

Notes on the Origin & Location of the Church of St. Giles, Colchester



NOTES ON THE ORIGIN AND LOCATION OF THE CHURCH OF ST. GILES, COLCHESTER.

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he little company of secular priests who were ministering in the Saxon church by St. Botolph's Gate were much perturbed, we may imagine, when during the years 1096 and 1097 they saw the great preparations which were in progress for the erection of Eudo's Minster; the new Benedictine impulse which had crossed the Channel with Lanfranc had stirred Colchester at last, though Lanfranc himself had passed to his rest. About the same time this little band of missionaries resolved to join an Order of "Regulars," and whatever may have been the instigating cause, the fact remains that the date of their regularization almost synchronises with the erection of St. John's Abbey, which was begun after Easter, 1097, and in 1104 dedicated in honour of Christ and St. John the Baptist; while the Priory of St. Julian and St. Botolph was founded shortly before the death of William Rufus, which occurred in 1100.

While exploring on another subject that antiquarian treasury, the Cartulary or Register of the Abbey of St. John¹ it occurred to me that peradventure might be found therein some clue to the origin of the Church of St. Giles, which from its position (so singularly placed in relation to the eastern portion of the northern precinct wall of that monastery I have come to regard as the sole surviving offspring of that once important foundation. The references in the cartulary to this church when compared with the well-known account of the foundation of the Abbey, which occurs in a manuscript in the British Museum and which purports to be extracted from the Third Book of the Chronicle of Marianus Scotus,² should, I hope, show convincingly the genesis of the Church of St. Giles. Here I would remark that Marianus himself could not have written this description as his death had taken place before the events narrated therein. The story is a fascinating one, and whoever wrote it had evidently been acquainted with the locality, as its careful study yields valuable topological data.

The legendary marvels which decided Eudo in the choice of this spot for his monastery are characteristic of the period, but we can

¹ Cart. Monast. S. Johannis de Colecestria (Roxburghe Club)

² Nero, D. VIII, fo. 345; Dugdale, IV, 607.

only touch upon those points that concern our subject:- “Near this city there was on the south side of a little hill (*a parte monticulus australi*) upon the northern declivity of which (*in cujus aquilonali declivo*) (or, if we may paraphrase, upon its slope exposed to the north wind), Siricus the priest had his dwelling and a church, built of wooden boards, dedicated to St. John the Evangelist.” Then follow the supernatural and miraculous stories referred to, the chronicle continuing:- “ All the city was elated by the miracle and so this report and likewise the pleasantness of the place delighted Eudo, who resolved to build a monastery there.”

It will be observed that the little wooden church served by Siricus the priest is described as occupying the northern slope of the hill which faced the south of the town, and on this spot, on account of the fame of the place, the Abbey Church was erected, Hugh of York having been consecrated the first Abbot about 1104. The chronicle proceeds: “ As the offices and dwelling-places of the monks had been placed on the northern side of the church (*a parte aquilonali ecclesiae*) this Abbot, wearied of the noise and clamour of the town, resolved to transfer the whole of the dwellings to the south side (*in partem australem*), which was done.” Now comes the most important detail in our inquiry and the wording requires careful study:- *Ita colliculus ille sublatus est qui ecclesiae imminabat et inde cimiterium complanatum a parte septentrionali*, which may be translated:- So that hillock which overhung the church was taken away and from that place a cemetery levelled on the north side. Considerable licence has been taken in paraphrasing – one cannot describe it as translating - this passage, until our associate, the Rev. H.J. Dukinfield Astley, M.A., Litt.D., published in 1903 the original text and a close translation.¹ The version in *Monasticon* is most confusing:- “A rising ground or hill which stood before the church was dug away and the earth taken to the back of the structure to level the churchyard.”² And Morant, who with his knowledge of the locality might have been more exact, contents himself thus:- “ The little rising or hill which stood before the church was taken down and brought behind it to level the churchyard.”³ Next, the Rev. E.L. Cutts, in his “History of Colchester,” also deals with the subject: - “The Abbot had the little hill which overhung the church on the south levelled and the cloister was built on that side and the cemetery on the north side levelled up with the transplanted soil.”⁴ It will be noticed that the author asserts that the hillock was to the south of the church, but the original does not so describe, although it may be surmised such was its position. Mr. Cutts

¹ Trans. Essex Arch. Soc., Vol. VIII, N.S., pp122-35.

² *Monasticon Anglicanum*, Vol. IV, p. 601.

³ “History of Essex,” Vol. I, p.140.

⁴ “History of Colchester” (Historic Towns Series), p.91.

also states, as may be noticed, that the cloister was built on the south side of the church. Here again he seems inexact, for had he examined the coloured sketch of the church which is drawn at the head of the MS. in question¹ (the drawing evidently being contemporaneous in character), he would have noticed that there are no architectural indications that a cloister ever occupied this, the usual position for such structures, while the soil to the south (coloured green) is shown rising above the ground level of the church. But, one must give Mr. Cutts credit for anticipating, in his paraphrase, one's own conclusions, based on other data, as to the location of the cemetery, although the domestic buildings having at first been to the north of the church, the narrative seems to indicate that only when these were removed was the site converted into a cemetery and levelled with the earth taken from the little hill. As to the extent of this levelling of the ground northward of the church, the spade can be the only trustworthy witness, for in view of the present height of the soil inside the eastern portion of the north and also of the east precinct walls - a few feet only from their summits, the outside roadway being some 20ft. below - this level in monastic times seems most unlikely.

While the church was in erection the dwelling-places (if any) on the site for the monks would have been insignificant, for we learn, from the same document that in response to Eudo's request for a supply of monks, his friend Gundulf, Bishop of Rochester, sent him but two. These, soon becoming discontented, returned to Rochester. Others were sent in their place, who also grew dissatisfied and complained of their dependence upon laymen for support. This might lead to the supposition that they did not even reside within these precincts. A new order ensued after Eudo had arranged with Stephen, Abbott of York, to send twelve monks and a Prior named Hugh, when fresh energy was thrown into the construction of the convent; and for these, also others soon joined them, domestic offices were built to the north of the church. The reason assigned by the Abbott (Hugh), for as already stated he had been elevated about 1104, for the transference of the buildings from north to south - "the noise and clamour of the town" - seems inadequate, and perhaps the suggestion conveyed by the word *aquilonali*, of exposure of the position to the northerly winds, may be considered more cogent. The location was certainly an unfortunate one, although doubtless a necessity in view of the drainage facilities afforded by the downward slope of the hill northward, whereas the rising ground southward of the church effectively precluded drainage in that direction. Moreover, the increase in the number of monks, which about this time had amounted to twenty, had compelled the provision of more fitting offices.

¹ Nero, D.VIII, fo. 345.

The actual position of these new claustral buildings, which have been so completely swept away, is a most interesting speculation, but does not concern the present investigation; one may, however, be permitted the question, Who was responsible for the planning of the Abbey Church and the first domestic offices?

I have mentioned Gundulf (*d.*1108). He and Eudo, it is stated in the Marianus MS., were friends. Eudo had been a benefactor to Gundulf's Cathedral at Rochester,¹ and the latter could hardly have failed to have visited Eudo at Colchester, if indeed he had not assisted in planning the alterations to the Castle, its resemblance in plan to the White Tower being acknowledged. Had Gundulf or his master-mason any hand in designing the Abbey?

Bearing in mind that the area northward of the church was converted into a cemetery, the Cartulary of the Abbey, which we shall now consider, shows that the Church of St. Giles and consequently its churchyard occupied part of that area and were thus *within the precincts*, the earliest record being in 1179, in which year Pope Alexander III (1159-81) confirmed to the Abbot and Convent all their possessions, among which appears *Ecclesia Sancti Egidii*.² These in 1202 Innocent III also confirms, St. Giles being the first mentioned: *Ecclesia Sancti Egidii in cimiterio vestro sitam* – the Church of St. Giles situated in your cemetery.³ Continuing, the document recites the amounts receivable from various churches, but from *Ecclesia Sancti Egidii omnes proventus* – all the revenue; they thus held the church, not merely its advowson. The distinct statement will have been noted that St. Giles's was situated in the cemetery of the Abbey.

Further proof of this is contained in the *scriptum inpecturis* of William de Sancta Maria, Bishop of London (1199-1222), on the subject of St. Giles only, described as *Ecclesiam Sancti Egidii in suo cimiterio sitam*,⁴ and the Convent was granted perpetual possession of the church provided it supplied and supported competent chaplains to minister therein. This letter is dated "St. Osyth's 1220." This concession was confirmed in 1229 by Pope Gregory IX, the church being referred to as *Sancti Egidii de Colcecestria*,⁵ and again in 1237 by Roger Niger, Bishop of London (1229-44).⁶

¹ *Reg. Roffense* (Thorpe), p.116.

² *Cart. Monast. S. Johannis de Colecestria*, p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*, p.67

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.89

⁵ *Cart. Monast. S. Johannis de Colecestria*, p.76

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.94

Having thus shown that St. Giles's Church was within the precincts, but a few words upon the wallings in its vicinity may suffice. The present churchyard walls, in which are incorporated worked stones from the Abbey buildings, are obviously of post-Dissolution date, but they doubtless represent walls which had previously existed to separate the lay from the monks' cemetery – in fact, an examination of the eastern as well as the southern wall will show mediaeval foundations. A precinct wall extended from the Abbey gateway northward towards the roadway, and is returned eastwards in line with the centre of the west wall of the tower, the material used in the construction of this wall and the base of the tower appearing homogeneous.

This wall is not, however, in line with that at the east end of the church, which cants northwards to meet the northern precinct wall, which undoubtedly represents the original frontage. It is evident that when the church was erected a portion of this wall was cut away to admit of its construction and to provide access for the parishioners, the present north wall of the church approximating the original alignment. At its western end, the return wall to the gateway appears at the same time to have been cut back to the present position, and a fresh wall built to meet the tower, hence the divergence in alignment between this and the wall at the east end of the church. It may be remembered by some that until the recent restoration there was no means of access to the churchyard excepting through the church. The precinct walls evidently completely enclosed the eastern as well as the western end of the church, which features I am inclined to regard as a survival of monastic conditions.

Dedications to St. Giles, the reputed Hermit-Abbot of Arles, the special patron of cripples, lepers, and beggars, do not occur in this country until its Normanization had begun, and had the church existed before the foundation of the Abbey, unless indeed its dedication had been changed, we should have expected its mention in the first or Eudo's charter, wherein are enumerated his Colchester grants to the Convent. Originating possibly as a mortuary chapel¹ (the churchyard accommodation of some of the churches in the town, notably St. Runwald's and St. Nicholas's, having been extremely limited), St. John's would find it necessary to erect a parochial church and so to emulate the work achieved by the neighbouring Canons of St. Botolph's – the nave of whose church, then about completed (1160-70) was devoted to parochial

¹ Mr. Rickword disagrees with this view and writes:- "Bearing in mind the extent of the parish allotted to St. Giles's, over 1,500 acres being larger than any Colchester parish except the purely rural ones of Lexden and Myland, I am inclined to look it as founded for the use of their tenants, including at first those of West Donyland or Berechurch."

worship – if they too were to participate in the oblations and alms of the people. Perhaps, however, we should be the larger-hearted, and believe that they built the church in order to succour the cripples, lepers and other outcast who, uncared for, congregated about their own gate, and around the southern gate of the town. In which connection you need not be reminded of the Church of St. Giles, Cripplegate, also just without the walls of London.

Finally, an inspection of portions of the south wall of the church will confirm the second half of the twelfth century as an approximate date for its construction, which is an accord with the documentary evidence submitted.

In contemplating the destruction of the Abbey Church which followed the Suppression, we may venture to assume that had any portion of the Minster been devoted to parochial uses it would have been spared so complete effacement.

It may appear presuming on my part to have attempted the elucidation of the beginnings of this church when there are so many eminent local archaeologists more qualified for the task. My excuse must be that St. Giles's has in the past suffered historic neglect, as structurally it had done since the Siege until the recent restoration. Besides, so many interesting problems surrounding the site of the Abbey Church and its buildings remain still to be solved, which the spade alone can satisfactorily dispose of, that I may be pardoned for directing attention to a minor branch of the subject. It is to be hoped that exploration and careful excavation may ere long be possible, and so enable the recovery of the planning of this historic House.

