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St. John's Church, Cardiff

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ST. JOHN'S CHURCH, CARDIFF.

BY JOHN BALLINGER,

CARDIFF formerly had two parish churches, St. Mary's and St. John's. The Church of St. Mary stood near the south end of St. Mary Street, and was held by the Abbey of Tewkesbury. The only picture of it known is a small sketch in the corner of Speed's plan of Cardiff, 1610, which shows a cruciform church with an imposing central tower. Such fragments of description as remain to us point to its having been an imposing structure. Rice Merrick, writing in 1578, speaks of St. Mary's as being of far greater antiquity than St. John's, but he gives no description of the building, which is unfortunate. Speed, thirty years later, refers to St. Mary's as in a dangerous condition, and liable to suffer from the proximity of the River Taff, which then flowed close to its walls, and threatened to destroy the fabric. This actually happened a year after Speed's visit, and before his remarks were published. It perished in the great flood of 1607.

It is only an inference, but it would seem that for some reason the Church of St. Mary was neglected, and allowed to fall into disrepair after the Dissolution, and that the flood found an easy prey. No effort appears to have been made to restore what the flood left behind, and gradually the Church of St. Mary vanished.

The history of the Church of St. John is a pleasant contrast to the story of St. Mary's. Originally a chapel of ease to St. Mary, it has for at least seven and a half centuries been used for divine service without interruption. The date of its foundation is uncertain, but one pillar in the chancel on the south side suggests that there was a Norman structure on this site, and the west doorway of the tower, certainly older than

the tower itself, also suggests an earlier structure. This theory is borne out by a document printed in the late Mr. G. T. Clark's collection of charters and other documents relating to Glamorgan. Matilda de Soor, *circa* 1190, notifies the Bishop of Llandaff of a gift of land to Margam Abbey, one of the witnesses being Augustine, of the Chapel of St. John, Cardiff. That St. John's and Roath were originally chapels of ease to St. Mary's is shown by another document printed by Mr. Clark, relating to the tithes paid to the Abbey of Tewkesbury. The document is a confirmation by Bishop Nicholas (1153-83), and shows that the abbey held the parish church of St. Mary, and the chapels of St. John, St. Thomas (a church in Cardiff of which nothing is now known), Roath, and several others. This document proves that the Church of St. John existed before 1183, and it may be inferred that it had then been in existence for some years, inasmuch as it appears to have been included in a still earlier grant to Tewkesbury Abbey, which Bishop Nicholas confirmed some time between the dates named.

The present church is undoubtedly older than the tower, for the building of which we have an approximate date, 1473 or thereabouts.

The tower has ever been the glory of the church. It is said to have been built by one Hart, who also built the towers of Wrexham Church and St. Stephen's, Bristol, the cost being defrayed by Lady Anne Nevill, daughter of Warwick "the King-maker," and wife of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, afterwards Richard III. Lady Anne Nevill and her sister Isabel became co-heiresses to the lordship of Glamorgan on the death of their father, Warwick "the King-maker," in 1471; and on the death of Isabel, in 1477, Lady Anne, with her husband, succeeded. The date 1473 for the tower is approximately correct.

The fame of the tower as an object of beauty is justified, its exquisite embattled parapet, with delicate tracery and pinnacles of open-work, light and beautiful in character,

being far superior to any other mediæval work in this neighbourhood.

The tower was repaired with great skill twenty years ago, during the vicariate of Canon Thompson, forming the final portion of a considerable scheme of improvement which he carried through with great success, especially when we remember the difficulties he had to overcome.

The interior of the church at some late period had been disfigured with galleries on the north, west and south, to meet the need for increased accommodation ; and in planning the removal of these galleries it was absolutely necessary to preserve, and if possible increase, the number of sittings. This was done by building extra aisles on the north and south. It will be noticed that the extra aisle on the south side is much wider than on the north. Owing to the nearness of the street on the north side it was absolutely necessary to make the new aisle on the south much wider in order to provide the sitting accommodation formerly supplied by the galleries.

The roof of the chancel was raised when the other work was carried out, the chancel arch being at the same time increased in height though *not* in width.

The churchyard cross was also restored, the upper part being conjectural, as no evidence of its original form was available. The design of the upper part is based upon that of similar crosses in the county.

After the tower the chief feature of interest in the church is the Herbert Chapel, or the Herbert Aisle as it is sometimes called, now the property of the Marquess of Bute. There is, so far as I can discover, no actual evidence as to when and how the possession of this chapel passed to the Herbert family. It is not difficult, however, to conjecture what took place. The Church of St. John has, I think, always been associated with Cardiff Castle—indeed, it is possible that the church was originally built by the owners of the castle, as was the tower at a later date. On the dissolution of the religious houses the Herbert family acquired a large share of their

possessions. Sir William Herbert, afterwards Earl of Pembroke, also received from Edward VI a grant of the extensive properties which form the Bute estate of to-day. It is more than likely that the north-east chapel, originally a chantry, passed at this time into the possession of the Herbert family. Either then, but more probably some years later, a member of the family embellished the chapel, enclosing it with the screen which stood beneath the rood-loft, introducing into the panels odd pieces of carved woodwork from other parts of the church, together with some from other sources, which will account for the miscellaneous nature of the carvings.

As a mere guess, I venture the suggestion that the embellishment may have been done at the instance of the widow of Sir John Herbert (died 1617), when she erected the tomb to the memory of her husband and his brother. Some of the carved work is as late as this time.

The following account of the Herbert Chapel is extracted from the description given by Mr. J. Hobson Matthews, *Cardiff Records*, vol. iii:—

“The Herbert Aisle or Chapel (both terms are used) may have been a chantry before the Reformation. It appears to have passed to the Herbert family soon after, and the carved woodwork, its principal feature, is of about this period. It is raised one step above the floor of the nave and north aisle. It is enclosed by a screen which may have formed part of the rood screen, the framework being late Perpendicular, with ornamental panelling of a somewhat later date. The panels are carved on the sides facing inwards with beautiful and intricate geometrical designs, and also arabesques and foliage; but the most interesting are those which present various grotesque figures. A medallion under the easternmost arch surrounded by arabesque carving, contains the bust of a man in armour, wearing a helmet with visor raised, and with his tongue out. The face is bearded, and the breastplate is charged with the arms of Jerusalem: “A Greek cross or cross coupée between four crosslets of like shape.” *Dos à dos* to

this, in a corresponding medallion, is a female figure, also with her tongue out. They no doubt represent characters in the mediæval legend of the Passion of Our Lord, viz. a Roman soldier, and the wife of the smith who, when her husband pretended he could find no nails for the crucifixion, produced them herself. She wears a close-frilled cap and a bodice with low neck, also frilled, showing the breasts. Right and left of the door into the north aisle there is another pair of heads, not grotesque. The man has a beard, and wears a flat cap; the dress of the woman, is similar to the one above mentioned. There is also a female half-figure on the west side in a dress of Mary Tudor's reign, and a corresponding male half-figure on the door leading to the north aisle. Another panel on the screen represents a large bird, holding by a cord a shield charged with the letter "H." Under the east window of the Herbert Chapel is a bench of five armed seats with an ornamental back, carved to represent Aaron with loaves and pitcher, etc.¹ In the chapel are also a number of old chairs, including a high-backed fauteuil of the seventeenth century, and also a long prie-Dieu² of the seventeenth century, carved with nymphs, cupids, tritons and dolphins.

"The Perpendicular string course of the screen bears the usual flowing carvings of vines and wheat, which appear also in the spandrels of the south and west doors of the screen.

"The most prominent object in the chapel is the Herbert monument, a fine and characteristic example of Jacobean sculpture. It consists of a sarcophagus of stone, marble and alabaster, standing against the north wall, and backed by a high reredos of like materials. Both sarcophagus and reredos consist of two parts, each containing a central panel of dark stone bearing an inscription. On the top of the sarcophagus are recumbent effigies of two gentlemen with their feet to the east. The outer effigy has a beard, and is dressed in ruffled collar, buttoned jerkin and trunk hose, over which is a

¹ Or possibly the high priest with the shewbread, and King David.

² See note at end.

barrister's gown. His shoes are ornamented with rosettes. The inner figure is clean shaven except for a small chin tuft, wears a ruffled collar, wrist bands, and armour of a later pattern. The reredos is sculptured with two cherubs, and at the apex is a rococo female bust. Above all are two escutcheons, between which at one time was a figure of Time. The monument was erected to the memory of Sir John Herbert and Sir William Herbert by the wife of the latter."

The south chancel aisle, now occupied by the organ, was formerly known as the alderman's aisle, the seats in it having been used at one time by the bailiffs and aldermen of the town. The churchwardens and the vicar also had seats there.

The entrances to the rood-loft on the south side of the nave were opened out during the reconstruction of the aisles.

The curfew is still rung at eight o'clock every evening from October to March. The seventh bell is rung for the curfew, and at its close the day of the month is rung on the fourth bell. A passing bell is also rung on notice being given to the sexton. and, if requested, a funeral bell is tolled, in each case for parishioners only.

The town fire-engine was formerly kept at the west end of the church under the tower.

The Parish Registers date from the year 1669, and the Churchwardens' Accounts from 1711. The Registers have not been printed, but copious extracts from the Churchwardens' Accounts and the text of a number of monumental inscriptions will be found in the *Cardiff Records*, vol iii.

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE.

The President of the Society, the Rev. Canon Bazeley, M.A., during the inspection of the Herbert Chapel, drew attention to the piece of furniture now used as a *prie-Dieu*, and pointed out that it was the "Houselling Stool" formerly used in the administration of the Sacrament. The word "housel," meaning the Holy Eucharist, is now obsolete, but it occurs in

old parish records in different parts of the country. To housel a man meant to give him the Sacrament. It is occasionally recorded that a parish contained so many "houseling people," *i.e.* communicants, and as all the parishioners above the age of fourteen were required to communicate, an estimate of the population of a parish in mediæval times can be got by doubling the number of "houseling people." The "houseling cloth" is, I believe, still used in Roman churches. It was formerly held below the chins of the communicants to prevent any portion of the consecrated bread from falling to the ground. The cloth was held at either end by deacons, or other assistants of the celebrant.

The "Houseling Stool" was during the celebration placed along the upper step in front of the altar. It is still used in some continental churches, but in this country has been almost, if not entirely, superseded by the rails introduced in the English Church in the time of Archbishop Laud, and now generally used in churches of all creeds.

The "Houseling Stool" in the Herbert Chapel is a handsome piece of furniture. The carved moulding along the front is in three pieces, and most probably was added after the stool was removed from the chancel. The subjects—nymphs, cupids, tritons and dolphins—are not ecclesiastical. They look like the carved fronts of the drawers from some fine piece of domestic furniture. Some of the other carved pieces inserted in the chapel also bear a domestic look, and resemble the carvings found on bedsteads and other furniture of the Elizabethan period.