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*St. Bartholomew's Priory and Hospital, Smithfield,
and their Founder*

By John H. Harvey

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman of Council, Ladies and Gentlemen:

When Ivor, Dr. Bulmer-Thomas, invited me to give this address on this particular occasion I felt rather shocked because, although I am a Londoner born and have many early recollections of visits to this church I have absolutely no special knowledge of St. Bartholomew the Great or of Smithfield, the neighbourhood, or the surviving buildings, and still less of this remarkable hospital, the great institution whose guests we are today and which is an integral part of this great Foundation. I think probably, judging from my own experience, that a great many people are a little bit fogged in their mind about St. Bartholomew's. They are not clear about the relationship between St. Bartholomew's Church, that is St. Bartholomew the Great which we have seen; the little church we saw second inside the precinct of this hospital, St. Bartholomew the Less, which is a church built on the site of or representing the mediaeval chapel of the hospital itself as distinct from the Priory church; and the institution of St. Bartholomew's Hospital which is renowned as probably the world's greatest centre, certainly the greatest with a long continuous history from the early Middle Ages, of medical teaching and medical work. These are three separate things, very close together, and in fact historically very closely related one to another. Beginning on the architectural side, on which I cannot really speak because I have never climbed to roof level in St. Bartholomew the Great: I don't know any of the details, but I would say for the benefit of any one present who was not in the church when the Rector and Dr. Huelin were talking to us earlier this afternoon, that the very important thing architecturally about the Church of St. Bartholomew the Great is that we have precise dates for the original building, the choir which still survives—at any rate east of the crossing. The dates are 1123, when apparently the foundation and very possibly the building began in the month of March, and 1133, when by the summer there was a consecration of a building which could be used as a church and probably consisted of the whole choir as far west as the eastern crossing arch. They also received a special charter from King Henry I in that same year, 1133. So we have a precise period of ten years in which we know what was built and this of course, from the point of view of the architectural historian, is an immensely important fact. We have a building which is early and therefore rare: it has great rarity value even in the country as a whole; and it has a really precise date. That is the first thing I

would like to emphasize.¹

Now I have a great many memories of the few early mediaeval buildings that we have in London. I am myself a Londoner and in most of my boyhood I lived on the outskirts of London up at Highgate, and one of my earliest memories of visiting an ancient building is being brought by my uncle on a tram from Highgate down to the tram terminus at Moorgate, and walking through the City to the Tower of London. The Tower of London is one of our other vitally important early Norman monuments, even earlier than this: the White Tower with St. John's Chapel. In recent years we have twice had an annual meeting of the Society inside the Tower of London and had the great privilege of being taken round by the Governor of the Tower. That chapel of course, in the White Tower, is the fundamental monument of the metropolis. In the history of architecture, building by building, St. John's Chapel really takes pride of place as a monument of the reign of William the Conqueror. We then move over to Westminster, and what you can still see of the Norman arcades and details in Westminster Hall in the ancient Palace of Westminster, are remains of the immense hall built for the Conqueror's son William II, King William Rufus. We also have of course fragmentary remains in Westminster Abbey, another great London monument where also within recent years this Society has held its annual meeting. There, in Westminster Abbey, are fragmentary remains from even before the Conquest, of Edward the Confessor's Norman Church, of his Norman conventual buildings, but there is very little that one can see that ante-dates the mid-thirteenth century and the Gothic re-building under King Henry III. So that if we look for a great church in the London area we come to St. Bartholomew the Great as the most important Romanesque church monument of the whole London area; and it has this special advantage of being precisely dated.

Now to get back to the three institutions: St. Bartholomew the Great was a priory of Augustinian or Austin Canons. I expect everybody in this room knows what an Austin Canon was². He was a sort of half-way house between a monk and a member of the secular clergy. He was not a secular clergyman because he was a member of an order of Canons. He was a Canon Regular, not a Canon Secular, but he was not cloistered inside a monastery and as an Augustinian Canon, unlike a monk, did normally have a cure of souls. Parts of the churches of Augustinian Canons' priories were parish churches as a normal and natural event and not by way of exception as we find in some genuinely monastic houses. And this has of course an extremely important bearing on what we have already been told this afternoon, namely that the parishioners of St. Bartholomew's the Great had rights in the building at the time of the dissolution of all monasteries including

houses of regular canons. So, when Henry VIII's commissioners turned up, the parishioners actually had legal rights to stand on, and it is to the fact that they had those legal rights because of this interesting special position of Austin Canons Regular, that we owe the preservation of what has survived, and what a hundred years ago was very notably restored, very faithfully restored. One must say that this is not something to which anti-restorers can object; it was a very wonderful, noble restoration with scrupulous adherence to the evidence that was still available of what the old apsidal form had been of the east end of the church, and it has made it again. One has only to look at the old drawings and engravings that survive to see what a mangled relic it was; but it has been turned again into a splendid church for our times. So that from my boyhood it was possible to come here with various parties on different occasions—my father used to take a lot of parties of Commonwealth visitors, occasionally foreigners, sometimes Americans and Canadians, visiting architects from New Zealand, all sorts of people, around these ancient buildings of London, and as a boy I often accompanied those parties. St. Bartholomew's the Great was one of the things that caused the greatest excitement among overseas visitors. Hardly any of them, even the visiting architects who had presumably learnt something about English architectural history, had ever heard of St. Bartholomew's the Great. They had no idea that any part of the mediaeval buildings still survived, and when they were taken through the gateway, which is the west doorway of the south aisle of the nave which was destroyed at the Dissolution, and across the churchyard and in under the tower and into the magnificent great Norman canons' church, they would gasp and say: 'I can't believe it; such a thing. How is it we don't know about this?' I would think (and I'd better touch wood because I don't want to see it swamped in the way Westminster Abbey has been swamped in the last ten years by far too many tourists): in proportion to its real value St. Bartholomew's the Great must be the least visited church in England. It is the most under-rated of our outstanding monuments and for that reason I am extraordinarily glad that we are meeting here today. I think it is quite wonderful that we have a chance to see the whole of this great complex.

We owe it all to a most interesting personality, Rahere, or as I would gather from the old spellings, Rayer. I think he was probably called Rayer; the 'h' didn't sound. But, anyhow, this man Rayer was not only a very interesting man, he was a very unusual man in relation to what he was and what he managed to achieve. He was a curious mixture. We start off with what is related of him by a man who wrote in Latin, one of the Augustinian Canons, whose name we don't know. We do know he

was writing somewhere about 1180, that is to say less than forty years after Rayer's death, and he tells us that in compiling this account of the foundation of the Priory and the Hospital he had consulted various elder members of both institutions—the Priory and the Hospital—who had known Rayer when he was alive, and he collected first-hand information for all he was worth about the sort of person Rayer had been and what people knew about him, and also a quite extraordinary record of the early cases cured in the hospital. The cures were what one would now tend to call faith healing or, according to your personal views, faith healing on the one hand or miracles and supernatural means on the other. But they were cured in this hospital; and the vitally important thing to my mind about our meeting here today, is that these cures have been going on ever since from around 1130. The hospital was built at the same time as the Priory and got going in the late 1120s. In other words, we have for a period of about 850 years a *continuous* history of cures, by whatever means. People have been cured, people have been helped, women have had their children born here. For a very long period it was a hospital of poor alms folk, people who were derelict, the outcasts of society who were not necessarily ill or injured but who were taken in, because mediaeval hospitals generally speaking were alms houses first and foremost. This one was quite exceptional in being a medical hospital first and foremost and not primarily an alms house, but it was also for hundreds of years an alms house for the poor: doing the sort of work Salvation Army hostels are noted for in our time. But it carried out all these functions and many of them it is carrying out still today.

The extraordinary book of the foundation, which exists as a Latin text, was translated in the last few years of the reign of Richard II, say about 1395, by another canon³. He translated it into the English of his day, and though it is in places slightly queer English, it is perfectly intelligible if it is merely re-spelt. I intend to quote straight from this late fourteenth-century English version of the Book of Foundation. You must remember the original is a Latin text that takes us right back to the same century in which Rayer lived and died. As we heard in the church from what the Rector and Dr. Huelin were telling us, the occasion of all this is that Rayer himself had been a man of what would be regarded as a worldly and sinful life and then, about 1120 or so, he went to Rome on a pilgrimage. Now it may well be, as has been suggested, that the reason why he decided to go on a pilgrimage to Rome just then is this. Whereas from the accession of King Henry I in 1100 and his marriage later the same year, there had been growing prosperity in England; everything seemed splendid until the Queen, Edith Mathilda of Scotland, died in 1118. Then, less than two years later, the dreadful disaster of the

King's sons being drowned in the White Ship on their way back to England from France cast the King into the most terrible depression and in turn cast the whole kingdom into depression. The country was rightly depressed, for the extinction of the male line of the royal family led directly to the appalling civil wars and anarchy of the reign of Stephen, after 1135 when Henry I died. When the disaster of the White Ship occurred, everybody on board was drowned except one man; this national disaster seems to have been rather like the 1755 earthquake at Lisbon; it brought the house down around people's ears and made them wonder: 'Have we been dreadfully sinful that there should be such a visitation on our King, our royal family, our country?' It may be that this is the actual occasion why, about 1121, Rayer went off to Rome and changed his way of life. And as we were told, when in Rome he had a serious attack of malaria, a very dreadful and recurrent disease. The patient suffers from fever and delirium, and we can only suppose, clinically speaking, that this was a kind of dream or nightmare in his delirium when he was beginning to recover from the malaria. What Rayer believed was that it was an actual vision—what he would have thought of as of supernatural, or at any rate superterrestrial, character. His dream was that he was borne up by a flying beast which had two wings and also eight legs, and this beast brought him to a place where he saw a noble figure standing, and the figure declared to him: 'I am Bartholomew the Apostle of Jesus Christ, that came to succour thee in thine anguish'. In other words, he was already convalescent when he had the vision. The saint in the vision went on to counsel him 'to have chosen a place in the suburbs of London at Smithfield where in my name thou shalt found a church . . . This spiritual house Almighty God shall inhabit and hallow it, and glorify it, and His eyes shall be opened and His ears intending on this house night and day, that the asker in it shall receive, the seeker shall find, and the ringer or knocker shall enter'. From March 1123 when Rayer got back to England and was able to carry out the word of command, as soon as it was possible to have anyone doing this on the site, it started and it has been going on ever since. About the priory church the Book of Foundation says: 'The church he made of comely stonework table-wise, (table-wise meaning of good ashlar, stone cut in good square shapes) and was an hospital house a little longer off from the church by himself he began to edify'. In other words, he got building contractors to put up the great priory church we have been looking at, but the original hospital on this site, 'the hospital house a little longer off from the church'—further off than the houses that the canons were going to occupy beside the church—Rayer himself began to build.

I am now going to switch back to an earlier part of the Book of

Foundation about Rayer himself because it is necessary to understand a little bit more than one gets from the general history books about him. The first thing is that he was not one of the governing or upper classes or the squirearchy. There is nothing to suggest, whether he was Norman or Saxon, whatever his origin, that he was a man who was socially distinguished. It is said that he was 'springing or born of low lineage', and he also did not enjoy the benefits of an outstanding education even by the standards of that period around 1100. 'Not having cunning of liberal science' is what is said in the English version of the book. But 'when he attained the flower of youth, he began to haunt the households of noble men and the palaces of princes, where under every elbow of them he spread their cushions, with japes and flatterings, delectably anointing their ears, by this manner to draw to him their friendships. And yet he was not content with this, but oft haunted the King's palace (Westminster Hall that King William Rufus had just built) and among the noiseful press of that tumultuous court enforced himself with jollity and carnal suavity, by the which he might draw to him the hearts of many one there, in spectacles, in meats (things to eat), in plays and other courtly mocks and trifles intending, he led forth the business of every day'. In other words he was a *bon viveur* and presumably, whatever his origins, whatever his lack of formal education, a man who could keep people not only flattered but also amused, and solace the boredom of long hours of waiting around a royal court or a nobleman's mansion. Well, against that background we have the extraordinary change after his attack of malaria. In order to get help to build this hospital on this very site he took to preaching 'and in this wise he delivered his sermon, that now he stirred his audience to gladness so that all the people applauded him, and then again he urged them to sadness and sorrow for their sins'. To advance the work 'he drew to him the followship of children and servants, assembling himself as one of them, and with their use and help stones and other things profitable to the building lightly he gathered together; he played with them, and from day to day made himself more vile in his own eyes . . . Who should not be astonished there to see constructed and built the honourable building of pity, that should be a sure sanctuary to them that fled thereto'. We must remember Rayer and the local children from the suburbs of London around here—the children and the servants who had an hour to spare to help him, and how by cheering them and keeping them amused and giving them a job to do—he managed to build the small, original hospital. Gradually it accumulated and grew and over the centuries it has become the building we are in today.

I don't propose to go into the architectural history of St.

Bartholomew's Hospital as it is or as it was. We do have this very remarkable story of a man who is sometimes called the King's Minstrel to Henry I, or even King's jester. Well, I think the word used is *ministrallus* but even when translated minstrel this does not necessarily tell the whole story. A *ministrallus* was a man who in some way or another was a servant; he served around the court; minstrels who served with their musical instruments or by singing were one particular kind; eventually their usage of the word usurped the sense and this almost contemporary account of Rayer's early life of being a flatterer and a joker, presumably a teller of funny stories, gradually developed into the idea that he was a professional jester. I don't think there is any truth in that, because among other things in the course of his career he became a prebendary of St. Paul's Cathedral, prebendary of Chamberlainwood for a good many years⁴. As such, even although he lacked learning in the higher sense, one must remember that the mediaeval clergy even of cathedrals were not always men of higher learning. A good many of them were not, particularly in that period. So there is no reason why he should not have taken Holy Orders, become a Canon and Prebendary of St. Paul's and also, as we know he did, enter the Order of Austin Canons Regular. So he was able, fitted by having joined both the Holy Order of the clergy and the Augustinian Order of Canons, to be the first Prior; and was in fact the first Prior of the Priory over the way. He was also for some years the first Master of this hospital. For a time he held the two jobs together so that Rayer was not only the man who, under God and under the guidance of St. Bartholomew in the vision, was the founder; he actually for several years ruled both these houses together. That is the relationship of the two main bodies. St. Bartholomew's the Less, which became a small parish church, is through its surviving late mediaeval tower, representative of the chapel of the hospital as distinct from the great Priory and parish church. All three are accounted for and they all derive from Rayer.

I should like now to consider a rather wider aspect of St. Bartholomew's and why we in particular as the Ancient Monuments Society and Friends of Friendless Churches should have a special soft spot in our hearts for the idea of coming here today. It is because this exemplifies better than almost anything we could find in the whole country, in the whole of Britain, what conservation is all about. Conservation is not just a matter of preserving ancient monuments and ruins and dead stones or bits of wood. A lot of people tend to say: 'It is a waste of money; it is a waste of energy to spend all this time on ancient things. Why are you not looking to the future and to progress? and so forth. What they overlook is that you cannot ever have a healthy plant if it hasn't got healthy roots, and St. Bartholomew's, as far as I know,

is the most splendid example in this whole country of an institution which is still flourishing because it has these deep roots. Although the history of the Priory Church was interrupted by the Dissolution under King Henry VIII, nevertheless through the law of the land, through the conservative activity of its parishioners, a great deal of that noble church was preserved and we still have it. Through the pressure of the City of London and its citizens upon King Henry VIII, approaching his better side, he agreed to re-found the hospital. Because it was of what he regarded as monastic origin and was linked to the Priory, though a separate institution by his time, he dissolved it; but he did give back a considerable amount of endowments and saddled the City of London with the balance. At any rate it was put into safe hands, so that under the auspices of the Corporation of the City of London, St. Bartholomew's had a continued existence. And through this train of events the great original foundation for medical and charitable purposes, the greatest in the world we may say without fear of contradiction, in a historical sense and in the extraordinary numbers of patients dealt with year by year over hundreds of years, this is the most amazing example of the continuity of an institution. Now let us look at that in reverse. Instead of starting at the Norman Conquest and moving on to the Conqueror's younger son Henry I and what happened in his reign and coming on down to our times, let us think what this means looking from our position on St. John the Baptist's Day, 1981, back towards 1123,

If we look back, this living institution within whose walls we have met together today, is a living link. The fact that it is a human institution, that has been going on and going on and going on all this time, means that through its members, through the devoted procession of nurses who have been working in these centuries, we have a direct link back to the age of Henry I, the period when all this started. What a very reasonable age that age of Henry I was, when one looks at it. It tends to be cut off from us in the history books by the twenty years' anarchy in the reign of Stephen, when it was said that God and his saints slept. Things became very dreadful. But what is commonly not realized, or not realized enough, is the very high place in western civilization the England of King Henry I held in those thirty-five years from 1100 to 1135; particularly in the scientific field in which at the period medical men took the lead. Among other things we know from the surviving charters of King Henry that all the way through his reign, certainly from 1101 on to maybe 1130 if not later, one of the main witnesses who was always present with the King witnessing charters was Grimbald his physician, and this physician Grimbald is constantly popping up. We do not know anything very much about him but he obviously was a man who was in the

immediate entourage of King Henry I. It is of course well known that the king was later on called Beauclerk because among mediaeval kings he was an exceptionally wise and learned man. We don't know the extent of his own education but we do know that he was a fluent speaker in Latin and French and apparently could also speak English, a very remarkable accomplishment for a Norman king at the beginning of the twelfth century. It is quite extraordinary that he could speak to his subjects in their own language and, far more than that, there is no doubt that he patronised a great many men of art and science.

We only get glimpses here and there of the sort of things that they were doing, but we do know just little bits and they add up in a fantastically interesting way. Many of you will have read our Chairman of Council, Dr. Ivor Bulmer-Thomas's recent paper about Euclid in this last volume of *The Royal Archaeological Institute's Archaeological Journal*⁵, and some of you may have read some of the earlier works of the American Charles Haskins who back in the 1920s wrote a great book on mediaeval science⁶; and a fairly recent book of the last four or five years by another American, Professor Dorothee Metlitzki of Yale University, *The Matter of Araby in Mediaeval England*⁷. This extraordinary book shows in considerable detail, in spite of the difficulty of getting detail out of such a remote period, the reason why there was a long continued and close link between England, rather than France, and the oriental world of Arabic science. I haven't time to go into the details now, but there were background reasons among which notably was the special interest of the English church in calculating Easter correctly, and knowing exactly the movements of the sun and the moon and how to work out the time of the church festivals. They were interested in astronomy, they were interested in mathematical science, and this is where you should certainly read Dr. Bulmer-Thomas's article about Euclid, which gets very close to the heart of the matter with the revolutionary things that were brought specifically to England in the reign of King Henry I.

One of the most notable of all these things is the collaboration between an English scientist and a Jewish convert. The scientist, the Saxon Englishman Adelard of Bath, travelled abroad, studied in France, went down to Sicily, Southern Italy, into the Near East—what is now southern Turkey—got to Antioch, went on to Jerusalem, then came back. And what did he do? An experimental scientist in a very unlikely period, he got hold of Arabic manuscripts of Euclid and other learned texts and brought them back with him. Somewhere about 1115 he returned to England. There he found someone able to help translate the Arabic texts, a most extraordinary man, known to western history books as Petrus Alphonsi, a converted Jew. As Moshe Sephardi, a

Spanish Jew, in 1106 in middle life he had suddenly become a Christian. King Alphonso I of Aragon stood sponsor, was his godfather at Huesca in Aragon. He almost immediately, as so many converts do, started to attack his former religion and wrote a treatise against the Jews. Surprisingly enough, it was a very moderate and reasoned treatise and not one of vituperation, but nevertheless he seems to have made Spain too hot to hold him and he had to leave. He came to England and, as he afterwards told Walcher the learned Prior of Malvern Priory, the mathematician and astronomer, his great sadness was that in having to leave Spain and come to England, he had had to leave all his books with the amazing new knowledge of the Arabic world, the Islamic world of science which the Christians and the Jews in Spain all revered.

Petrus had had to leave his books behind him. But he had enough knowledge of mathematics in his head to show Walcher how to make calculations in degrees, minutes and seconds, instead of by incredibly clumsy adaptations of Roman numerals on the IIII principle. And this great revolution took place between 1119, when the last of the old-fashioned clumsy mathematical treatises came out, and 1120 when the new one by Walcher appeared, where he acknowledges his conversations with Petrus and how Petrus had shown him how to do it. So we can pin-point from these mathematical and astronomical treatises the fact that there was a great revolution in science happening in this country in 1120 due to the return from the Near East of an Englishman, Adelard of Bath; the existence of Walcher from Lorraine, one of the invading Norman ecclesiastics who happened to be one of the most learned men of Northern Europe of his time; and the arrival of a third man, this converted Jew from Spain. Due to these three individuals there opened a fantastic period of new thought, new sciences, new literature. You have to read Professor Metlitzki's book to grasp the enormous influence on literature of the arrival of Petrus Alphonsi with his long book of oriental stories, a sort of preliminary to the Arabian Nights; and what a difference this made to European literature and most of all, to English literature and to this country. We don't know the details. We do know in a traditional way that a Saracen prisoner of war who is called 'Lalys' was down in Glamorgan and is supposed to have been the architect of Neath Abbey, founded in 1129 and that later he became an architect to King Henry I⁸. We know incidentally that Petrus Alphonsi became one of the physicians to King Henry I, though he did not take Grimbald's place. These people enjoyed royal patronage. We know that Adelard of Bath in his older life was back in Bath and getting a pension from the King in the one surviving Pipe Roll of 1130⁹.

I can't go on any further but I would mention something

which does seem to me to epitomize this. The books of the last hundred years or so, describing the tomb of Rayer which most of us have seen in the church today, mention that at the foot of the figure of Rayer there are two little kneeling puppet Canons, reading from books. These apparently contained the Latin Vulgate version of a text from Isaiah, Chapter 51, verse 3, of which the Authorised Version in English is 'For the Lord shall comfort Zion, He will comfort all her waste places, and He will make her wilderness like Eden and her desert like the Garden of the Lord, Joy and Gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of melody'. But the interesting thing about that is that if you look it out in the Vulgate Bible translated from the ancient tongues by St. Jerome in the 4th Century A.D., (if you like to believe it, sitting in a cave in Bethlehem, with a pet lion helping him), you will find St. Jerome said: 'The Lord will comfort her ruins', *ruinas ejus*. It seems to me that as a society devoted not just to ruins, but to saving churches from ruin, this text on the tomb of the founder of these wonderful institutions is something to give us comfort for the future: that the Lord, through our agency to some extent—without boasting, we may say to some extent—the Lord will comfort their ruins.

Notes

- 1 See Norman Moore, *The Church of St. Bartholomew the Great* (1888; 7th ed., 1912); *The History of St Bartholomew's Hospital* (2 vols., 1918); E.A. Webb, *Records of St. Bartholomew's Smithfield* (2 vols., 1921); Nellie J.M. Kerling, *Cartulary of St. Bartholomew's Hospital* (1973).
- 2 J.C. Dickinson, *The Origins of the Austin Canons* (1950).
- 3 Norman Moore, *The Book of the Foundation of St. Bartholomew's Church in London*, edited from Cotton MS. Vespasian B. IX (St. Bartholomew's Hospital, n.d.)
- 4 See the authorities in note 1 above, also John LeNeve, *Fasti Ecclesiae Anglicanae, 1066-1300: I. St. Paul's, London* (compiled Diana E. Greenway, 1968), 38.
- 5 I. Bulmer-Thomas, 'Euclid and Mediaeval Architecture', *Archaeological Journal*, CXXXVI for 1979 (1980), 136-50.
- 6 C.H. Haskins, *Studies in the History of Mediaeval Science*, (Harvard, 1924; reprint New York, 1960).
- 7 Dorothee Metlitzki, *The Matter of Araby in Mediaeval England*, (Yale University Press, 1977).
- 8 J.H. Harvey, 'The Origins of Gothic architecture: some further thoughts', *Antiquaries Journal*, XLVIII (1968), 87-99, esp. p. 91; *The Mediaeval Architect* (1972), 94-7; 'Wells and Early Gothic', *Report of the Friends of Wells Cathedral for 1978*, 16-24; cf. *Mediaeval Craftsmen* (1975), 51-4, on the links between the work of Petrus Alphonsi and the treatise of Theophilus; C.R. Dodwell ed., *Theophilus: The Various Arts* (Oxford, 1961).
- 9 Joseph Hunter ed., *Magnum Rotulum Scaccarii* (1833), 22; cf. William Farrer, *An Outline Itinerary of King Henry the First* (1920).