

An extract from:

Chester, A Historical and Topological Account of the City

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Of those which remain the next most interesting to St. John's is the church of St. Mary's on the Hill, '*usually called super montem*,' says the Vale Royal, for '*it standeth upon the brow of a bank that riseth from the west side of the Bridge Street and not far from that gate.*' It was also described as De Castro, but it was not in the liberties of the Castle, but in those of the city. This church was given to the abbot of St. Werburgh's by Ranulph the fourth Earl of Chester. Its parish extended beyond the boundaries of the city. The area was altered when the new church of St. Mary without the walls was built in Handbridge, and now includes the old parishes of St. Bridget and St. Martin, as well as part of the original parish of St. Mary. After the dissolution the church was seized from the dean and chapter by Sir R. Cotton, who sold it to the Brereton family. Thence the patronage passed through the Wilbrahams and Hills to the Westminster family.

Externally a building of no very great attractiveness, it possesses in its interior some objects of interest. The roof is supposed to have come originally from Basingwerke Abbey, (Flint) for in the churchwardens' accounts under date 1536, it is noted that '*the quere was boght at basewerk and sette uppe with all costs and charges belongynge to the same.*' This roof, quite recently repaired, is an excellent specimen of the Tudor date, and the fine carving of the bosses is well brought out by the paint. The nave and aisles are separated from one another by arcades also of the Tudor period. In the north aisle is a memorial to the four Randle Holmes, whose names are ever to be remembered in connection with Chester, and of whom some account is given in another chapter. On either side of the chancel is a chapel, that on the north being dedicated to St. Catherine. In it are two interesting altar tombs. The first of these is to the memory of Thomas Gamull, recorder of Chester, and father of the loyal Sir Francis Gamull, whose name has been mentioned in connection with the siege of Chester. The recumbent effigies of the recorder and his wife lie on the top of the tomb, and the figure at the feet of the lady is that of their son, afterwards Sir Francis. The other tomb bears a semi-recumbent effigy of Philip Oldfield of Bradwall. Ormerod accounts for the excellent state of preservation of these monuments, by stating that when Chester was surrendered to the Parliamentarians, the representatives of these families procured an assurance that their respective family tombs in St. Mary's Church should be preserved from injury, as the property they most valued. The result

proved how necessary was their forethought, as these two tombs are the only monuments of a like character in Chester which escaped demolition by the Puritans.

The southern chapel is called the Troutbeck Chapel. It was built in 1435 by William Troutbeck and Joan his wife, but the roof falling in in 1661, the monuments within were destroyed. Collections were made in the neighbourhood, and it was rebuilt. It was again restored in 1891. Near this chapel and at the east end of the south aisle proper are the remains of an interesting fresco of which a coloured restoration hangs below in a frame. Under the figure of a king is a representation of the Crucifixion with our Lady and St. John. Then on the angle of the wall is a bishop, and beyond this on the pilaster of the window the Instruments of the Passion with the figure of Our Lord showing the wound in His side. This church must have been exceedingly rich in ecclesiastical furniture, and was promptly dismantled after the change of religion. In 1547 the Holy Rood was taken down and the walls were 'white-limed' so as to cover up the frescoes. In 1550, a sum was paid *'for taking down the alters and tiling the church flore.'* In 1553 the commissioners visited Chester and as a result of their visit the copes, vestments etc. sold are found to have produced £10, 13s. 6d., a larger sum than that obtained in a similar manner from any other church, not excepting the cathedral. Under Queen Mary the Rood once more returned to its accustomed place, for there is an entry in the books *'gathered in the parish for the making of the Rode, 8s. 4d.'* but it was not long to remain.

In 1559, Elizabeth having now come to the throne, the rood was taken down, a communion table provided and a communion book, whilst in 1562 the rood-loft itself was removed as well as the altar, the church was white-washed throughout and the ten commandments written up. (Earwaker.) Being near to the castle, the churchyard was used for the burial of prisoners there executed, and at times there must have been considerable employment given, from this cause, to the grave-diggers. In 1631 the following entries of burials appear close together. *'Thomas Laceby, a prisoner, pressed to death, buried in the church-yard on the north side the steeple the 23rd day of Aprill. John Johnson, Joan Broome and Katherine Crosse, three persons that were executed, buried att the west end of the steeple in the churchyard the 25th day of Aprill.'* Again during the Commonwealth, in 1656, *'Three witches hanged at Michaelmas Assizes, buried in the corner by the Castle Ditch in the church yard 8th of October.'*