

**ELEMENTARY
REMARKS ON CHURCH
ARCHITECTURE**

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Elementary remarks on church architecture by John Medley

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JOHN MEDLEY

**ELEMENTARY
REMARKS ON CHURCH
ARCHITECTURE**

TO
JAMES WENTWORTH BULLER, ESQ.
OF DOWNES,
THESE FEW PAGES ARE DEDICATED,
WITH EVERY FEELING OF
GRATEFUL AND SINCERE ESTEEM,
BY HIS OBLIGED AND FAITHFUL SERVANT,
THE AUTHOR

St. Thomas' Vicarage,
October 4, 1841.

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ELEMENTARY REMARKS
ON
CHURCH ARCHITECTURE.

THE substance of the following observations was originally read at a General Meeting of the Exeter Diocesan Society for the Promotion of the Study of Church Architecture. They are now thrown together in a somewhat different form, with a few additions, in the hope that they may be useful to those who, like the writer, are desirous of being *learners* in this most interesting but difficult subject. In the Middle Ages the Clergy were frequently the architects as well as guardians of the Church; and if this cannot be expected now, at all events it is desirable that those to whom the care of our holy edifices is intrusted, should not be ignorant of the essential principles of the science to which we are all so deeply indebted, and should know both how to preserve what is valuable, and to add what is deficient. Nor are the Clergy the only persons interested. It might be so, if the Clergy were the Church. But as the Laity form equally

with themselves an integral part of the one body,— as they alike enjoy the benefit of the ecclesiastical taste and munificence of former ages,— some knowledge of Church Architecture ought, surely, to be a part of every liberal education. Ought not they who would be ashamed to be ignorant of the names of ordinary plants, herbs, and minerals, and who even take delight in extending their researches into the productions of a former world, to blush at their ignorance of the very elements of the great science by whose noblest productions they are surrounded? Yet how do most persons enter a cathedral, collegiate, or handsome parochial church? After gazing about them for a few moments in uninstructed amazement, they surrender themselves into the hands of an officer more ignorant, probably, than themselves, who hurries them on from nave to choir, from monument to monument, with all the rapidity of one who has his alphabet to say, and his fee to receive, and who would be glad to finish the one, and receive the other as soon as possible. And few even of those who frequently enter our parish or collegiate churches have any notion whatever of the style in which they are erected. This general ignorance has been attended with its usual consequences: barbarous neglect where it seemed unnecessary to do anything for the church, and still more barbarous alterations where enlargement or restoration became necessary. For what is the usual course adopted on the enlargement of a parish church? The thing is staved off as long as possible; there is a great deal of talk throughout the parish that accommodation

is wanted ; a dissenting chapel is built, and those who have tried in vain to obtain a seat in the parish church occupy their sittings there ; until at last the parishioners come together. Even then there is a grumbling about the heavy rates and dreadful expenses ; but the rate is finally carried. Yet how to enlarge to the best effect nobody knows : one proposes to lengthen, another to widen, a third to build galleries all round the church, which latter proposition is in all likelihood accepted. So the old and lofty pillars are incrustated with galleries, neatly painted *to look like oak* ; and to give light above, green-house frames are thrown into the roof. And now those in the galleries can neither see nor hear the preacher. The pulpit must therefore be removed from its old and graceful position, and placed directly in front of the altar on four handsome Grecian pillars. But the desire for improvement increases. There is an ancient Norman font half blocked up with pews, and very dirty on the outside. Mr. A., the churchwarden, is a painter, and has a mind to try his skill, and show his liberality. So, with the best intention possible, he offers to paint the dirty granite a light cerulean blue, streaked in with veins of marble ; and there being nobody to remonstrate, it is done, and all agree the font looks much cleaner than before.

Now this is no exaggerated picture of what is going on every day. Our churches are in a course of transformation ; and unless the parishioners acquire some better notions of what is due to God's house, *our church building zeal will irrecoverably spoil half the*

old churches in the kingdom, to say nothing of those which are built entirely new.*

But there is a higher ground on which we may rest the argument for the necessity of some knowledge of Church Architecture, and it is this:—*A deficiency in taste where the object is to pay religious reverence to the Almighty, implies a deficiency in moral perception, and a deficiency in moral perception cannot exist without injury to the moral and religious character.* For if God himself condescended to inspire one holy man † with skill for the furnishing a part of the tabernacle, and to mark out by pattern for Moses himself, ‡ what was proper for its erection, and in a subsequent age to descend to the same particulars in reference to the temple, || it is clear that what the great

* To take one instance out of many. Mr. Oliver, in his "Ecclesiastical Antiquities," informs us, that at Bishop's Teignton, the chancel is of the date of Richard the First. He was not aware, probably, that before his second edition was published, the account had already become obsolete. The lancet windows are gone; the vestiges of antiquity carefully erased; the ancient church is converted into a neat modern chapel, with high pews; a gallery cuts in half the perpendicular piers; the steps to the altar being removed, an inclined plane leads up to the holy table; the plinth outside carefully follows the line of the inclined plane; the old walls are neatly stuccoed; the handsome Norman font placed close to a large upright iron pipe beside the altar; and the only remains of ancient days are the thickness of the walls, and the beautiful Norman archway, half incrustated with whitewash, which the parishioners began to remove, but unhappily desisted. Such is the history of the alterations of one church; but the type of too many.

† Exod. xxxv. 30 to 35.

‡ Exod. xxv. 40. Heb. viii. 5.

|| 1 Chron. xxviii. 12. 19.

God of Heaven thought it not beneath him to teach, must be our duty to learn. And where the houses dedicated to God are either so mean as to excite contempt, or so ill arranged that all that profound self-abasement which man ought to feel towards his Maker is swallowed up in taking care for his own comfort, and making himself his own idol, it is plain that bad taste is only another name for irreverence and forgetfulness of what is due to God and to the place where he is worshipped. So that I think it may be admitted, on scriptural principles, that incorrect taste in religious edifices implies incorrect moral perception; an error not, indeed, always wilful, but which, nevertheless, requires to be amended.

I shall make only one other prefatory remark in anticipation of a supposed objection. It may be said, "May we not safely leave all this in professional hands? The study of Church Architecture belongs to architects, and may properly remain with them." Now, to say nothing of the mistakes which even skilful architects occasionally make from their want of study of the principles of Church Architecture, is it not evident that the supply must, in some degree, be regulated by the demand? And that bad taste in the public mind will not call for, nor excite good designs among architects? And that so long as the public are content to be ill informed, architects will not sufficiently inform themselves? But after all, we do not leave the matter in professional hands, for we undertake to be the *judges of their plans*. And he who undertakes to be a *judge*, should at least have some knowledge on the