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Burford Priory

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BURFORD PRIORY.¹

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THE history of Burford Priory has been often written by far abler writers than myself, and in far better language than I can put it, and to them I am indebted for most of the information I have been able to collect; so I think it better to confine myself now as far as possible to the discoveries I made, and the little matters of interest that cropped up during my work here some two years ago.

That a priory building existed here as far back as 1291 seems certain, since which time the place has passed through various hands and many vicissitudes of fortune till it came into my possession in June, 1908.

I may say that far from finding the restoration of the Priory the hopeless task my friends and the experts predicted, I was actually living in the house a little over ten months from the day I started work; and the fact that I acted as my own architect, and was most loyally supported and assisted by my builder and his workmen, gave me a perfectly free hand, and whatever mistakes I have made are my own.

Perhaps the matter of greatest architectural interest was the discovery of a series of arches and columns built into the wall on the north side of the south wing.

This wall appears to have been the north side of the south aisle of the Canons' Chapel of the original Priory.

One other old main wall runs through the house from north to south, and seems to have been the west end of the same chapel, and the two west doorways to the north and south aisles are still extant and traceable.

¹ A paper read on July 12th, 1911.

The centre of the present house seems to have been the nave or chancel of the chapel; and the dwelling-house as originally constructed seems to have been erected round these two walls, and built of the pieces of the pulled-down ecclesiastical building, which was not converted into a dwelling-house, as was usually done under similar circumstances, but reconstructed entirely with the exception of those two walls, and possibly some of the south wing.

I arrive at this conclusion from the fact that wherever you pull about the present building you come across worked stones that have been used before, such as old mullions, jambs, pieces of doorways, carved stone traceries, etc., many of them of an ecclesiastical character, and probably parts of the old Priory.

I think also that the old building was probably lying about in a more or less ruinous state for years at the Dissolution for anyone to plunder, and that many of the beautiful bits of stonework still to be seen in the old houses in Burford were taken from the priory at that time.

We came across a good many thirteenth or fourteenth century tiles, probably from the old chapel floor, but not in situ, as they were buried in an accumulation of rubbish which had collected above the old pebble court, now uncovered, to the west of the house, where they had been thrown away to take their chance at some time.

The floor of one room in the south wing which I have mentioned as the probable south aisle of the chapel was, we found, laid on the spandrels of a former oak roof or ceiling of some importance, probably its own original roof. The spandrels are similar to some in Burford Church.

A variety of coins turned up, one Roman, and various others dating from Edward IV down to the present day; several Hanseatic tokens dropped about by the merchants from Lubeck, Nuremberg, etc., in the prosperous times of the wool trade; a bronze arrow-head, and some ancient British pottery.

The house as originally planned undoubtedly faced south instead of east as at present. The great bay-windows now in the east front were bodily removed from the south at some time, and the marks of their removal were easily traceable.

Many things point to this conclusion, the principal one being that a metalled roadway ran right across the south front from east to west, with a bowling green or garden between it and the house, and the whole garden scheme with its garden house at the west end now reveals itself.

Thus the gallery was certainly built before the present chapel, and met or crossed the roadway at a higher level, where the ground rises. The doorway in the gallery immediately outside, and to the east of the present chapel door, though now half blocked and turned into a window, was once the centre of the gallery and of the garden scheme, and it directly faces the garden house.

The old roadway ran right through the middle of the present chapel, and is easily traceable both sides of it. Why the chapel was built at its extraordinary angle to the gallery is an absolute puzzle. It faces no particular point of the compass, and makes every building near it look crooked.

I found the royal coat of arms, which I take to be those of James I, clapped on to the north end of the chapel above the upper door. It obviously did not fit the place, in spite of a bracket and some of the water-tabling having been cut away to try and make room for it ; in fact, the scroll belonging to the top of the coat of arms could not be got into the space at all, and was cut in half and fixed under it to form a bracket for its support. It had nothing, therefore, to do with the chapel, which Lenthall did not build till about 1660 ; and as it distinctly dwarfed the building, and was very loose and tumbling to pieces, I took it carefully down, and re-erected it on an ugly bare space between the spaces formerly occupied by the old bay-windows on the south front, where I venture

to think it is more in character, and shows to greater advantage.

It had probably been put up by Tanfield in some such position in honour of James I, when he stayed here with his Queen in 1603, and had been removed by Lenthall during the Commonwealth, to be re-erected by him on his new chapel, when he again turned his coat, and probably went in fear of his life, at the Restoration of Charles II, and wished to show his lately-born loyalty to the restored king, though it is recorded that he did his best to assist the Restoration when it came about.

When I began my work on the Priory I was very frequently asked if I was going to "restore" it; but as a very cursory examination showed that there had been a variety of buildings on the same site at different periods, I used to ask my friends which particular period they would like it restored to!

Of course, on looking into the matter it was apparent that a restoration to any particular period, without entirely losing what was left of the old building, was out of the question. I therefore determined to mend everything as I found it, and to keep all existing features of whatever period, and to make the best of any others that might appear during our work. As half the mullions of the bay-windows and all the transoms had been cut away, I thought it better to fill the whole of the window spaces with casements, as to have put in the missing parts of new stone would have meant practically two new bay-windows, which would have disfigured the whole east front.

In the same way I have left the chapel practically untouched. To have restored it would have entailed so much new stone and woodwork that all its picturesqueness would have vanished, so I contented myself with making it sound and weather-proof, and otherwise it remains as I found it.

Including the original Priory, there seem to have been six or seven periods of alteration or attempts at reconstruction:—

First, we know there was the original priory building of the Augustine Canons, an offshoot of the Abbey of Keynsham, which was in existence in 1291, though there seems no record when it was built.

Then came Harman's house in Henry VIII's time.

Then the Duchess of Somerset and Edward Lee possessed it.

Then it fell into the possession of the Crown for some unexplained reason.

Queen Elizabeth then sold it to Sir John Fortescue, who possibly made his alterations, but afterwards sold it to Sir Laurence Tanfield, who again seems to have rebuilt some of it in the reign of James I.

Tanfield left it to his grandson, Lord Falkland, who probably was one of its few owners who did not pull it about. Falkland sold it to Speaker Lenthall in 1634, in the reign of Charles I.

Lenthall altered it again, and rebuilt the south wing and built the chapel.

Then some other Lenthall must have put in the present staircase with its ceiling and east windows at a later period.

Finally, the last Lenthall of Burford Priory, about 1808, pulled half the house right down, spoilt all the windows, and added a new back and north wing in the style of that period.

Then after a hundred years of neglect came my mending !

It will be seen that the old house has had plenty of people tinkering at it first and last, and it speaks well for the original structure that it has managed to retain through it all a considerable amount of its charm and picturesqueness, in spite of all our efforts. I think also I must have made it clear how impossible it would have been for me or anybody to have restored the house to any one period of architecture. I found it impossible to show the arches and columns *in situ* as I found them (half of them were buried in, and used in the construction of a chimney-stack) ; so I got them out carefully,

shortened the arches, slightly blunted the pitch, and re-erected them in the present hall, some 10 ft. away from and parallel to their original position.

There is one very fine stone fireplace now in the hall, which I think dates back to Harman's house or possibly earlier. This was unearthed in pieces from a ruinous part of the south wing. There are several fireplaces of the ordinary Tudor arch pattern, and some three or four of the Charles II period, from Lenthall's new wing (now in ruins).

The house has had the honour of entertaining seven kings and one queen.

James I and his Queen, Anne of Denmark, stayed here with the Tanfields in 1603, and I expect the royal coat of arms was first put up in honour of that visit.

Charles I in 1644 refreshed himself and his troops on his way to Bourton-on-the-Water.

Charles II in 1681 dined here with Sir John Lenthall.

William of Orange in 1695 slept at the Priory, then in the occupation of Lord and Lady Abercorne (Lady Abercorne was the widow of the previous and mother of the following Lenthall).

It will be asked how such a house was left to fall into decay. The story as told me by the present head of the Lenthall family is that the last of the Lenthalls of the Priory, who was a typical country gentleman of the old days, got into difficulties, and gave a mortgage on his property. Times got worse and worse; and as Mr. Lenthall could not pay off the mortgage when called upon, to prevent its being foreclosed, he put the whole property up to auction, when it was bought by Mr. Thomas Greenaway.

I gather that the latter did not care to live at the Priory; and that as nobody ever lived there afterwards, the place gradually fell into decay, and for many years the only interest his successors seem to have taken in the place was to use it as a quarry to draw stone to mend the farm buildings on the estate, and only some forty years ago the whole of Speaker Lenthall's south wing shared that fate.

Latterly it fell into much better hands, and the destruction was arrested; but too late to stop the decay which had set in, and I think that one or two more years of neglect must have seen the whole place in actual ruins and beyond repair.

I may add that my ambition has been to make no noticeable change in the appearance of the house, so that when my work was finished no one should be able to point out anything as having been obviously renewed; and I think, taking into consideration the state in which I found it, I have succeeded fairly well.

I have been able to preserve such features of interest as remained of all periods, including the old plaster work of the ceilings; but no modern work could restore the house to the stately grandeur of its appearance before the senseless destruction of so much of it perpetrated by its then owners in 1808.