

Wall, Charles J., Shrines of British Saints. Methuen & Co. London, 1905.
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CHAPTER II

ST. ALBAN AND ST. AMPHIBALUS

Of all British shrines St. Alban's demands primary consideration, not only as that of Britain's proto-martyr, and as one of the type of great shrines, but as the best and most marvelous of restorations. Not the shrine of prelate or king, but of a layman ; not of one who had been reared by Christian parents, or tutored by theologians, but of a convert, who, strong in his newly acquired faith, was the first in this country to give his life to Him who had bled for mankind.

When the persecution of Diocletian ceased, a small chapel is said to have been built over St. Alban's grave on the top of a hill situated to the north of Verulam city. At the invasion of the Saxons in the sixth century this chapel was ruined, and during the two hundred years of paganism which followed, the grave of St. Alban was forgotten.

Owing to a vision of the Mercian king Offa (so runs the story), in which he was admonished to search for the martyr's body and exalt it to a place of honour, a monastery was founded and the relics of St. Alban were placed in a shrine in 795. It was only a simple monument, but it excited the covetousness of the semi-Christian Danish invaders, who, intent on plunder, broke it open and carried off the relics to Denmark, where they were deposited in a monastery of Black monks at Owensee.

By strategy the relics were restored to their own church.

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The sacrist of St. Albans, Ergwin, followed the pirates to Denmark, and became a postulate in the abbey to which the relics had been taken. He showed himself such a devotee of St. Alban that the shrine was placed in his charge, when he contrived to remove the relics and to secretly dispatch them to England, after which he seized the first opportunity to return to St. Albans.

The ambition of many succeeding abbots was to make a shrine worthy of Britain's proto-martyr, and for this purpose they collected a great number of precious stones. Marble and pillars were excavated from the ruins of Verulam, which formed a veritable quarry of material already worked ; but before their object was attained many of the jewels were sold by Abbot Leofric to allay the distress consequent on a famine, only retaining certain stones and cameos for which he could find no purchase. When next a Danish incursion was expected Ælfric concealed the relics of St. Alban in a wall, while he sent a chest of bones—professedly of the saint—to Ely, with a request that the abbot and monks of that monastery would receive them into safe custody until the danger was past.

Such a treasure the monks of Ely were loth to part with, but the St. Albans fraternity understood that weakness—the coveting of relics—and had, as we have seen, made provision for its occurrence ; at the same time spreading abroad the report of their removal, thus hoping to hoodwink the Danes and escape their ravages.

When all fear was past, the precaution of the St. Albans monks was found to be fully justified, for those of Ely returned certain bones, but not the same as they had received, and they afterwards boasted that they possessed the relics and how they had overreached their too confiding friends. But they rejoiced in their fraud prematurely, and their pride was broken when, from a cavity in the wall, the abbot of St. Albans drew forth the bones

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of their patron saint. Those bones sent from Ely were deposited in a wooden chest, in which St. Alban had been laid in the time of Offa, and in future years that also came to be venerated in consequence of its former association with the martyr.

At last Abbot Geoffrey ordered the work of the shrine to be again taken in hand. The copper was overlaid with plates of beaten gold. Sixty pounds ¹ had already been spent on the feretory, when famine again impoverished the country, and the precious metal were stripped off for the benefit of the starving.

This was the year 1128, but the following year was one of plenty, and the long-delayed work was accomplished. It was made by Monk Anketill who had been a goldsmith before joining the brethren, was of silver gilt, and decorated with a profusion of gems ; but the upper-most crest was not finished, as they had not collected a sufficiency of jewels.

Scarcely was it completed before it was again destroyed, not to relieve the starving poor this time, but to buy the manor of Brentfield. The monks were indignant. Why should the vessels of gold on the abbot's table be spared while the shrine of the saint was defaced? Abbot Ralph's action was sacrilegious ; but he made compensation which was for the ultimate honour of St. Alban, for he appropriated the greater part of the rents of that manor to the perpetual keeping—up of the shrine.

The next abbot, Robert de Gorham, solicited the Pope—Adrian IV, the Englishman—to take measures to compel the monks of Ely to forbear asserting

that they were the possessors of the true relics. It was asserted that St. Alban sometimes issued from and returned to his shrine, thereby testifying that his relics were safe in his own church and not Ely.² Adrian accordingly directed

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a commission of three bishops to make a strict inquiry. They went to Ely and on pain of excommunication the convent confessed "that they had been deceived by a pious fraud ; that they had perpetuated sacrilege, and were without one bone of St. Alban."³ This abbot once again restored the feretory, as it was before Ralph's vandalism, with much ornament of gold, silver, and precious stones. The succeeding abbot employed John, a goldsmith, to yet further embellish the shrine, and Matthew of Paris, that indefatigable historian and artist, says that he had never seen one more splendid and noble. To him we are indebted for a drawing of it, which, together with his description, enables us to realize the beauty of the shrine of England's most notable saint.

In those days the high altar screen had not been built, and the feretory could be seen by those in the choir, over the dorsal, as it stood on a stone substructure. The feretrum on the two sides was overlaid with figures of gold and silver, showing the acts of St. Alban in high relief. At the eastern end was a large crucifix with the attendant figures of St. Mary and St. John, ornamented with splendid jewels ; and at the western end was an image of the Blessed Virgin seated on a throne with the Divine Infant in her arms, of silver gilt, highly embossed and brilliant with precious stones, costly bracelets, and jewels. At each of the four corners was a pillar to support the canopy, resembling the towers, with apertures to represent windows all of plate gold, and the inside of the canopy was covered with crystal stones.⁴

In this drawing the feretory has been taken down from the fixed shrine and placed on a bier, richly draped, or [sic] the poles have been passed through attached rings, and it is being carried in procession on the shoulders of four monks.

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This beautiful work was unfortunately done with borrowed money, and at the death of the abbot, among the creditors who pressed their claims was one Aaron, a Jew, who came to the abbey and boasted "that *he* had built that noble shrine ; and that all the grand entertainment of the place had been furnished out of *his* money."

While making some repairs at the east end of the church in 1256 the original coffin of St. Alban, which had long since been discarded, was found, and by its old



THE FERETORY OF ST. ALBAN
Cottonian MS., Nero, D.I.

Illustration: The Feretory of St. Alban

associations with the saint had become endowed with miraculous properties, as was attested on that occasion. The following year the king came to the shrine and offered a curious and splendid bracelet, valuable rings, and a large silver cup, in order to deposit therein the dust and ashes of the venerable martyr ; he also gave some palls of silk to cover the old monument of the saint. On another occasion he had offered rich palls, bracelets, and gold rings, and gave the convent permission to convert them into money, provided they expended it in decorating

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the shrine. Among the permanent decorations of the feretrum were two suns of gold.

Thomas de la Mare added many valuable ornaments to the shrine, and a large eagle of silver and gold which stood on the crest, the gift of Abbot Michael, he re-beautified.

Among the benefactors to the shrine, Edward I gave a large image of silver gilt ; Edward III offered many rich jewels of gold and precious stones ; and Richard II presented a necklace for the image of the Blessed Virgin which was on the west end of the feretory. Other pilgrims offered various gifts : Adam Panlyn gave a silver basin which was suspended over the shrine to receive alms ; Lord Thomas of Woodstock, a necklace of gold adorned with sapphire stones, with a pendant of a white swan expanding its wings, and two cloths of gold for a covering for the shrine ; Sir Robert de Walsam, precentor of Sarum, gave jewels ; another gave a sapphire "of admirable beauty" ; and another a richly ornamented zone.

The abbot John Wheathampsted had the Life of St. Alban translated from Latin into English at a cost of three pounds (about £50), and deposited it on the shrine for the edification of the pilgrims. He also, at his own expense, had a picture of the saint painted and decorated with gold and silver, which he suspended over the shrine ; and it was said that the ornament exceeded the merit of the artist. It cost 50 marks, besides 795 ounces of plate used in embellishing it.

Many names of the custodians of these treasures find mention in the numerous manuscripts written in the scriptorium of this abbey, one of whom—Robert Trynoth, feretrius—was buried in the retro-choir, beneath the shadow of these shrines he had so diligently tended.

The fixed structure on which the feretory rested was

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taken down by Abbot John (1302 – 1308) and replaced by one of greater magnificence at a cost of 820 marks ; the remains are visible at the present day. No representation of this was left to us, and until quite recently the form of it was unknown.

Desecration and destruction (which may be followed in detail with the shrines of St. Cuthbert and St. Thomas) obliterated this shrine in the sixteenth century, and for three hundred years no one could say what kind of memorial had been raised as the sepulchre of St. Alban.

In 1847, the rector had certain walled-up arches and windows reopened, and among the *débris* were found many fragments of beautifully wrought Purbeck marble. These were carefully preserved, and when, in 1872, a great number of corresponding pieces were discovered, Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, assisted by the foreman of the works, patiently fitted together over two thousand fragments of marble and clunch—a veritable work of love, which restored the better part of the substructure whereon the feretory had rested. It was a marvelous accomplishment, and it enables the present generation to picture the beauty it presented to the pilgrims who thronged around the shrine.

This structure, 8 feet 4 inches in height, is composed of a paneled base decorated with quatrefoils, upon which rise ten canopied niches, with backgrounds of thin plates of coloured clunch yet retaining much of their colouring—vermilion and blue-blazoned with the three lions of England, the fleur-de-lys of France, and stars, all in gold. The pediment is sculptured with scenes of St. Alban's passion, with censuring angels, and statuettes of kings and prelates, and above is a foliated cornice. Fourteen slender square shafts surrounded the shrine, and on each side three cable-pattern shafts supported images of tapers.

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The third portion of the shrine—the protecting cover—is the only part of which we have no representation. It was presumably of wainscot similar to those of St. Thomas and St. Cuthbert (see pages 160, 191) ; it was certainly

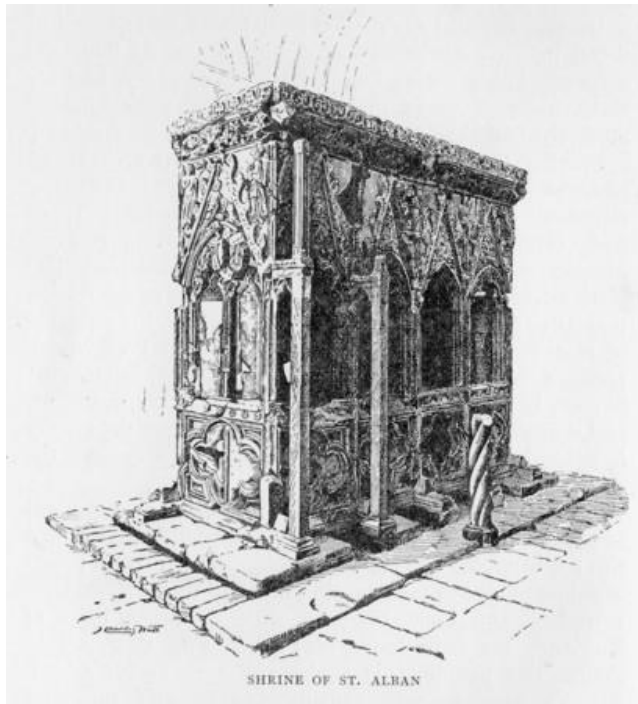


Illustration: Shrine of St. Alban

made on the same principle, to be lowered over the costly feretrum for protection and to be raised to exhibit it to the pilgrims, for in the roof immediately over the centre of the shrine is a hole through which a pulley was fixed : and

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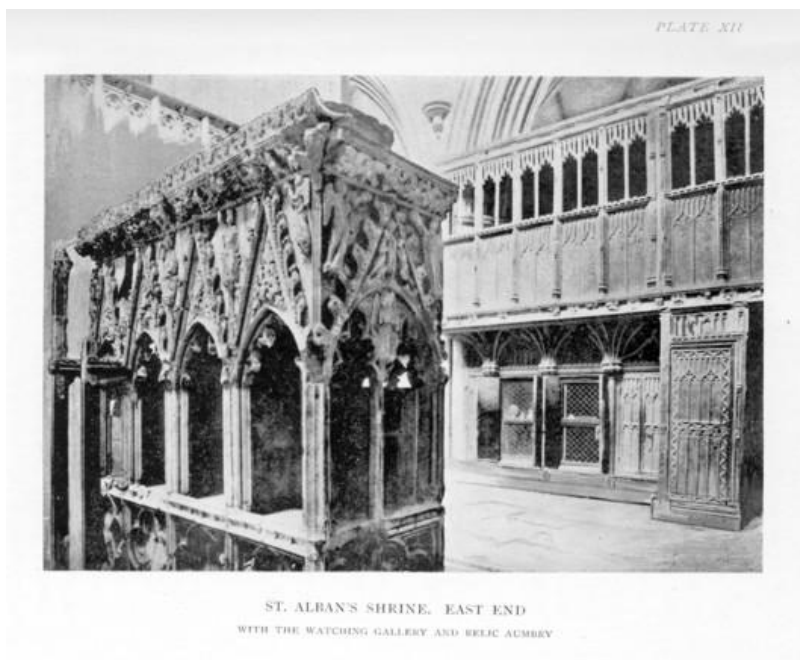


Illustration: Plate XII St. Alban's Shrine, East End

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if it is this canopy which is mentioned by Matthew of Paris as having the inside covered with crystal stones, what a spectacle it must have presented, as it slowly rose before the assembled pilgrims ! The lights from innumerable tapers would cause the crystals to scintillate with an indescribable magnificence.

The watch-loft on the northside of the shrine is the most perfect left to us. It is a two-storied building of oak ; in the lower portion are aumbries [book cupboards], which contained various smaller relics, and which have shutters to ensure their safety. A narrow stairway of oaken beams ascends to the watching-chamber above, in which was posted a monk to see that no damage was done to the feretory when the protecting cover was raised and the jewelled reliquary exposed for the veneration of the pilgrims.

At the demolition of shines there were among the ornaments brought to the treasure-house of Henry VIII "great agates, cameos, and coarse pearles set in gold, from St. Albans," some of which were probably the antique gems which had been gleaned from the ruins of the Roman city of Verulam by the early abbots of St. Albans.

A few shrines have in latter days been partially restored, but in no other case has there been so complete and wonderful a restoration as we have a St. Albans.

ST. AMPHIBALUS

Within the same old abbey another shrine has been re-erected—the shrine of St. Alban's teacher, the priest who had been instrumental in bringing St. Alban into the Church ; the priest who, by St. Alban's exchange of cloaks, had been enabled to escape his persecutors for a time, allowing the latest convert to be the first to witness by his blood the faith of Christ. Whether St. Amphibalus be the name of the man, or a name conferred through the

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incident of the cloak, matters not ; by that name is the martyr revered, and by that name has he been known for generations in the Church's calendar.

St. Amphibalus was apprehended very shortly after the martyrdom of St. Alban. He was brought with certain of his converts to the village of Redbourn, where they were stoned to death and buried in the field where they suffered. Their relics were afterwards found and brought to St. Albans in 1178. The bones of St. Amphibalus were put in one gilt chest, and those of his companions in another, both the chests being enclosed in one monument on the right hand of the

high altar. They did not, however, remain long in this position, for the succeeding abbot, Warren de Cambridge, caused them to be translated with great solemnity on the 8th of the Calends of July, 1186, to a new shrine richly adorned with gold and silver. St. Amphibalus now had a separate monument close to the wall on the north of the altar and next to the upper pier, while his co-martyrs had separate reliquaries.

Hitherto the shrine of St. Amphibalus had been in close proximity to that of St. Alban, but when William de Trumpington became abbot he prepared another position for it, where St. Amphibalus should be venerated by himself and not receive a mere share of the divided attention of the pilgrims with the proto-martyr. This was in the middle of the ante-chapel of the Lady Chapel, or the retro-choir, where a high fixed shrine was decorated by Walter de Colchester, the sacrist, who was an excellent painter and an "incomparable carver." It was enclosed with an iron grating, "where had been fixed a decent altar with a painting and other suitable ornaments" ; and the whole was consecrated by the Irish bishop of Ardfert. The two gilt shrines in which the relics of St. Amphibalus and his companions had first been deposited were given to the

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newly built church at Redbourn to honour that place with mementoes of its own martyrs, and the abbot appointed that a perpetual guard should be kept over them both day and night by a relay of monks.

The shrine of St. Amphibalus was rebuilt, during the time of Abbot Thomas de la Mare, at the cost of the sacrist, Ralph Witechurche, and the eastern end was adorned by the abbot with images and silver-gilt plates at a cost of £8 8s. 10d. (about £168 16s. 8d.).

At the time when the fragments of St. Alban's shrine were found (1872), many pieces of finely carved white stone, or clunch, were also discovered, which proved to be parts of the pedestal of the shrine of St. Amphibalus. These have been fitted together, and although in a very fragmentary and imperfect state, sufficient has been restored to enable a fairly correct conclusion as to its former appearance.

Standing on a step of 6 inches in height is a basement 23 inches high, 6 feet long, and nearly 4 feet wide. This is covered with a curiously sculptured fretwork, the western end bearing the remains of the saint's name, AMPHIB . . . S and a fleur-de-lys. On the north and south sides are the initials R. W. of Ralph Witechurche and fleur-de-lys ; but the eastern end, which was decorated with silver-gilt figures, is naturally lost.

Above the basement, on either side, is an open arcade of two bays, and at each end is a single arch, all of which are canopied and have straight-sided crocketed pediments. Originally there were three shafts at each side and two at the ends, of which only the capitals remain ; they are elaborately sculptured with a goat and masks, and some of them retain traces of colour and gilding. Surmounting the whole is a cornice 12 inches high, making the total height from the pavement 7 feet 7 inches.

Another relic of St. Amphibalus—a hand, or fragment of that member—was enshrined in a hand reliquary, richly decorated with silver and precious stones, and presented by William Westwyck, who for so great a benefaction was awarded a final resting-place near the shrine of that saint in the retro-choir close by the altar of the “four wax candles.”



Illustration: Shrine of St. Amphibalus

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Footnotes~

1. About £1,500 to the present day.
2. Matt. Paris, *Vitae Abbot*, p. 997.
3. Matt. Paris.
4. *Ibid.*

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