

From the *Transactions* of the  
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

**A Brief Account of the Church of St. John Baptist, Coventry, and  
its Precincts**

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1914, Vol. 37, 93-105

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# A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE CHURCH OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST, COVENTRY, AND ITS PRECINCTS.

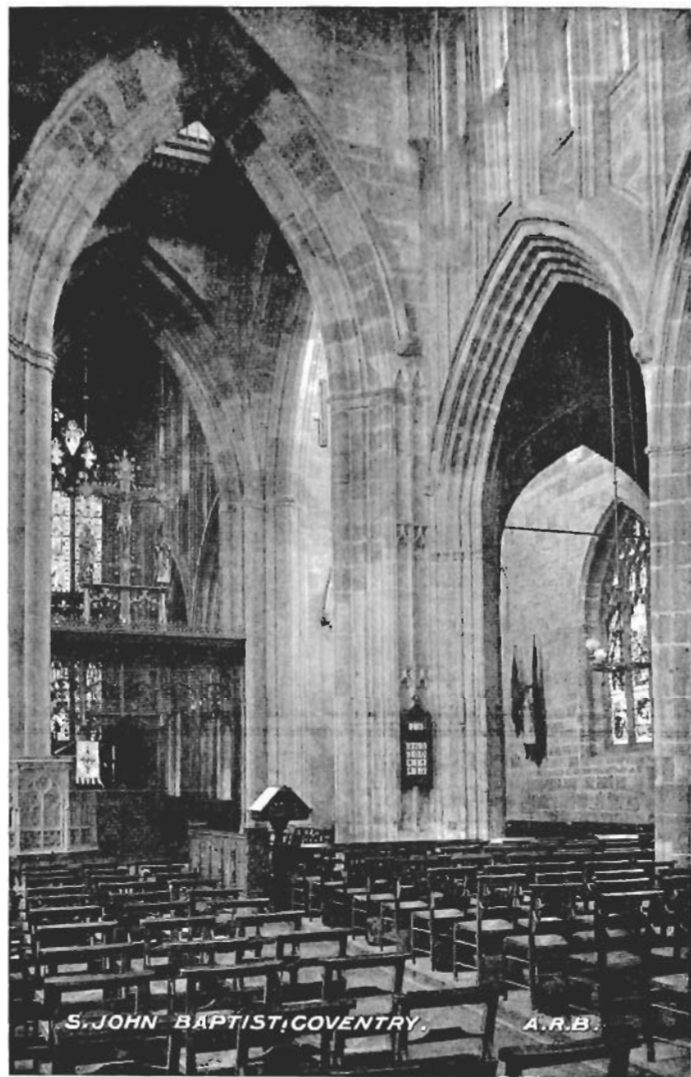
By F. W. HUMBERSTONE, A.K.C.

## THE STRUCTURE.

THE idea that Queen Isabella, the widow of Edward II, and the mother of Edward III, spent the last thirty years of her life a prisoner at Castle Rising is now proved to be incorrect.<sup>1</sup> She had several residences, and the manor house at Cheylesmore, Coventry, is spoken of as "one of her favourite places of abode." She not only resided there occasionally, but she exercised considerable influence over local affairs, as several charters preserved in the muniment room at St. Mary's Hall testify. Thus the Charter of Incorporation, dated 1344, was granted at her "instance and request." Another of the preserved "letters-patent," written in French and dated (May 7th, 1344) from Castle Rising, and signed "Isabella, the Queen Mother," grants "to the good people of the Guild of St. John Baptist, in the town of Coventre, a piece of land called Babbelak, in the same town, in order that they may there build a Chapel in honour of God and St. John the Baptist, and have there two chaplains daily chanting masses and other divine services for the good estate of the said Queen's dear son, the King, and of the said Queen Isabella, and of her daughter the Queen Philippa, and for the Prince of Wales, during their lives, and for their souls when they shall have died; and for the soul of the Queen's dear lord (!) the late King of England . . . and for the lives and souls of the brethren of the said Guild, etc."

This was the origin of the Collegiate Church of St. John Baptist, Coventry, commonly (until recent times) known as

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of National Biography.*



ST. JOHN BAPTIST, COVENTRY.

Bablake Church. The building of the chapel was proceeded with immediately, and a dedication took place on the 5th of May, 1350.

Whether any portion of the chapel then dedicated forms a part of the present church it is impossible to say with certainty. During the restoration in 1875, when soil to the depth in this part of three feet was removed in order to find the true floor, the base of a substantial wall was discovered running from south to north through the middle of the present chancel into the churchyard beyond; and a competent opinion was expressed that this was the east end of the original chapel. In that case it is clear that the present chancel, or at least the eastern portion of it, was not built until after 1350. And there are architectural reasons for the supposition that the chancel of the church that now is, is of later date than at least some portions of the nave and aisles. But the story of the erection of the church in portions at different periods is complicated.

In 1357 William Walsheman, valet and steward to Queen Isabella, agreed to enlarge the existing chapel by the addition of "one new aisle." "I am strongly of opinion," wrote the late Mr. William George Fretton, F.S.A., "that this part of the church [he is describing the south aisle of the nave] with the lower part of the south transept, constitutes the aisle that Walsheman agreed, in 1357, to erect at his own cost." Mr. F. W. Woodhouse, the author of a recently-published work entitled *The Churches of Coventry*, is of the same opinion. "The tracery of these windows," he says, "is somewhat peculiar in design and refined in detail, and has the transitional character one would expect from its date."

Assuming then that this is Walsheman's aisle, and that it was erected in 1357, there must have been a nave prior to that date. A small portion of that nave remains. The clerestory on the north side, as it is at present, consists of three large windows with Decorated tracery. Moreover, the

stone of this portion of the wall has a greyish tinge ; the lower part is *red* sandstone. We may take it then that the original nave belonged to the Decorated period, and was erected before Walsheman's aisle in 1357—possibly even before 1350, when the first dedication took place.

Some time between 1365 and 1369 this same Walsheman and his wife, Christina, gave certain tenements called the Draperie to the Guild to meet the cost of building " a chapel within the chapel of Bablake, to the honour of the Holy Trinity, St. Mary, St. John, and St. Katherine." When the church was restored in 1875 and four feet of earth removed from the nave and its aisles, the bases of the pillars were brought to light. On the western face of each of the two western piers that help to support the tower were discovered the remains of two altars of the fifteenth century. " I presume," says Mr. Fretton, " these were the altars of the Holy Trinity and St. Katherine."

We might go on assuming, were it not for the startling announcement that in the year 1375 " the church was BEGUN." This is made by one of the city annalists, who goes on to commend the generosity of the mayor, William Woofe, " a great helper in his costs and charges." The enlargements of this period—the last quarter of the fourteenth century—must have been considerable. They include probably the partial or total reconstruction of the chancel, and its extension eastward, together with the insertion of the fine Transitional window at the far end.

The north aisle, too, judging from Transitional tracery of its windows, appears to have been erected at the same time.

Either at this time or somewhat later, for the Perpendicular tracery is fully developed, occurred the happy afterthought of adding transepts to the upper story, thus making the church cruciform above and rectangular below. The tower was probably built at the same time.

Such alterations and extensions might well appear to

the "honest chronicler" like an entire reconstruction; but there were greater changes to come, after an interval of perhaps another century. Attention has been called to the Decorated clerestory on the north side of the nave as being perhaps the oldest part of the present church. It is easy now to see what was done to this side at a subsequent period, for not only are its arches of great width, but the mouldings of both arch and pillar "have the characteristic shallowness of the [Perpendicular] period," and the colour of the stone is different. The alteration was like putting a new and modern shop-front under the overlapping stories of an old house.

On the *south* side of the nave the changes are even more marked. Not only have we the same wide arches and shallow mouldings as on the north side, but the clerestory has undergone a complete transformation. The large Decorated windows (assuming that the clerestory on the south side originally corresponded to that on the north) have been removed, and their place supplied by transomed and trefoiled lights, set in square-headed frames of the most up-to-date (that is to say, Tudor) pattern.<sup>1</sup> In the choir again, although the pillars and arches have been left alone, a clerestory like that in the nave has been substituted for the former, whatever it was.

To conclude these few remarks upon the structure, Sir Gilbert Scott once said that he knew no interior more beautiful than that of St. John's, Coventry. Mr. F. W. Woodhouse, the author of *The Churches of Coventry*, in the "Bell Series," without going quite so far as the eminent architect to whom both restorations were entrusted, writes: "All, at least, will agree that there is something about it striking and dignified, which is obviously not concerned with mere size, is largely independent of elaboration of detail, and may therefore be safely attributed to its satisfactory proportions, and the broad effects of light and shade."

<sup>1</sup> Illustrations of these are given on page 88 of *The Churches of Coventry*, by F. W. Woodhouse (Bell Series).



ST. JOHN'S CHURCH (EXTERIOR).



ST. JOHN'S CHURCH (INTERIOR).

## THE HISTORY.

The history of the church can only be briefly touched upon. The full strength of the college, according to Stowe, was "One Warden, 12 priests, and 12 singing men." When John Leland passed through Coventry, not later than 1544, the number had declined to eight "ministers," as he calls them. The occupations of these were various, and included the conduct of a grammar school; but the main duty, of course, was the daily celebration of Mass, "for the welfare . . . of the brethren and benefactors of the said Guild . . . and for the souls of all who have died in the Faith." Obits, or anniversaries of deceased members, became so numerous, and it must be added so scandalous, that they were at length restricted to two in the year—the eves of St. John Baptist (June 24th) and of St. Peter (June 29th).

After the suppression in 1548, the city authorities petitioned for the church and college buildings to be made over to them. The favour was granted, a rent of one penny per annum being paid as an acknowledgment for nearly two hundred years. The grant included "all the rents, revenues, and profits of the said church, with the bells, lead, iron, glass, jewels, and ornaments of every kind belonging thereto," but as the main source of income had been stopped by the dissolution of the Trinity Guild in 1545, the "revenues" were insufficient to maintain regular services, and they were discontinued. In 1561 the church was closed altogether for a time, and 2s. 4d. was paid by the Wardens of Holy Trinity "for ye carrying of ye seats from ye bablake."

But with the advance of Puritanism another use was found for "ye bablake." A demand arose for "preaching ministers" or "lecturers." "A wonderful thing it is," wrote Bishop Andrewes, "how many sermons, and sermons upon sermons, as it were so many measures of seed, are thrown in daily; and what becomes of them no man can tell . . . Fruit there comes none." In Coventry the lecturers were

“appointed, protected, and paid” by the civic authorities, who also made all the arrangements for the lectures or sermons. “In 1608, William Hancox, the Mayor, caused the church to be repaired, the floor boarded, the windows glazed, and some seats made,” in readiness for a lecture, to be delivered every Saturday afternoon from 3 to 4 o’clock, “for the better fitting of the people for the Sabbath.” Other lecturers succeeded, but the services were occasional only.

During the Cromwellian period Bablake Church was loaned to the Independents, Mr. Samuel Basnet, the son of a former mayor, being appointed minister.

At the Restoration the church fared even worse, being utterly neglected, and suffered to fall into decay, save for occasional attention to the roof, the clock, and the bells. But in 1733 application was made to Parliament for an Act to enable the local authorities to create a new parish out of Spon Street Ward, with St. John’s for its parish church. This was obtained, and carried out during the four following years. The alterations then made were sadly out of keeping with the character of the building, though quite in accordance with the spirit of the time. A ponderous pulpit with a sounding board was erected against the south-west tower pier, the masonry being cut away to accommodate it; the floor was raised to a height of three feet in the chancel and four in the nave, as a protection against floods; galleries were built into the north aisle and the transepts, and high pews prevailed everywhere.

By the same Act of Parliament permission was obtained to transfer £200 from the endowment of the free school to that of the church, upon the understanding that the head master for the time being should be rector and the usher lecturer.<sup>1</sup> The value of the benefice was augmented by £100 per annum derived from seat-rents. The arrangement

<sup>1</sup> At this time the emoluments of the head master and the usher were considerable, and the duties light, owing to the comparatively small number of scholars attending the school.

lasted until 1864, when the Rev. Thomas Sheepshanks (the father of the late Bishop Sheepshanks) retiring from the head mastership, retained the rectory, and the right of future presentation was sold by the trustees for the benefit of the school. Under this arrangement services were held without further intermission until 1858, when a restoration of the fabric became imperatively necessary.

The first restoration of the church was begun in that year, and continued until October, 1861, when the state of destitution which prevailed in the city compelled a suspension of the work. The exterior walls of the tower, the transepts, and the east end, which were of a soft, grey colour, were cased (not to their advantage) with new-*red* sandstone, and the interior walls and pillars of the chancel were scraped. In 1875 the Restoration was resumed from the designs of Sir Gilbert Scott, with the result, as regards the general appearance of the interior, we see to-day. The church was re-opened on its patronal festival in 1877, the cost of the restoration having been upwards of £8,000. A few fragments of the old stained glass are preserved in the west window of the north aisle, and some of the encaustic tiles found in the floor are relaid at the base of the western tower piers.

On the night of December 30th and 31st, 1900, an unforeseen disaster overtook St. John's. The lower parts of Coventry were visited by a serious flood, and water stood in the church to the height of 5 ft. 6 in. Great damage was done to the organ, seats, books, and altar furniture, and upwards of £350 was spent in putting the church into repair. To this must be added £800 more for the provision of a new organ.

At a meeting of the parishioners in the spring of 1905 it was unanimously resolved that from St. John's Day next ensuing seat-rents should be abolished, and the church be "free and open."

Some additions to the internal fittings of the church

made in recent years add considerably to its beauty. These include a delicately-carved stone pulpit, a chancel screen of beautiful design, presented in 1886, with the rood added twenty-two years later, a light and graceful organ case, designed by Mr. Bucknill, the well-known church architect, and the altar-piece in the Lady Chapel. This last consists of three paintings, copies of masterpieces executed in Rome. The centre panel is a copy of Raphael's "The Madonna and the Goldfinch," whilst the panels on the left and right are respectively "St. Michael" and "An Angel playing upon a Guitar," both after Perugino, Raphael's teacher. All these additions are the gifts of persons who desire to remain anonymous, and some are memorials of deceased benefactors. The crossed flags in the south transept perpetuate the memory of the loss of H.M.S. *Captain* in the Bay of Biscay on September 7th, 1870, and of Commander Richard Sheepshanks, a son of the then rector.

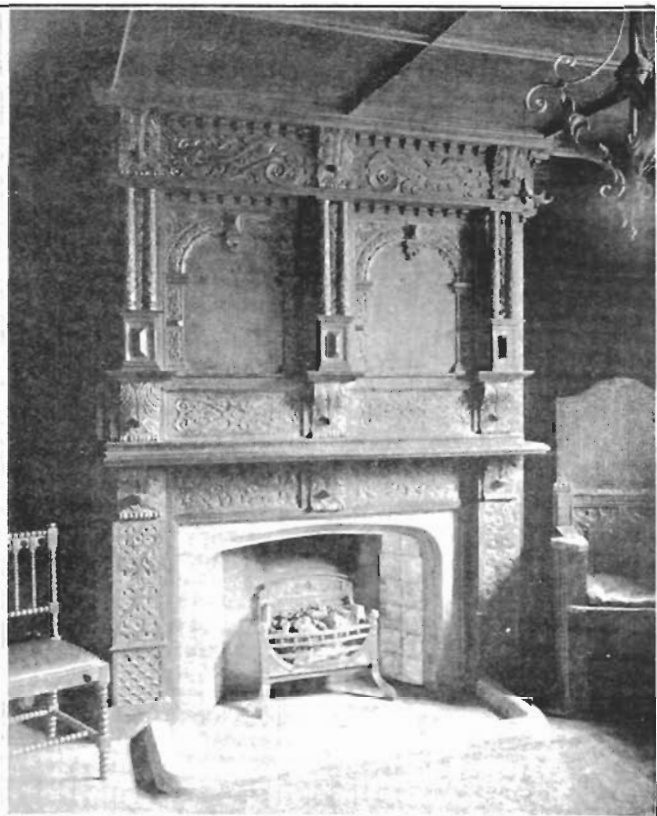
### THE PRECINCTS.

#### BABLAKE COLLEGE.

No portion of the original Bablake College remains, or is described by any writer. But it may be asserted with some confidence that the Bablake Boys' Hospital, because architecturally it belongs to the early Tudor period, must have formed a part of the College at the time of its suppression in 1548. During the lifetime of my friend William George Fretton, F.S.A., who died in 1900, and of his contemporaries, Mr. M. H. Bloxham, F.S.A., of Rugby, Mr. Tom Burgess, F.S.A., of Leamington, and the Rev. Peter B. Brodie, Vicar of Rowington, near Warwick—those archæological giants of the seventies—the assertion that this building is of the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century was not disputed; but recent opinion seems almost inclined to support the view that 1560, the date of the foundation of Bablake Hospital, is also the date of the building in which for upwards of three



DINING HALL, BABLAKE.



ST. MARY'S HALL.



STAIRCASE, BABLAKE BOYS' HOSPITAL.



BOND'S AND BABLAKE BOYS' HOSPITALS  
(BABLAKE QUADRANGLE).

hundred years Thomas Wheatley's beneficent purpose was carried out. It is true that both the accounts of the foundation of Bablake School state that "in the year 1560 this Hospital *was erected*"; but, as we know, little reliance is to be placed upon the accuracy of such statements, and, as we have seen in the case of the adjoining church, the term *ERECTED* is applied to buildings that have been at the time merely *altered* and *adapted*. In support of the foregoing opinion the following points deserve consideration:—

1. Not only have we here a cloister, but a *DOUBLE CLOISTER*—a passage open to the air, above and below. This feature is almost unique; but the Prior's House at Wenlock Abbey has the same characteristic, and this is a fifteenth-century monastic house. And observe that in both cases the upper passage is not a mere wooden gallery added to the building, such as is to be seen in old inns, but it is an integral part of the structure. In short, it is a true cloister.

2. This building bears a resemblance to the Stratford Town Hall and Shakespeare's Grammar School, both within and (as to the east or Hill Street side) without, but the Stratford Town Hall is admitted to be of the late fifteenth century.

3. The harmony of style that exists between this Hospital and Bond's and Ford's points, if not to the same date, at least to the same period, and that period is not Elizabethan. The date of the adjacent Bond's or the Bablake Men's Hospital is 1506, and that of Ford's in Grey Friars Lane not later than 1520.

The College of Bablake is supposed to have formed an irregular quadrangle, one side (the present Bablake Boys' Hospital) being adjacent to Hill Street, and another at right angles to this, and parallel to the church. The buildings comprised a hall (which is mentioned as early as 1364), a parlour, kitchen, wax chamber, warden's chamber, priests' chamber, schoolhouse, etc. The sites of these are not now

determinable, but it is not improbable that the room afterwards known as the dining hall, from its proximity to the kitchen, was the refectory, and the room above it in earlier as in later times a dormitory.

#### BABLAKE BOYS' HOSPITAL.

As already stated, these buildings (including the church) passed into the hands of the Corporation after 1548, but no use was made of them for twelve years.

A scheme for the utilisation of the two buildings which had formed the College found favour with the Corporation in 1560, when it was proposed to establish therein a hospital or home for forty-one boys, "to be maintained by the city, and the charity of well-disposed people, citizens and strangers." The scheme was carried out, but three years later a change was found to be necessary, owing probably to a decline in the voluntary subscriptions. In 1563 the number of scholars was reduced to twenty-one (for whose accommodation this building alone would suffice), and Mr. Thomas Wheatley, who had been Mayor in 1556, "settled some land towards the maintenance thereof." He thus became the founder of Bablake School as reconstituted. Several benefactors followed his example, and the school was never afterwards dependent upon subscriptions.

Wheatley was one of those scrupulously honest and prosperous merchants of which class the sixteenth century affords not a few examples. It is told of him by Dugdale that he once received from Spain a chest of silver ingots at a time when he was expecting some steel wedges his agent had ordered. The ingots were kept pending inquiries but they were not claimed. Wheatley was too conscientious to dispose of them in the ordinary way of trade, even after a reasonable time had elapsed, but he felt justified in including their value in the estate he was minded to devote to charitable uses.

## THE BRIDEWELL.

In 1571 another use was found for the now tenantless half of the college buildings. The city annals record that "the dirge-hall, the warden's and priests' chambers, and the school-house, were laid together in that year, repaired, in some parts new-built, to make a house of correction commonly called Bridewell; but 'because of the plague, it was staid, and did not goe forward.'" Eventually, however, the alterations were completed, and the Bridewell occupied this position until 1831, when it was taken down and the inmates transferred to the city gaol.

## BABLAKE BOYS' HOSPITAL.

The double benefit of education and maintenance was carried on in this, the Bablake Boys' Hospital, with little variation until 1833. In that year, in consequence of an increase in the number of scholars (which ultimately reached seventy, one-half being resident) a schoolroom and schoolmaster's house were built on the opposite side of the quadrangle. This old building, however, continued to serve its purpose as a hostel until 1890, that is for 330 years in all. In 1890, under the provisions of a new scheme, some charity schools were amalgamated with Bablake, and the institution was removed to new premises on the outskirts of the city. The distinctive dress worn by the boys (which closely resembled that of the Blue Coat Boys or Christ's Hospital, of London) was abolished, but the boarding was retained. The old Hospital was then rented to the rector and churchwardens of St. John's for use as parish rooms, and it serves this purpose at the present time.

Some structural alterations remain to be noticed. Over the fireplace in the boys' kitchen is an inscription, "Edward Owen, Mayor, 1681." That this is the date of some extensive alteration, or what would now be called a restoration, is clear from a note by one of the city annalists, who writes: "1681. Edward Owen, Mayor. In this year the Blue Coat Boys'

Hospitall was altered from a Fullsome Ugley Place to what it is, and Dials put on two sides Babblake steeple, which before Travellers could not tell what o'clock it was, as they rid through the city; this year was a Prodigious Blazing Starr as was ever seen, and rose westward, and, before it decline, it lookt as if the whole Heavens was on Fire, it was so large." This year, 1681, is no doubt the date of the much admired staircase and gallery, as they are certainly not Tudor.

#### THE UPPER CLOISTER.

The view of the Bablake Boys' Hospital contained in the programme (with notes), issued in connection with this Summer Meeting, represents the open spaces of the upper cloister as glazed. All sketches and photographs of the building taken between 1881 and 1913 have the same unintentional misrepresentation. In 1881 the cloister was converted into a lavatory, a useful accommodation, the need for which ceased with the removal of the school to the Coundon Road. Not the least valuable part of the recent renovation has been the removal of these panes of glass, and the restoration of the cloister to its original state.

#### THE DINING-ROOM.

The dining room contains one object of interest, viz. a fine Jacobean mantelpiece, bearing the date 1629. It was made for a house in Little Park Street, that was demolished in 1820, and was brought here for preservation.

#### BOND'S HOSPITAL.

The north side of the Bablake quadrangle is occupied by the Men's Hospital, or Bond's Hospital, as it is now generally called. Thomas Bonde was a draper or cloth merchant, and mayor in 1497. During his mayoralty he gave land by deed to found a hospital for "ten pore men and one woman to look after them," but it was not until 1506 that sufficient money was available for the founder's wishes to be carried out. His gifts included "every year a gown of black with a

hood," and a small sum of money weekly, together with a room in the hospital and medical attendance. The present building is generally supposed to be the original, but it is not. It was erected in 1832, and is said to be an exact reproduction of the old Bedehouse. That much of the old timber was used in the reconstruction is certain, and the beautiful barge boards are copies of their predecessors, very carefully executed.

Speaking of barge-boards, it may not be out of place to mention here that of thirty examples given in Pugin's *Ornamental Gables* (published in 1854) no less than twenty are copied from Coventry originals.

The most interesting room in Bond's is the Trustees' Room. This contains some beautifully-carved chairs of the Queen Anne period and a portrait of the founder.

The writer desires to express his obligation to Mr. A. R. Birch, B.A., Parish Warden of St. John Baptist's Church, to Councillor Lee, Chairman of the Electricity Department of the Coventry City Council, and to the proprietors of the *Coventry Graphic*, for the loan of blocks used in the illustrations of this article.