

FACT SHEET No 296

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SOUTHWELL MINSTER RESTORATION [From the *Architect*]

Last week we published some correspondence regarding the intended restoration of the ancient Collegiate Church of Southwell Minster which is not only interesting in itself and suggestive of important consideration affecting the morals as well as the expediency of such operations in general, but appear to enable that the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings to give expression more clearly than heretofore to the principles which it professes. There are no doubt many amongst the artistic and the educated public who are exceedingly anxious at this moment, and have been for some time, to understand a little more distinctly, indeed a good deal more distinctly, what it is that the Society desires to be done; and if the present controversy can be made to illustrate with any practical effect the doctrine which has hitherto chiefly attracted attention to the abstract, it will be welcome, whichever side it may happen to be for the occasion in the right or the wrong.

In fact we have been waiting for some incident of this very nature. It is all as it should be that this Association has been established by earnest, able and eminent men, for so beneficent and patriotic a purpose; and the public of this country – not merely the artists and the archaeologists, but the people of everyday common sense – will incline to be very indulgent towards such an agency, even if the spirit of its enterprise at first should be too indefinitely indicated. But the time must presently come when vague ideas, however excellent in themselves, ought to be resolved into intelligible demands or the whole undertaking will be pronounced a fiasco. Hitherto the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings has perhaps not had much opportunity for reducing its general views to specific form: and it is not to be regretted that the famous old Norman church now in question should be allowed to become the subject of any amount of attack and defence if the result is to be a better understanding of the issue which the Society desires to raise.

The first thing, we may say, which the correspondence seems to prove is that the quarrel of the Society is really, as has been supposed, with the leading Gothic architects of the day personally. It is now some considerable time since Mr Stevenson so courageously assailed at the Institute of Architects the mode of dealing with old churches which was customarily adopted by Sir Gilbert Scott and Mr Street, as chiefs of a whole army of alleged profaners of our most sacred relics. It will be remembered how anxiously Sir Gilbert Scott defended himself, and none the less how seriously Mr Street regarded the attack; as indeed did minor men, such of them as could venture to ask for a hearing, and succeed in obtaining it. The whole order of ecclesiastical architects, in short, seemed to be dismayed by the speciousness if no more, of the accusations which were so unreservedly hurled at them. That the accuser was not one of themselves, not even an erratic Pugin, but an unknown Scotch immigrant – one who did not so much as profess Gothicism at all, but believed in the mystery of Queen Anne – in their eyes a sort of Swedenborgian or Johanna Southcotian of art, if not a mere Mormon – only amazed them the more, and made their eagerness of resistance attract the more notice from observers. Since then Mr Stevenson, like the solitary scout, has disappeared, and the Society for the

Protection of Ancient Buildings, like the legion of armed invaders, has followed steadily and confidently to the conquest. That we have not hitherto been able to discern its particular tactics is scarcely to be wondered at. That it should be suggested to have no tactics whatever is quite natural. But at length it has begun to develop {sic} something like a definite manoeuvre, and we may proceed to scrutinise it; bearing in mind, however, this reflection, that although what is now being attempted may happen to be disproved, still the principle upon which the action is based may be as sound as ever, and only misapplied. At any rate, the battle of Southwell Minster begins with an attempt upon the architect of the work of restoration as a representative man, and as a representative man he resists it.

The curt and consequential style in which the penman of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners for England is pleased to conduct their correspondence with “a fellow who wants to know,” is not to be regarded as of any moment, and the decisive way in which they “decline to continue the correspondence”, need not be looked upon as an impertinent rebuff, but rather as the mere stereotyped form in which august authority expresses – perhaps a little testily, but naturally so – its sense of the inconvenience of being lectured upon a subject which it is obviously the task of the architect alone to discuss. Mr Christian is put in the front in a perfectly business-like manner, and we are entitled to suppose that the debate will now be continued by him, and perhaps by his professional friends, on proper architectural and archaeological ground. Why the Ecclesiastical Commissioners should have been addressed at all we do not clearly see, and for the future we are disposed to advise that the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings should not allow itself to adopt, even if only in appearance, the form of an appeal from the architect to the client. We cannot suppose that in this case it was intentionally done, but, however unintentionally, it had better not be done again; the cause of the Society is so good and generous, and our restoring architects, if they really require a pressure to be put upon them, are so well able and so well entitled to take their own squeeze in their own persons, that it would indeed be a pity if anything that could be called want of courtesy were to be permitted to interfere with the high character of the conflict.

What, then, is it that the Society thinks wrong in the proposed treatment of Southwell Minster by Mr Christian; and how does Mr Christian explain it? Our reply to this need not go into detail; so far we may refer the reader to the published documents as affording ample information; and what we prefer to do is to try to discover what principles of action it is that the society now lays down with any of that definiteness which up to this time we have been waiting for. Moreover, we would not recommend enquirers and critics to be misled by mere casual mistakes of argument or understanding on either side; to dwell upon such misadventures is no better than to draw red herrings across the line of debate; the only questions worthy of investigation are these – whether the society has made its practical policy clear or not; and whether, if it has, such policy is good or not good, artistically and archaeologically.

The first complaint that the society makes against Mr Christian refers to his removal of “the modern fittings of the choir.” These fittings consisted of deal pews with oak fronts, their design “modern and poor in quality.” Mr Christian substitutes the customary “stalls and benches of oak, and tiled floors.” The society asks why the deal pews should be interfered with, seeing that they were “quite adequate to the requirements of cathedral service.” Mr Christian replied that they were not “in any respect worth to remain in a structure like Southwell Minster.” The Society rejoins that “poor though they were, they fulfilled the requirements of the service of the

church by providing seats for clergy, singers and people.” In other words, the architect, in restoring a church of great dignity and adapting it for use as a cathedral, would clear away as rubbish a number of modern and poor deal pews which occupied the choir area, while the society would protect and preserve them as a relic of authenticity, the architect would substitute stalls and benches of oak of high quality and imitation-antique design, while the Society would deprecate such a measure as archeologically wrong and (we presume) architecturally bad. If Mr Christian had brought to light from out of some forgotten lumber-chamber the original oak fittings which must have been displaced at some time or other by the poor modern deal pews, then the society might no doubt have authorised their restoration, and justified the abolition of the modern substitute as a substitute and no more; but inasmuch as the ancient fittings are utterly gone, the modern pews become, if we understand the argument, the only authentic remains, however modern they may be and however poor, and the neo-antique is not antique at all, not in any way a genuine article but only a Brummagen pretence. But suppose the modern pewing to be as Mr Christian asserts it is, inadequate and inappropriate; or suppose – what is the same thing – that there had been no pewing there of any sort, what would the society do then? We are very much afraid that, however archaeological it may be, it is not a revival Society at all, and that it would not indeed put up in the nineteenth century, even in Westminster Abbey, any new Gothic fittings whatever. If this surmise be right, we scarcely know what to say. As regards Southwell Minster, it is easy enough to profess that the only question in dispute with Mr Christian is whether the deal pews were adequate or not: but the one thing that the public want to see is the principle upon which to act, not in the stolid preservation of the inadequate, but in the substitution of the adequate. Here are church fittings which are neither of venerable antiquity nor of respectable construction, and yet they must be protected as sacred relics so long as they will hold together – or so long as people will consent to be inconvenienced for their sake. In the paradise of vested interests which England is well known to be, we can at least understand this doctrine; but the time must come when even the vested interests of modern deal pews in a cathedral shall be superseded, and what then? Is the Society only prepared to say that its own function is then at an end, and that our architects may do as they please? Perhaps it is safest to say so. At any rate, the deal pews of Southwell Minster being gone, what ought Mr Christian to do in designing his new fittings?

The case of Bernasconi’s screen may next be examined. They were made of cement, copies of a stone screen close by, and only a lifetime old. Mr Christian says they were very well modelled but flimsily put together. He sweeps them away, and the society denounces the act. The Bishop had consulted Mr Street, and there was a great deal of “most careful consideration” all round before it was determined to do away with this sham stonework. Now why should such things as these awaken the sympathy of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings? The answer no doubt is that they were worth preserving as curiosities. To this the rejoinder would be that if the screens had stood in one of Wilkin’s sham Gothic castle the case might be so, but that in a cathedral they are only mere Wyatt-work on a par with that architect’s cast-iron cresting – which also which also was no doubt frequently “very well modelled,” if flimsily put together. In short, how far does the society really intend to go in the protection of work which is not ancient at all and not even meritorious in art? Would Wyatt’s cast-iron cresting be protected?