a mark annually; and that they should have the patronage of the living, provided that they never alienated such patronage or subject their convent to any other control; and should they behave themselves improperly the property should pass from them and go to some religious order of men. William FitzWilliam must then have altered the church to suit this new purpose, and he added on the north side another nave and choir of the same length as the existing church, and it is this addition which gives the present building so odd a look with only one arcade or row of arches, and this was probably the original arrangement, although the present arcade, with the exception of one arch, is later. The earlier windows have disappeared with the exception of one, which was opened out in 1868.

The southern side, or parochial church, has a nave and chancel, and, in addition, a south transept and two eastern chapels. The nuns' part would have been closely screened off. In the late restoration traces of very early work were found; especially in the parochial nave and south transept Norman work was visible. To the north of the nuns' church were the cloisters, around which were grouped the fraternity or refectory, the dorter, chapter house, parlours, and sub-prioresses' rooms, and muniment room. These all existed until the end of last century, for the Leathersellers' Company, having bought the buildings of the nunnery, turned them, or rather a part of them, into their hall, and this hall of theirs, which had been altered and fitted up late in Elizabeth's or early in James I.'s reign, and was a perfect specimen of the art of that period, and one of the most beautiful in London, was destroyed to give place to their present hall, a very commonplace affair, and at the same time most of the old conventual buildings were cleared away and S. Helen's Place built on the site. For over two hundred years the sisters pursued the even tenour of their

way, and there is little to record; but towards the end of the fifteenth century, through the munificence of their tenant, Sir John Crosbie, certain alterations were made in the interior which completely transformed it, and which gave the church the appearance it now presents. A few alterations had been made previously to the parochial part, especially the eastern chapels; but the principal alteration was made in consequence of Sir John Crosbie's legacy of 500 marks, aided, doubtless, by other charitable citizens. This alteration consisted mainly of removing the old arcade between the two parts of the church and re-building them in the then prevailing fashion, and the old lancet or single-light windows were removed and larger ones inserted. One arch only of the earlier building was retained, and as the stalls for the nuns backed against it, it was probably left to allow their services and canonical hours to be uninterrupted. This arch is the last but one nearest the east end; the last arch itself is a much later insertion, and probably only dates from the time of the erection of the tomb of the Pickerings, father and son. Crosbie's alterations must have been made about 1475 or soon after, although the will is dated 1471. In this document he directs that his body be buried in the chapel of the Holy Ghost within the "parish" church of S. Helen within Bishopsgate, London, in the same place where the body of "Anneys" (or Agnes?), his late wife, was buried, in case it fortune him to decease within the realm of England. After particularising his tomb and its ornaments, he bequeaths various sums to the prioress and nuns of S. Helen and to the parish priest of the parish church of S. Helen (making thereby a marked distinction between the two foundations), to do placebo, dirge, and masses of requiem for his soul and that of his late wife, and for the souls of all his children passed to God and for all Christian souls, and forty shillings to a priest to pray for his soul in the parish church of S. Helen, and for his obit to be holden yearly for forty years in the said church.

Sir John evidently looked upon the sisters with great



From an old print.

affection. Alice Ashfield, the then prioress, had leased to him the ground on which he had built his stately mansion for ninety-nine years, at the annual ground rent of £11 6s. 8d. This stately mansion still partly exists, and is known as Crosby Hall. Sir John was a member of the Grocers' Company and a wool stapler, and a very worthy specimen of the merchant princes of the olden time; and Stowe, while recording some gossip about his being a foundling, casts considerable doubt upon it; and although he was an Alderman and Sheriff in 1470, and knighted by Edward IV. in 1471, he never seems to have filled the office of Lord Mayor, although he represented the City in Parliament. It is unnecessary to state he was a devoted Yorkist, and on his effigy the collar of roses and suns is greatly in evidence. The previous alterations to the thirteenth century church, before alluded to, probably consisted in altering the old lancet windows to the nuns' choir and parish choir to large windows of the Decorated type, as, in 1308, William de Basing, Sheriff of London, was a liberal benefactor, as also was Adam Francis, Lord Mayor, who built the chapels of the Holy Ghost and Our Lady, eastward of the south transept. This Adam Francis died in 1534, so that improvements had already been made in the interior before the executors of Sir John Crosbie took it in hand and completely changed its internal appearance. Before this time (1475) the church still possessed its high-pitched roofs and early arcade, one arch of which only is left; and the soil outside had accumulated above the level of the floor inside. Crosbie's 500 marks, aided by other donations, was expended in raising the floor slightly, building the present beautiful arcade of four arches, and substituting flat moulded roofs of oak over the whole area, and putting larger fifteenth century windows instead of the narrow, single, lancet ones. In the nuns' choir on the north wall is still to be seen the door which led to the dormitory of the nuns, who were obliged by their rules to keep the canonical hours of primes, lauds, mattins, tierce, sexts, nones, vespers, and complines, and to do this a con-

venient approach to the church had to be made from the dormitory. Probably the sisters joined two or three of these services into one, so that they were not obliged to rise from their beds every three hours and shuffle down into the cold church. A few more uneventful years passed over these quiet precincts, until the distant muttering of that storm began to be heard which finally swept down all before it, and left this ancient church battered and ruined like an old hulk thrown up by the waves beyond the reach of further mishap. One can trace in the business transactions of the last few years of the priory the futile efforts made by the last prioress, in the name and on behalf of the convent, to ward off that catastrophe which would soon drive them from their peaceful home out into a world of which they knew nothing or had but very little experience of. On the 10th of September, 1534, we find the prioress and convent, in the vain hope of making themselves friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, giving the infamous Thomas Cromwell, afterwards Earl of Essex, then at that time secretary to the King, an annuity of four marks to be paid out of their lands for the term of his natural life, and payable at Michaelmas, and that he might enter and distrain if the annuity was in arrear, and that they paid a sum down as earnest money. One can fancy the poor prioress doing this in consultation with her steward, and thinking that by thus propitiating a man of influence he might possibly be of assistance to them in the preservation of their beautiful house and home. How little did they reckon that they were dealing with a double-dyed traitor, whose appetite for gold only increased with what it fed on, and that when the final storm broke this infamous pension would be actually allowed by the Court of Augmentation, while other charities and doles for the poor would be ruthlessly swept away!

They had before this been granting leases of some of their outside property; in many cases the leases were only renewed, and very rarely for more than forty years, with the

exception of Crosby Hall, which had been leased in 1466 for a term of ninety-nine years. This would have expired in 1565, but in 1538 they granted a lease to Antony Bonvixi, merchant, their great messuage, with houses, cellars, solars, and gardens, called "Crosbyes Place," together with nine messuages belonging to the same, for a term of seventy-one years, which was to take effect immediately after the expiration and completion of the aforesaid term of ninety-nine years. This transaction rather shows the uneasy feeling which pervaded men's minds at the time, that they had better be beforehand and get some of the spoils before the Crown entered and took possession, when they would have to reckon with a very different kind of landlords to the gentle prioresses. During the very last days we find the convent granting annuities of the same description as that to Thomas Cromwell, to Edward Rollesley, for good and faithful service, an annuity of forty shillings—he was, doubtless, the steward; then to John Rollesley, for good counsel past and future; four marks to Henry Bowsfel, gent, for good counsel; to Jerome Shelton, for good counsel; to John Staverton and to John Melsham, for the like. How in all these transactions one can trace the growing anxiety of the prioress, and how, when one counsellor proved a broken reed, she turned to another. But at last the evil day broke, and the deed of surrender still existing in the Record Office shows the seal of the Priory, but no signatures. Even that formality was dispensed with, and we can only suppose naturally that the sisters were unwilling. It is dated the 25th of November, 1538. But in Cardinal Pole's pension book, 1556, the following pensions and annuities were paid to the then survivors:—

S. HELEN'S LATE PRIORY.

Annuities—

Edward Rowlesley	...	...	...	40	shillings
John Rowlesley	...	...	...	53	"
Richard Berde	...	...	...	40	"
John Melsham	...	...	...	20	"

The poor prioress, Mary Rollesley, was dead, but the following pensions were paid to the surviving sisters:—

Margaret Sampson...	...	...	...	53s.	4d.
Elizabeth Graye	...	...	...	53s.	4d.
Katherine Glassappe	...	...	...	53s.	4d.
Joan Pamplyn	...	...	...	56s.	8d.
Elionor Hanham	...	...	...	53s.	4d.
Ann Alleyne...	...	...	...	53s.	4d.

And with that entry the sisters of S. Helen's Priory disappear from history. Whether these pensions were ever paid is uncertain. Perhaps some of the sisters found a shelter and home in their families, but there may have been some who were aged and had outlived their families. What became of them?

When once the convent was dissolved it did not take long to divide up the spoils. The church could not well be touched because of the rights of the parishioners; but the whole of the site, sept, circuit, and precincts of the late priory of S. Helen's, the church vulgarly called the "Nonnes Church of Seynt Helyns," and all houses and buildings belonging to the same, were granted to "Cromwell." On the 28th July, 1540, Thomas Cromwell's annuity ended with his life on Tower Hill, after an hypocritical prayer on the scaffold for the "King's Grace," and that he might live long in health and prosperity, and that his sonne Prince Edward, that goodly "ympe," might long live after him. The advowson passed to the Crown, and was granted by Elizabeth, who so well knew how to do things cheap, as a reward to Captain Nicholas Oseley for information sent from Spain about the Armada, but he did not possess it long. It passed to the Stanhopes, who farmed it, reserving £20 per annum for a "godly preacher." The reign of Elizabeth left its mark upon this old fabric, beside the indelible one upon the "living." The neighbourhood was a rich one, and that most reprehensible custom of burying the dead under the floors of churches was the common practice, hence the stately monuments to the Pickerings, Greshams, and

Spencers. The tomb of the first-mentioned family commemorates the father and son; but the very beautiful effigy is that of the son, Sir William Pickering. He was a very handsome man, and for his good looks much favoured by Elizabeth, and was sent as Ambassador both to France and Germany. According to the inscription on his monument he served under four monarchs—Henry VIII., Edward VI., Mary, and Elizabeth—which says much for his extreme cleverness. He died at his own house in this parish in 1574, in his fifty-eighth year. Close by, at the east end of the nuns' choir, is the plain altar tomb of Sir Thomas Gresham, without effigy or inscription, only his coat of arms cut in the stone, and so long as the Royal Exchange and Gresham College last no further memorial would be needed for so great a man—a real merchant prince. The Gresham Committee have unfortunately filled the east window of the nuns' choir with bad tracery, and still more indifferent glass; an old print shows the original, and it is most regrettable that the old form was not copied if a new window was required. This modern work was done in 1865. Another famous celebrity of Elizabeth's reign lies here with his wife under a stately tomb, Sir John Spencer, Alderman of London, generally called "Rich Spencer," whose only daughter, Elizabeth, eloped with William Compton, and finally conveyed his wealth to the Spencer Comptons, the family of the Marquis of Northampton.

But the Crosbys, Pickerings, Gresham, and the Spencers are not the only illustrious dead interred within these old walls; there are monuments to the Bonds, Juddes, Robinsons, Lawrences, and other famous London merchants or merchant adventurers, "who travelled much by land and sea," and a very curious altar tomb to Sir Julius Aldemar or "Cæsar," representing a vellum deed by which he agrees to give up his soul when required. He was Master of the Rolls in James I.'s reign.

When S. Martin Outwich was pulled down—a modern and very ugly church standing at the junction of Bishopsgate

and Threadneedle Streets—and the living annexed to this, some of the monuments which had been preserved from the old church, rebuilt about 1800, were removed here, and among them is a very beautiful altar tomb with the effigies of Sir John de Oteswich and his wife—a singularly beautiful tomb, scarcely excelled by any in Westminster Abbey. Another, a fine canopied tomb in Purbeck marble, once inlaid with brasses, commemorates Alderman Hugh Pemberton. Sir Francis Bancroft, the founder of Bancroft's Almshouses and Schools, formerly was commemorated here with a large railed enclosure, completely blocking the best part of the church, in which stood a tasteless stone tomb with an oaken door, within which, on the ground, was the coffin. A glass lid enabled one to see the shrivelled remains of Bancroft. The charities were left to the care of the Drapers' Company, and also the maintenance of this tomb, and a loaf of bread and pitcher of water were to be placed on the coffin every week. On founder's day the boys of the school were allowed to see their pious benefactor as a great treat; but in consequence of one of the boys having a fit through sheer fright, this annual ceremony was dispensed with. The tomb and contents are now sunk beneath the pavement in a specially prepared vault with a staircase down to it, and the freehold which he had bought in his lifetime marked on the pavement.

In Hatton's *New View of London*, 1708, he describes twelve brasses, but more than half have disappeared, and, although augmented by two from S. Martin Outwich, the number at present is only seven. A very fine one to Thomas Benolte—"Clarencieux King"—and his two wives must have been stolen comparatively recently, because a rubbing of this is still in existence. The old stalls of the nuns, formerly in the nuns' choir, are now arranged as choir seats. In the north wall of the nuns' choir is a curious canopied recess, which possibly might have been an Eastern sepulchre, the lower part of which is pierced with squints, through which a view of the nuns' altar could be obtained from the chamber contiguous to the choir, and another squint a little to

the westward communicates with the south walk of the cloister.

It only remains now to say that the church has lately been thoroughly repaired, the old levels returned to, and all the bodies removed to Ilford, with a few exceptions—a most necessary work, for the ground beneath was in an awful state. The choir had been properly arranged and enclosed with oak parcloses with a magnificent carved oak rood-screen. The old Lady chapel has been fitted up for occasional services, and the old altar stone replaced in position, the oak roof thoroughly repaired and new leaded; and this fine old church now stands revealed in all its pristine stately beauty, very little different from what it was when the voices of the sisters behind their screen could be heard chanting their offices. And visions of Constantine and S. Helena, Roman, Saxon, Norman, and Mediæval London, Tudor tyranny, Laudian revival, Puritanical neglect, the Plague and the Fire, all come crowding around one and fill this old place with their memories. “We have heard with our ears, and our fathers have told us, the noble works Thou didst in their days and in the old time before them.”
Laus Deo S. Helena.
