

Noake 1848

St. Peter's

I HAVE seen no probable estimate of the date of the foundation of the old church of St. Peter. The first mention of it in history is in the year 969, when Bishop Oswald, who was at that time engaged in worming out the secular clerks of the Cathedral from their most opulent foundations, and to place monks in their room, gave to Wulfgar, a collegiate priest, the church of St. Peter " by the south wall," and also the manor of Battenhall. It was subsequently appropriated, by Bishop Wakefield, to the Abbey of Pershore, who wore its patrons till the Dissolution. It was first dedicated to the Saints Perpetua and Felicitas; but in April, 1420, the parishioners obtained a faculty to alter the same, and their wake was afterwards kept on the Sunday after St. Philip and St. James. The name of " St. Peter the Great" appears to have been given to distinguish it from " St. Peter the Little," which was a chapel belonging to the king's castle here.

The present building was commenced in 1836 and completed in 1838. The old one was in a very ruinous state, and contained accommodation but for 275 persons out of a population of nearly 5,000. A voluntary subscription was made, aided by a grant of £600 from the Incorporated Society; and the present erection (which contains 1030 sittings, of which 600 are free) was speedily raised. It is in the "debased" Gothic style, and is large and commodious; but a great mass of trusswork which supports the roof, being naked to the eye, gives to the whole a heavy and lumbering effect, while the immense windows in the side walls admit a flood of light which is almost overpowering to the eye. This should be rectified either by stained glass or the use of blinds. The east window (which was painted for the old church by Messrs. Doe and Rogers, of this city) contains the figures of the Saviour, with St. Peter and Moses; the arms of the diocese are on one side, and those of John Nash, Esq., a munificent contributor, on the other. A portion of the western end of the church, containing the font, &c., is cut off by means of a glazed screen, which adds to the comfort of the adjoining seats, and there is also a huge gallery at this end. The general appearance of the church is not good. We are all more or less affected by external circumstances; and in a modern erection, with its blank staring walls and windows, its cold proprieties, studied economy, and lack of associations, there is to me nothing to compensate for the loss of those solemnities engendered within edifices o'erhung with lichens and monuments, which speak impressively alike to the most obtuse apprehension and the hardened heart.

" I would not leave the old church grey,
Its venerable yew,
And long flat stones, in dull array,
For any one that's new."

On entering at the western door there is a painting on the wall at the right hand (dated 1608) intended as a monumental record of the benevolence of one William Bachelor, a member of the Corporation, who gave " ten pounds, the profits thereof to be distributed to the poore of that prish, especially to such which wante wherewith to burie them." The old gentleman is arrayed in his municipal robes, and looks rather too gay for that period of life when one thinks of making his " last will and testament." Another individual, who also stands at the table which divides the two, is in the act of throwing down some coin thereon, to be applied for the benefit of the poor; he is habited in the characteristic civilian dress of that period, and is a starched, important looking personage, with features of the most contemptuous *odi profanum* class; it is tolerably clear he is jerking down his moneys less with the abstracted view of a philanthropist than of propitiating the lower orders against rising in judgment on his avarice. Gentlemen who wish to stand well in the opinion of posterity, and who leave no history behind them, cannot be too scrupulous in the selection of their portrait painters. The charity tables sprinkled about the walls describe a tolerably wide range of objects for the exercise of benevolence, including " warm gowns for ancient maids and widows;" coals, bread, shrouds, & for poor housekeepers and others; money to apprentice poor boys; and lastly, the sum of ten shillings was left by a Mr. S. Juice, "sometime minister of Birtchmorton," to the minister for preaching a sermon on Ascension Day. It was my intention to visit the church again on the day of that festival, with the view of ascertaining if the sermon was worth the bequest, but I have not yet been enabled to do so. I believe, however, that the bequest has been lost sight of. There is a sum of about £220 (left in small legacies to the poor of this parish) of which there is now no trace.

The reprehensible practice of late attendance appears to be observed here to a great extent, more particularly among the younger female members of the congregation, who, either from indolence or a wish to attract attention, are in the habit of indulging, sabbath after sabbath, in this breach of decorum; to all such I would commend the sentiment of one of their own sex - the good Mrs Chapone - who, when asked why she always came so early to church, replied - " Because it is a part of my religion never to disturb the religion of others." I was also surprised at the disproportionately small number of men in the congregation. As it is not likely the ladies would resign to their husbands the superintendence of the cooking, I can only account for the absence of the latter from the supposition that the tradesmen of the parish have adopted the commercial maxim of " Six days shalt thou labour, and on the seventh *post thy books*". The worthy clerk here wears a gown, he and the clerk at St. Nicholas' being the only two in

Worcester having that privilege, which is granted by license from the Bishop, and renders the office less dependent on the will of the clergyman.

The spacious gallery before mentioned was crowded with school children, of whom there could not have been less than four hundred; indeed, from the multitude of these "olive branches" which thronged all parts of the sacred building, it was satisfactorily demonstrated that whatever sins may be laid to the account of St Peter's parish, a non-compliance with the primeval command to "increase and multiply" cannot be made out. Of course nothing is more proper than to bring these young pledges early to the courts of God's house, but I do not mean to say that it adds anything to the comfort of the adult part of the congregation: indeed on this occasion, such an unintermittent cannonading of coughs, stampings, and confused sounds, was projected from this source, added to the circumstance of an old gentleman near me doing battle all the morning with the peccant matter in his lungs, that I was not sorry when the time came to beat a retreat. The school children all sang in unison, but the mass was totally unwieldy and required a conductor's baton to keep them together; it may be said of them, that

"Should they learn to sing in time, No doubt in time they'll learn to sing."

Some adults have since taken up the post of leaders, but the performances are still wretched, the singing being fearfully loud, harsh, and usually out of tune. It cannot fail to be a source of regret to almost every attendant at St. Peter's church—the largest and most commodious in the city for the erection of an organ - that no such instrument has yet been placed there. The effect of one in such a building would be second only to that at the Cathedral: an assertion the truth of which will not be doubted by any person who had the fortune to hear the "Hallelujah Chorus" performed by the instrumental and choral societies of the city at the opening of this church in 1838. Tell me not that funds cannot be raised: there are individual parishioners who, if actuated by one-tithe of the devotion which urged our forefathers to deeds of munificence, have it in their power nobly to present such an addition to the service of the sanctuary, without ever feeling the pecuniary loss - *Extant recte factis praemia*.

With regard to the schools, there are, I hear, no less than 200 girls and nearly the same number of boys in the Sunday Schools, to whom is imparted such instruction as is suited to their ages and capacities; the scriptures being taken as the basis. The funds are not in a flourishing state, there being a balance due to the treasurer.

It has been a source of regret that a great number of the poor of this parish do not attend the church; and their prevailing excuse, here as elsewhere, seems to be on the score of unseemly apparel. Others of the more respectable grade, I hear, absent themselves on account of being unable to procure seats: this, to any one who has noticed the capaciousness of the church, and the thinness of the congregation, must appear a paradox; but I have no doubt the fact is, there are not seats enough for each family to have a whole one, and consequently they will not accept of a part. On the whole, however, my inquiries have not led to the conclusion that there is an extraordinary lack of moral or religious feeling and habit, when compared with other parishes, especially considering the large amount of population and the class of individuals of which it is chiefly composed. It is also a gratifying circumstance that the opposition to church-rates - which for a long time threw an unenviable notoriety over this parish - has altogether ceased for the last five years, a circumstance which I attribute to the kind amenities and the conciliatory communion of the worthy vicar with his parishioners.

The vicarage of St. Peter, with the curacy of Whittington (value £250), is in the gift of the Dean and Chapter. Vicar, the Rev. G. L. Foxton. Curate, the Rev. G. W. Spooner. Clerk, Mr. Jones. Population, 4,575.

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