

**WESTMINSTER**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649480722

Westminster by Augustus J. C. Hare

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Cover @ 2017

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**AUGUSTUS J. C. HARE**

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## I.—ABBEY

THE first church on this site was built (close to Watling Street, the Roman Road from Verulam) on the Isle of Thorns—'Thorney Island'—an almost insulated peninsula of dry sand and gravel, girt on one side by the Thames, and on the other by the marshes formed by the little stream Eye,<sup>1</sup> which gave its name to Tyburn (Th' Eye Burn), before it fell into the river. Here Sebert, king of the East Saxons, who died 616, having been baptized by Mellitus, is said to have founded a church, which he dedicated to St. Peter, either from an association with the great church in Rome, from which Augustine had lately come, or to balance the rival foundation in honour of St. Paul upon a neighbouring hill. Sulcard, the first historian of the Abbey, relates that on a Sunday night, being the eve of the day on which the church was to be consecrated by Bishop Mellitus, Edric the fisherman was watching his nets by the bank of the island. On the opposite shore he saw a gleaming light, and, when he approached it in his boat, he found a venerable man, who desired to be ferried across the stream. Upon their arrival at the island, the mysterious stranger landed, and proceeded to the church, calling up on his way two springs of water, which still exist, by two blows of his staff. Then a host of angels miraculously appeared, and held candles which lighted him as he went through all the usual forms of a church consecration, while throughout the service other angels were seen ascending and descending over the church, as in Jacob's vision. When the old man returned to the boat, he bade Edric tell Mellitus that the church was already consecrated by St. Peter, who held the keys of heaven, and promised that a plentiful supply of fish would never fail him as a fisherman if he ceased to work on a Sunday, and did not forget to bear a tithe of that which he caught to the Abbey of Westminster.

On the following day, when Mellitus came to consecrate the church, Edric presented himself and told his story, showing, in proof of it, the marks of consecration in the traces of the chrism, the crosses on the doors, and the droppings of the angelic candles. The bishop acknowledged that his work had been already done by

<sup>1</sup> The Eye, now a sewer, still passes under New Bond Street, the Green Park, and Buckingham Palace, to join the Thames near Vauxhall Bridge.

saintly hands, and changed the name of the place from Thorney to Westminster, and in recollection of the story of Edric a tithe of fish was paid by the Thames fishermen to the Abbey till 1382,<sup>1</sup> the bearer having a right to sit that day at the prior's table, and to ask for bread and ale from the cellarman.

Beside the church of Sebert arose the palace of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs, to which it served as a chapel, as St. George's does to Windsor. It is connected with many of the legends of that picturesque age. Here, while he was attending mass with Leofric of Mercia and his wife, the famous Godiva, Edward the Confessor announced that he saw the Saviour appear as a child, 'pure and bright like a spirit.' By the wayside between the palace and the chapel sat Michael, the crippled Irishman, who assured Hugolin, the chamberlain, that St. Peter had promised his cure if the king would himself bear him on his shoulders to the church, upon which Edward bore him to the altar, where he was received by Godric, the sacristan, and walked away whole.

Whilst he was an exile Edward had vowed that if he returned to England in safety he would make a pilgrimage to Rome. This promise, after his coronation, he was most anxious to perform, but his nobles refused to let him go, and the Pope (Leo IX.) released him from his vow, on condition of his founding or restoring a church in honour of St. Peter. Then to an ancient hermit near Worcester St. Peter appeared, 'bright and beautiful, like to a clerk,' and bade him tell the king that the church to which he must devote himself, and where he must establish a Benedictine monastery, was no other than the ancient minster of Thorney, which he knew so well.

Edward, henceforth devoting a tenth of his whole substance to the work, destroyed the old church, and rebuilt it from the foundation, as the 'Collegiate Church of St. Peter at Westminster.' It was the first cruciform church erected in England,<sup>2</sup> and was of immense size for the age, covering the whole of the ground occupied by the present building. The foundation was laid in 1049, and the church was consecrated December 28, 1065, eight days before the death of the king. Of this church and monastery of the Confessor nothing remains now but the Chapel of the Pyx, the lower part of the Refectory underlying the Westminster schoolroom, part of the Dormitory, and the whole of the lower walls of the South Cloister; but the Bayeux tapestry still shows us in outline the church of the Confessor as it existed in its glory.

The second founder of the Abbey was Henry III., who pulled down most of the Confessor's work, and from 1245 to 1272 devoted himself to rebuilding. The material he employed was first the green sandstone, which has given the name of Godstone to the place in Surrey whence it came, and afterwards Caen stone. The

<sup>1</sup> In 1231 the monks of Westminster went to law with the Vicar of Rotherhithe for the tithe of salmon caught in his parish, protesting that it had been granted by St. Peter to their Abbey at its consecration.—*Flete*.

<sup>2</sup> 'Novo compositionis genere.'—*Matthew Paris*.

portions which remain to us from his time are the Confessor's Chapel, the side aisles and their chapels, and the choir and transepts. The work of Henry was continued by his son Edward I, who built the eastern portion of the nave, and it was carried on by different abbots till the great west window was erected by Abbot Estney in 1498. Meantime, Abbot Littlington, in 1380, had added the College Hall, the Abbot's House, Jerusalem Chamber, and part of the cloisters. In 1502 Henry VII. pulled down the Lady Chapel, and built his beautiful perpendicular chapel instead.



AT WESTMINSTER

The western towers were only completed from designs of Sir Christopher Wren (1714), under whom much of the exterior was refaced with Oxfordshire stone, and its original details mercilessly defaced and pared down.

'The Abbey Church formerly arose a magnificent apex to a royal palace, surrounded by its own greater and lesser sanctuaries and almshouses; its bell-towers, chapels, prisons, gate-houses, boundary-walls, and a train of other buildings, of which at the present day we can scarcely form an idea. In addition to all the land around it, extending from the Thames to Oxford Street, and from Vauxhall Bridge Road to the church of St. Mary-le-Strand, the Abbey possessed ninety-seven towns and villages, seventeen hamlets, and two hundred and sixteen manors. — *Burdwell's Ancient and Modern Westminster.*'

At the dissolution Abbot Boston was rewarded for his facile resignation by being made dean of the college which was established in place of the monastery. In 1541 a bishopric of Westminster was formed, with Middlesex as a diocese, but it was of short existence, for Mary refounded the monastery, and Elizabeth turned her attention entirely to the college, which she re-established under a dean and twelve secular canons.

No one can understand Westminster Abbey, and few can realise its beauties, in a single visit. Too many tombs will produce the same satiety as too many pictures. There can be no advantage, and there will be less pleasure, in filling the brain with a hopeless jumble in which kings and statesmen, warriors, ecclesiastics, and poets, are tossing about together. Even those who give the shortest time to their London sightseeing should pay not fewer than three visits to the Abbey. On the first, unwearied by detail, let them have the luxury of enjoying the architectural beauties of the place, with a general view of the interior, the chapter-house, cloisters, and their monastic surroundings. On the second let them study the glorious chapels which surround the choir, and which contain nearly all the tombs of antiquarian or artistic interest. On the third let them labour as far as they can through the mass of monuments which crowd the transepts and nave, which are often mere cenotaphs, and which almost always derive their only interest from those they commemorate. These three visits may enable visitors to see Westminster Abbey, but it will require many more to know it—visits at all hours of the day to drink in the glories of the light and shadow in the one great church of England which retains its beautiful ancient colouring undestroyed by so-called 'restoration'—visits employed in learning the way by which the minster has grown, arch upon arch, and monument upon monument; and other visits given to studying the epitaphs on the tombs, and considering the reminiscences they awaken.

' Oft let me range the gloomy aisles alone—  
Sad luxury! to vulgar minds unknown,  
Along the walls where speaking marbles show  
What worthies form the hallow'd mould below;  
Proud names, who once the reins of empires held;  
In arms who triumph'd, or in arts excell'd;  
Chiefs, graced with scars, and prodigal of blood;  
Stern patriots, who for sacred freedom stood;  
Just men, by whom impartial laws were given,  
And saints, who taught and led the way to heaven.'—*Tickell*.

In approaching the Abbey from Parliament Street, the first portion seen is the richly decorated buttresses of Henry VII.'s Chapel. Then we emerge into the open square which still bears the name of Broad Sanctuary, and have the whole building rising before us.

' That antique pile behold,  
Where royal heads receive the sacred gold;  
It gives them crowns, and does their ashes keep;  
There made like gods, like mortals there they sleep,  
Making the circle of their reign complete,  
Those suns of empire, where they rise they set.'—*Waller*.



The outline of the Abbey is beautifully varied and broken by St. Margaret's Church, which is not only deeply interesting in itself, but is invaluable as presenting the greater edifice behind it in its true proportions. Facing us is the north transept, the front of which, with its niches, rose-window, and its great triple entrance—imitated from French cathedrals—sometimes called 'Solomon's Porch,' is the richest part of the building externally, and a splendid example of the pointed style. A round window, however, introduced in a recent 'restoration,' is very destructive to history; though the series of English saints, bishops, abbots of Westminster, and other benefactors to the Abbey, has much interest. Beyond the feeble towers, usually attributed to Wren, though possibly the work of Hawksmoor, is the low line of grey wall which indicates the Jerusalem Chamber.

Facing the Abbey, on the left, are Westminster Hall and the Houses of Parliament, which occupy the site of the ancient palace of our sovereigns. Leaving these and St. Margaret's for a later chapter, let us proceed at once to enter the Abbey.

The nave and transepts are open free; a fee of sixpence (except on Monday and Tuesday) is asked for entering the chapels surrounding the choir.

Hours of divine service, 7.45 A.M., 10 A.M., and 8 P.M. From the first Sunday after Easter till the last Sunday in July there is a special evening service with a sermon in the nave at 7 P.M. 'Vox quidem dissona, sed una religio,' was the maxim of Dean Stanley in his choice of the preachers for the services.

*Three miles of hot water completely warm the Abbey in winter.*

Behind the rich lacework of Henry VII.'s Chapel, and under one of the grand flying buttresses of the Chapter-House, through a passage hard by which Chaucer lived, we reach the door of the Poet's Corner, where Queen Caroline vainly knocked for admission to share in the coronation of her husband George IV. This is the door by which visitors generally enter the Abbey.

'The moment I entered Westminster Abbey, I felt a kind of awe pervade my mind which I cannot describe; the very silence seemed sacred.'—*Edmund Burke.*

'On entering, the magnitude of the building breaks fully upon the mind. The eye gazes with wonder at clustered columns of gigantic dimensions, with arches springing from them to such an amazing height. It seems as if the awful nature of the place presses down upon the soul, and hushes the beholder into noiseless reverence. We feel that we are surrounded by the congregated bones of the great men of past times, who have filled history with their deeds, and earth with their renown.'—*Washington Irving.*

'In Westminster Abbey one thinks not of the builder; the religion of the place makes the first impression.'—*Horace Walpole.*

'How reverend is the face of this tall pile,  
Whose ancient pillars rear their marble heads,  
To bear aloft its arch'd and ponderous roof,  
By its own weight made steadfast and immovable,  
Looking tranquillity!'—*Congreve.*

'They dreamed not of a perishable home  
Who thus could build. Be mine, in hours of fear  
Or grovelling thought, to seek a refuge here;  
Or through the aisles of Westminster to roam;  
Where bubbles lurst, and folly's dancing foam  
Melts, if it cross the threshold.'—*Worsworth.*

'Here, where the end of earthly things  
Lays heroes, patriots, bards, and kings;  
Where stiff the hand and still the tongue  
Of those who fought, and spoke, and sung;  
Here, where the fretted aisles prolong  
The distant notes of holy song,  
As if some angel spoke again,  
'All peace on earth, good will to men ;'  
If ever from an English heart,  
Oh, here let prejudice depart !'—*Walter Scott.*

'This is the consecrated temple of reconciled ecclesiastical enmities. Here the silence of death breathes the lesson which the tumult of life hardly suffered to be heard.'—*Dean Stanley.*

'No monument has ever been more identified with the history of a people ; every one of its stones represents a page in the annals of the country.'—*Comte de Montalembert.*

'In the chambers of the dead, in the temple of fame, no less than in the house of our Heavenly Father, there are indeed "many mansions," many stages, many degrees. Each human soul that is gifted above its fellows, leaves, as it passes out of the world, a light of its own, that no other soul, whether more or less greatly gifted, could give equally. As each lofty peak in some mountain country is illuminated with a different hue of its own by the setting sun, so also each of the higher summits of human society is lit up by the sunset of life with a different colour, derived, it may be, from the materials of which it is composed, or from the relative position which it occupies, but each, to those who can discern it rightly, conveying a new and separate lesson of truth, of duty, of wisdom, and of hope.'—*Dean Stanley, Sermon on the Death of Lord Palmerston.*

'Incongruity among things beautiful in themselves is the very first element of the picturesque. As it is, though Westminster Abbey has suffered much, and is suffering more, at the hands of the modern "restorer," its delightful want of uniformity is not, and can scarcely ever be, overcome.'—*H. J. Loftie.*

The name **Poet's Corner**, as applied to the southern end of the south transept, is first mentioned by Goldsmith. The attraction to the spot as the burial-place of the poets arose from its containing the grave of Chaucer, 'the father of English poets,' whose tomb, though it was not erected till more than a hundred years after his death (1551), is the only ancient monument in the transept. Here, as Addison says, 'there are many poets who have no monuments, and many monuments which have no poets.' Though many of the later monuments are only cenotaphs, they are still for the most part interesting as portraying those they commemorate. That which strikes every one is the wonderful beauty of the colouring in the interior. Architects will pause to admire the Purbeck marble columns with their moulded, not sculptured, capitals ; the beauty of the triforium arcades, their richness so greatly enhanced by the wall-surface above being covered with a square diaper ; the noble rose-windows ; and above all, the perfect proportions of the whole. But no knowledge of architecture is needed for the enjoyment of the colouring, of the radiant hues of the stained glass, which enhances the depth of the shadows amid the time-stained arches, and floods the roof and its beautiful tracery with light.

Few, however, among the hundreds who visit it daily are led to the Abbey by its intrinsic beauty, but rather because it is 'the silent meeting-place of the great dead of eight centuries'—the burial-place of those of her sons whom, at different times of her taste and judgment, England has delighted to honour with sepulture in 'the great

temple of silence and reconciliation, where the enmities of twenty generations lie buried.<sup>1</sup>

'Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers that begat us. The Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning. Such as did bear rule in their kingdoms, men renowned for their power, giving counsel by their understanding. . . . Leaders of the people by their counsels, and by their knowledge of learning meet for the people, wise and eloquent in their instructions. Such as found out musical tunes, and recited verses in writing: rich men furnished with ability, living peaceably in their habitations. All these were honoured in their generation, and were the glory of their times. . . . Their bodies are buried in peace, but their name liveth for evermore.'—*Eccles.* xlv. 1-7, 14.

'When I am in a serious humour, I very often walk by myself in Westminster Abbey, where the gloominess of the place, and the use to which it is applied, with the solemnity of the building, and the condition of the people who lie in it, are apt to fill the mind with a kind of melancholy, or rather thoughtfulness that is not disagreeable.

'When I look upon the tombs of the great, every emotion of envy dies in me; when I read the epitaphs of the beautiful, every inordinate desire goes out; when I meet with the grief of parents upon a tombstone, my heart melts with compassion; when I see the tomb of the parents themselves, I consider the vanity of grieving for those whom we must quickly follow. When I see kings lying by those who deposed them, when I consider rival wits placed side by side, or the holy men that divided the world with their contests and disputes, I reflect with sorrow and astonishment on the little competitions, factions, and debates of mankind. When I read the several dates of the tombs, of some that died yesterday, and some six hundred years ago, I consider that great day when we shall all of us be contemporaries, and make our appearance together.'—*Addison*, '*Spectator*,' No. 26.

'Death openeth the gate to good fame, and extinguisheth envy; above all, believe it, when a man hath obtained worthy ends and expectations, the sweetest canticle is "Nunc Dimittis."—*Lord Bacon*.

'O eloquent, just, and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only hast cast out of the world and despised; thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two words, *Hic jacet*.'—*Sir W. Raleigh*, '*History of the World*.'

'The best of men are but men at the best.'—*General Lambert*.

Those who look upon the tombs of the poets can scarcely fail to observe, with surprise, how very few are commemorated here whose works are now read, how many whose very existence is generally forgotten.<sup>2</sup>

'I have always observed that the visitors to the Abbey remain longest about the simple memorials in Poet's Corner. A kinder and fonder feeling takes the place of that cold curiosity or vague admiration with which they gaze on the splendid monuments of the great and the heroic. They linger about these as about the tombs of friends and companions.'—*Washington Irving*, '*The Sketch-Book*.'

<sup>1</sup> Macaulay.

<sup>2</sup> We look in vain for any monuments to Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Southwell, John Donne, Thomas Carew, Philip Massinger, Sir John Suckling, George Sandys, Francis Quarles, Thomas Heywood, Richard Lovelace, Robert Herrick, George Wither, Henry Vaughan, Andrew Marvell, Thomas Otway, Isaac Walton, Thomas Parnell, Edmund Waller, William Somerville, William Collins, Edward Moore, Allan Ramsay, William Shenstone, William Falconer, Mark Akenside, Thomas Chatterton, Tobias Smollett, Thomas Wharton, James Beattie, James Hogg, George Crabbe, Felicia Hemans, L. E. Landon, and John Keats. Even the far greater memories of Walter Scott, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Walter Savage Landor are unrepresented. Stained windows are supposed to commemorate George Herbert and William Cowper.