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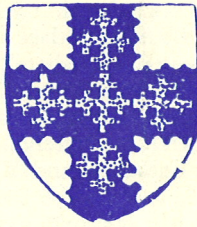
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CLEALL A.V.G. - WALTHAM ABBEY,
A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE
LADY CHAPEL. ERECTED c 1316

Waltham Abbey



A brief description of the Lady Chapel

ERECTED CIRCA 1316

THE CHAPEL OF OUR LADY, WALTHAM ABBEY

BY the preservation of the beautiful early fourteenth century Lady Chapel, attached to the more ancient Abbey Church of the Holy Cross and St. Lawrence, English architecture has retained a fine gem with several individual features. The date of its erection was in the neighbourhood of 1316 or earlier, and its architecture is a grand specimen of the work of the Decorated period. Its interior is 44 feet long, 22 feet wide, and 23 feet high. Possibly in order to give a greater loftiness to the Crypt, which is immediately underneath it, the Chapel was built at a height of approximately 5 feet above the floor of the Nave. Apparently, there has always existed an entrance entirely separate from that of the Church, and, indeed, for a long time (and right up to the last Restoration of the Lady Chapel in 1931) there was no way of access from the interior of the Abbey.

The question is frequently asked why this particular Lady Chapel was not built at the East End of the Church, in accordance with the common practice of the Middle Ages. The answer is not altogether a simple one. Actually, there existed no hard and fast rule on the subject, and various matters had to be taken into consideration when the building of such an addition was contemplated. If, through lack of sufficient money or land, a Lady Chapel could not be erected immediately behind the High Altar, the Church Authorities generally selected another site as near to the Choir as possible; and so the Chapel was sometimes set up on the North or the South side of the Choir, or even (more rarely) at the West End of a Church. It is believed that Rochester Cathedral and Waltham Abbey stand unique in the possession of a Lady Chapel on the South side of the Nave to the West of the South Transept. In our own case, the reason for the choice of this position may have been that it was very probably built at the expense of the Parishioners (and not at that of the Monks), as an addition to the Nave, which for long had served as the Parish Church of the people. In these circumstances, it was natural that the Chapel should be erected in close proximity to the very building in which the Parishioners normally worshipped, rather than to the East of the Transept, where it would have appeared to be an integral part of the Monastic Church. This explanation is strongly supported by the fact that the Lady Chapel was allowed to remain standing, together with the Nave, after the dissolution of the Monasteries in 1540, instead of being demolished with the other parts of the Abbey. Also, in its existing position, it was somewhat less expensive to build than might otherwise have been the case, because it needed only two additional walls, being inserted in the angle made by the main building and the transept, the West wall of the South Transept serving as the East wall of the Lady Chapel, and the South or Norman wall of the Nave serving as the North wall of the Chapel. On this last-named wall, within the Chapel, it is easy to see the tracery of an ancient circular window, which once lighted the Triforium passage, and the arches of two Norman windows.

Like the Abbey Church itself, the Lady Chapel possesses no ancient glass, but the five windows are worthy of special note, particularly the fine double-traceried six-light square-headed West window. The easternmost window on the South side was filled with stained glass in 1931 to the memory of the Rev. F. B. Johnston, M.A., Vicar of Waltham Abbey from 1885 to 1929. The cost was raised by public subscription and the design executed by A. K. Nicholson. The subject of the window is that of "The Annunciation." The adjoining window was filled in 1937 as a memorial to the late Brig. General Sir Richard Colvin, K.C.B. (H.M. Lord Lieutenant for Essex from 1929 until his lamented death in 1936). The subject in

this case is "The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ." The westernmost window on the same side, depicting "The Presentation of Christ in the Temple", was presented in 1933, in memory of the late Mrs. E. E. Wren (a sister of Sir Richard Colvin).

On the East wall there is a fresco of the "Last Judgment." This painting (probably the third of a series of three efforts) was executed in approximately 1430. It covers the space of the upper half of the wall only, measuring 21 feet in length and 10 feet in height. The artist (presumably an Augustinian Monk) very cleverly made use of the North Buttress in his symbolism of Heaven, in front of the gate of which the Archangel Gabriel is seen handing the Keys of Heaven to St. Peter the Apostle, robed as a Bishop in Cope and Mitre. Around is grouped a number of other ecclesiastical figures and angelic forms. At the opposite end of the fresco, Hell is depicted through the symbolism of flames and fire, into which devils are receiving the lost souls. In the very depths of the fire it is possible to see Satan—a curious tailed figure. The central part of the picture is the most striking, for therein God is represented as sitting upon the rainbow, bearing the Orb in His Hand, and having suspended over His Head a Sword and a Lily. Beneath His Feet are the Scales of Justice, in which Souls are weighed in the balance of God's Final Judgment, and if found among those whose names are written in the "Lamb's Book of Life," pass to the North Side, to be taken by the Angels into Heaven; or, if found wanting, to go in the opposite direction, to be conducted by the emissaries of Satan into "Hell-fire." Not far from the Scales of Justice, on the Heavenward side of the picture, can be seen several figures rising from the graves at the call of the Angel, who is sounding a Trumpet, now scarcely distinguishable, on which are written in Latin the words: "Arise, ye dead." Above the head of the Central Figure, in addition to the Sword and Lily already mentioned, the careful observer is able to note one or two other representations of similar symbols—these most probably being relics of the two earlier Paintings to which reference was made above, and which in the course of time, have appeared through the later paintings. A slight difference in the design of the sword affords the clue to the earlier date. This most interesting fresco was restored by Professor Tristram at the last Restoration of the Lady Chapel in 1931. (The previous Restoration was carried out in 1875.)

At the present time this Chapel is in constant use, the early Celebrations of Holy Communion taking place therein; and it is interesting to note that from the time of Edward I until the reign of Edward VI services were carried on—both in the Lady Chapel and in the Crypt beneath—without interruption. In those days the building was decorated in a most costly manner, and there was much rich plate with costly vestments for the priests, rivalling, in every way, the magnificent ornaments in use within the Abbey Church itself. It is commonly reputed that the reading desks of the clergy were overlaid with silver.

At the 1931 restoration a Faculty was granted to enable the Abbey Church authorities to carry out the suggestion of the architect, Sir Charles Nicholson, Bart., F.R.I.B.A., to transform the western portion of the Lady Chapel into a Museum of interesting exhibits. In this Museum can now be seen, among other relics, the following noteworthy objects:

(a) The ancient Parish whipping-post, ornamented with flat carving and bearing date 1598, and pillory. In the year named, the old carved post, which served the two-fold purpose of stocks and a whipping-post, was erected in the market of this Parish near the still more ancient pillory.

This latter (which is of extreme rareness in South Britain) consists of an upright post of plain oak, approximately fourteen feet high, with a fixed cross-bar, measuring five-and-a-half feet, and hollowed out for the wrists and necks of the two prisoners. The upper cross-bar, which fixed the victims in their uncomfortable positions, has disappeared entirely, as has also the platform, which was fixed about four-and-a-half feet beneath the top of the lower cross-bar.

(b) A "Suicide's Stake" (which up to the 18th century, was driven into the bodies of suicides, which were then left at the cross-roads).

(c) A reputed fragment of the tomb of King Harold (which some authorities believe to have been erected over the burial place of the Royal Founder of Waltham Abbey, King Harold, about a hundred years after his death).

(d) A case of stone implements and weapons (dating back to man's earliest occupation of Britain).

(e) An early fourteenth century Scroll containing the Book of Esther in Hebrew.

(f) A collection of very ancient coins.

(g) A copy (with a translation in English) of the Deed of Surrender of the Abbey of Waltham to Henry VIII.

In addition to these interesting objects in the Museum, the Lady Chapel also finds a resting place for the old oak pulpit, which, until nearly eighty years ago, occupied a position in the Nave. Its approximate date is 1658. The sounding-board of this pulpit serves as a table-top in the Clergy Vestry, and may one day be re-erected, we venture to hope, in the Nave.

The Screen, which divides the Lady Chapel from the Nave, is a beautiful oak structure, bearing a representation of the ancient Seal of Waltham Abbey—a Cross, supported by two angels. This was erected in 1886 as a memorial to the Reverend James Francis, M.A. (Vicar of this Parish from 1846 to 1885).

Before concluding this article on the Lady Chapel, some reference must be made to the decorated West door, which is ornamented with ball flower and Tudor Rose, and also to the East end of the exterior wall, where there is to be seen a curious piece of herring-bone work a few feet from the ground. This wall was once the inner wall of the South Transept, and is undoubtedly one of the very earliest portions of Waltham Abbey. The courses of irregularly-shaped stones are laid angularly.

It is interesting to recall that, prior to the Dissolution of the Monasteries, the Abbey Church in this Parish possessed sixteen Chapels (in addition to the Chapel dedicated to the honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, described above), namely—Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, St. Thomas the Martyr's Chapel, the Abbot's Chapel, and St. George's Chapel, among others.

Visitors will learn with interest that the Royal bodies of both King Edward I and his Queen (Eleanor) rested, on separate occasions, within the sacred precincts of the Lady Chapel of the ancient Abbey of Waltham.

THE NAVE. A separate leaflet describes the main portion of Waltham Abbey.

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