

HISTORIC CHURCHES

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IN these Transactions, last year, the late Dr. Francis Eeles gave a valuable account of the stages through which the treatment of our ancient parish churches has passed during the last hundred years, and of the system which has now been established through Diocesan and Central Committees to ensure that the welfare of both their fabrics and their precious contents shall be carefully safeguarded.

At the moment when a supreme effort is being made through the Historic Churches Preservation Trust (also described last year by the Chairman, Mr. Bulmer-Thomas) to raise sufficient funds to free all these invaluable buildings from the ravages of age and decay, it may be of interest to add some notes upon the aim and the methods of those on whom has fallen the responsibility for their care, and upon the appeal which our ancient churches should make, on many grounds, far beyond the circles of those who regularly use them for worship.

It is, however, their status as living houses of prayer and worship which must rule and inspire the approach to their maintenance no less than to their furnishing and decoration, for they owe their very survival to the fact that they are what are now called strictly functional buildings, that is, that they are still perfectly adapted (with such modern concessions as heating and lighting systems) to the purposes for which they were first erected; the basic needs of public worship having varied so little down the centuries. The acute problem now presented by those derelict churches which a shift of population, or other cause, has thrown out of use reminds us that a proper fitness for their high use, not less than the careful preservation of their fabric, is essential to their continued survival; and that it is not merely as architectural museums, nor as relics of past craftsmanship, that they can be soundly maintained.

On the other hand, it is a principle with every Advisory Committee that before any attempt is made at interior improvements or decoration, complete structural soundness must be secured as the necessary foundation for every work of embellishment. How, then, is any necessary repair to be carried out? The first essential is to secure supervision of it by an architect whose training and experience has made him familiar with the methods and materials used by the old builders, so entirely different to contemporary practice, for without such knowledge he can hardly diagnose correctly the causes of mischief, nor ensure that the repair is at once effective and also sympathetic and congruous to the old work. To give the simplest instance, the external appearance of the finest old church can be ruined, and its structural soundness impaired, by pointing it in unsuitable materials or by wrong methods.

When proper control of the work has thus been established it will be the joint concern of both architect and Advisory Committee to ensure that in the process of repair no scrap of ancient work which is still serviceable shall be discarded, and that there shall be no attempt at conjectural replacement of vanished features. As another instance, the Advisory Committees have been able to do much in preventing the wholesale replacement of ancient timber by new wood, on the sole ground of an attack by death-watch beetle. It is now an established principle that every foot of timber which is still capable of serving its purpose shall be retained, new timber being scarfed on only where the ancient work has become structurally unreliable, and this conservative view is of course applied to work of every period, post-Reformation features being as jealously preserved as medieval work. The combination of the advice offered to the Chancellors and Archdeacons by the Advisory Committees with the strict conditions laid down by the Historic Churches Trust in making any grant for repair should now make the mishandling of the ancient fabrics very unlikely; and it can be claimed that there is now general agreement among all those who are interested in them as to the lines on which repair ought to proceed.

It is upon questions of interior arrangement, furnishing, and decoration, that more disputable issues are encountered, but growing experience in the Advisory Committees proves that all proper provision for worship, and for making an inspiring setting for that worship, can be quite satisfactorily combined with the most careful regard for every archaeological feature, and indeed in many cases for their better display and appreciation. The treatment of the organ is a case in point. Many churches which still retained a

west gallery, originally erected to house the organ and singers, had seen the organ removed from it and placed in a chancel which it overcrowded, or in a transept or chapel at the east end of an aisle where it distorted the plan of the building and blocked the light from one or more windows. There has been a steady movement in such cases to replace the organ in the gallery, not only with successful musical effect, but also the great gain of the building itself, whose full form is thus revealed, and the lighting often greatly improved.

More hotly debated has been the cleaning, and occasional re-colouring, of many of the splendid but sadly decayed and neglected sepulchral monuments of our churches. These remain the legal property and responsibility of the descendants of those who set them up, not of the parishioners, but with the extinction or removal of many families the monuments have become so disfigured with dirt, and in consequence so perished, as to be eyesores whose merits could no longer be appreciated. Where such cleaning has been undertaken it has produced some interesting results. First, in the case of the classical, post-Reformation monuments and effigies it has been found that many of them had been repainted more than once since they were first completed, so that the procedure is not entirely an innovation; and it is perhaps relevant to recall that in the case of at least three splendid Gothic monuments such treatment has been continuous, and seemingly without protest. The chantry tombs, with their effigies, of Archbishop Chichele at Canterbury, and of Bishops William of Wykeham and William Waynflete at Winchester, have always had their colour and gilding renewed at intervals as an act of piety by the Colleges which they founded at Oxford University. In many cases careful and conservative cleaning has recovered inscriptions and other details long lost to view, and has solved heraldic ambiguities due to wrong tinctures; it has even recovered the original colour-scheme where this had been altered in a subsequent re-painting.

Experience in the Advisory Committees can also claim that in many cases such cleaning has produced a different, but encouraging, result, namely, that the parishioners have for the first time become "monument-conscious," so that fine works which had previously been ignored and neglected are now regarded with pride, and due care is taken for their future maintenance. Wherever such work is undertaken, it is essential that it be entrusted only to workers with full training and experience, who possess a scholarly knowledge of their subject, and who can be trusted to preserve every trace of

original treatment, and to avoid all conjectural re-colouring.

Another problem which is often encountered in dealing with the interior, especially in the chancels, is set by the arbitrary changes which were introduced during 19th century "restorations" of our ancient churches. Should these changes, where they are plainly wrong, now be corrected? Or must they be respected as "period" work, in the way that we now preserve the changes made in a Gothic building during the 18th century? Remembering the charges we lay against the men of the Gothic revival for removing in so many churches every trace of Georgian work merely because it had become unfashionable, it is certain that we must not incur similar blame by destroying all evidence of work in a period of great importance in the story of our ancient churches, since in spite of much loss and falsification we owe to their vast labours the saving of most of our churches from actual ruin. The best work of that time, whether it take the form of craftsmanship in old churches, or of entirely new buildings, must be carefully retained as a link in the chain of the treatment and equipment of the English parish church.

Yet some of the mistakes which they made, which heavily mar the appearance of fine and ancient churches, can surely be undone without loss and with real advantage. The great 19th century church architects too often radically altered the floor-levels in old chancels by the insertion of extra steps, with two specially unhappy effects. The levels of such medieval survivals as sedilia and piscinae were so falsified as to put these out of use, while the altar was often raised so near to the sill of the east window that its reredos or background inevitably covered the lower portion of the lights, thus spoiling their proportions and sometimes concealing valuable stained glass. It seems legitimate, wherever the ancient levels can be surely recovered, to remove such insertions, bringing ancient features back into use and recovering true proportions, with the added reward in several cases of revealing the original flooring with ledger-stones and inscribed flags.

The very great improvement in the arrangement and furnishing of our churches during the past fifty years, marked by the widespread recovery of the ancient practice of whitened walls, greater spaciousness and dignity, with a higher standard of ornaments and furnishing, has not only better fitted them for seemly worship, but has led directly to the steadily increasing numbers who visit and appreciate them, and so to a wider interest in securing their preservation. It is again a maxim with all Advisory Committees that the introduction of new work, whether of furnishing or of decoration,

shall not only reach the highest standard available, but shall never interfere with nor conceal any ancient features of the building.

The claims of our old parish churches to rank for preservation among the very first of our Ancient Monuments should indeed be recognised far beyond the circle of those who regularly worship within them. Almost alone of the buildings which survive in use these illustrate the continuous development of building and craftsmanship from the 12th century, or even earlier, to the present time. In them lies the main output of our English sculptors all down the centuries, and though, through periods of mistaken religious zeal, we have lost a large part of their most delightful work, we have in our monumental effigies alone an unrivalled series, which are also an admirable record of the development of costume, ecclesiastical and legal, civil and military. This long series of monuments of all types is at once the legacy and the record of the changing scenes of English life; they show the mounting splendour and the gradual decline of the great nobles and prelates, the rise of the merchants and the ordinary citizen; for on these walls are the memorials of all the men and women who helped to build not only our churches, but our houses, villages, and towns; who farmed our lands and formed our landscapes, founded our industries and fostered our crafts. The very fabrics themselves recall not simply, like most other ancient buildings, one particular period or phase, but the whole story of our growth and development from the Conquest or earlier to our own times.

The Norman churches, fortress-like with stout walls pierced by few and small apertures, reflect a period of strife and unrest, when the Church was both the refuge and the source of culture; the spread of order under firm government allowed an extension of the arts marked by the growing elegance of the Early English buildings, expanding in turn to the full richness, even the extravagance, of the Decorated style which matched a time of national pride and prosperity, but which changed swiftly and completely, perhaps helped by the shock of economic tribulation which succeeded the Black Death, into the splendid but more sober Perpendicular buildings which are the special glory of English architectural achievement; but which in their turn, just before the religious upheavals of the 16th century put an end to the development of Gothic art and to the building of any churches for a century, began to rival any previous style in richness and splendour, as at Westminster and Windsor; the outcome of firm government and prosperity which followed the end of the Wars of the Roses.

The religious strife of the 16th century, and the civil struggles of the 17th, are recalled by the almost entire absence of new buildings, and for some eighty years by a lack of much furnishing beyond elaborate monuments; and when conditions allowed a general resumption of church building and furnishing it was marked by a complete change of style to the Classic manner which produced some of the most charming and delightful of our churches, as well as a great wealth of furnishing and decoration, so much of which was wantonly dissipated under the influence of the Gothic revival. Georgian churches and furnishings faithfully reflect a changed outlook; the soaring aspirations of the Middle Ages are replaced by a taste for elegance and comfort. Plaster ceilings conserve warmth, high pews exclude draughts, altars are simple and pulpits elaborate, the whole effect recording the feelings and customs of the time; but all once more to be reversed in the 19th century under the combined influences of the religious and Gothic revivals.

Not less valuable than the national record afforded by our ancient churches are their local or regional variations. These arise from too many causes to be covered in a summary review, but we can notice some of the more obvious among them. First would come the materials most readily available to the builders, and we should recall at once the flint churches of East Anglia and the south-east. The great beds of oolite stone, all the way from Wells to Whitby, is punctuated throughout its course by splendid churches with stately steeples, whether towers or spires; the prevalence of fine stone so fostering the mason's craft that we find in those buildings an exuberance of decorative stonework in fabric and fittings, pulpits and screens of stone at the south-western end, monuments and Easter sepulchres and carvings of amazing richness toward the other end.

The sandstone regions were prolific in oaks, and so in Warwickshire and Worcestershire, Cheshire and Shropshire, we find much timber construction and a wealth of craftsmanship in timber, roofs and screens of great elaboration, repeated again in the far south-west in Devon and Cornwall.

Another important factor in the regional character of our churches was the period of highest prosperity in each district, for however ample was the supply of good material there was need of abundant wealth to make full use of it. So the great churches of the Cotswolds and East Anglia, to take but one instance, recall the great days of prosperity in the wool and weaving trades, which brought immense wealth to those districts, producing a wide re-modelling or complete re-building of churches. Since these industries reached their maxi-

num in the 15th century the predominant character of the greater churches in those districts is Perpendicular, the ruling style at the moment when most money was available for expenditure upon them; and this family resemblance amongst them is thus a memorial to their once principal trade.

Again, local styles seem sometimes to be clearly due to fashion, which caught the local fancy and was then copied in the neighbourhood. There come to mind in this connection Somerset towers and Midland spires, Devon screens and East Anglian roofs, the poppy-headed benches of the Eastern counties, and the flat-topped model in the West. Two instances of unusual details, which must be due to imitation of a fashion, can be found in the West country. No less than five of the Cotswold churches, including the notable examples at Campden, Northleach, and Cirencester, have inserted a large window of several lights immediately above the chancel arch, an unusual site hardly found elsewhere; while another Gloucestershire invention, the rich crown of pierced parapet and pinnacles seen on the central tower of Gloucester Cathedral and on the towers of several parish churches in the county, spread beyond its borders northward as far as Malvern, westwards to Cardiff and Llandaff, and south-westwards to Taunton.

Earlier mention was made of the main treasure of English sculpture which lies in our ancient churches, but these also hold a vast store, greater than is shown in all our museums, of the best English craftsmanship of all ages, in wood and stone, in iron and brass and the precious metals, and in stained glass; while the work of the late Professor Tristram and of those who have succeeded him is steadily revealing to us important remnants of our once ubiquitous wallpaintings, of which we may hope there may yet be many more discoveries. To the great museums has now passed the larger part of our ancient textiles and embroideries, but our churches still hold a splendid legacy of that embroidery which made England famous, and was called all over Europe "opus anglicanum."

The claims of our ancient parish churches for constant care and preservation are indeed strong; for their long history of continuous use for their original purpose (which also guarantees their survival), their appeal to both national and local patriotism, the variety and richness of their contents, and the value which they add to every type of landscape, combine to rank them, for all who love their country and its rich heritage, among the most precious and essential of our Ancient Monuments.
