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HYTHE CHURCH AND ITS CRYPT.

By M. Adeline-Boulter-Cooke.

ON the Kentish shore there stands an ancient town—one of the famous Cinque ports which was bound to contribute ships and men to fight the King's battles, and received in return many privileges. Nowadays, the sea has receded, so that it is no longer a port or harbour, but the old town with its narrow streets, its steep ways up the side of the high ridge, its remnant of ancient houses, still retains its remarkable church, which only seems to have increased in interest and historical associations with the passing of the centuries. Picture a steep, steep path, or narrow way, running straight uphill to the entrance porch—a porch with a great flight of stone steps rising to the door of the church, very majestic and imposing, and rendered necessary no doubt on account of the ridge on which the church is built. Nobody can forget this wonderful first view of the parish church of St. Leonard, for it takes hold on the mind in an extraordinary manner. Over this thirteenth-century porch is a parvise, and this was used for the council chamber up to the year 1795.

Much of the church dates from the twelfth century, and includes the lovely Norman arch between the south aisle and transept, and a fine Norman door. The north transept was originally St. Edmund's Chapel, and we can see an aumbry and piscina, and what may have been an Easter Sepulchre where the Blessed Sacrament used to be placed on Maundy Thursday. Although the rood screen has gone, the stairs and doors still remain. A flight of steps, in a manner very reminiscent of Canterbury Cathedral, leads up to the beautiful thirteenth-century chancel with its triforium and clerestory sedilia and piscina, and the choir aisles, of which St. Katherine's Chapel is used for daily service, and the south choir aisle was originally the Lady-chapel.

Amongst other interesting details of this fine old church, naturally important as the parish church of a Cinque port, is an iron chest, which is supposed to have belonged to the Spanish Armada. It must have been quite difficult to open, for the key turns as many as eleven bolts, and in its construction much resembles a treasure chest in which King Philip of Spain is considered to have brought

over gold and jewels, and which is carefully preserved at Southampton. Curious, too, is the sixteenth century inscription to the memory of John Bredgman, Baily of Hythe. It is worth recording, though it is not particularly easy to decipher:

" Whilst he did live which heare doth lie,
Three sutes gatt he of ye Crowne.
The Mortmain fayer and Mayraltie
For Hythe this ancient Towne.
And was himself tha Baylye last,
And Mayer fyrsr by name.
Though he bee gone tyme is not past
To preasyse God for ye same."

But the great feature of the church is the so-called crypt and the extraordinary collection of skulls and bones which it contains. Not that it is in reality a crypt, but a part of an ambulatory or procession path. In the days before the Reformation, it was customary, upon great religious and ceremonial occasions, for there to be imposing processions round the church. These, however, must take place on consecrated ground, which was often difficult to arrange, as at the splendid church of St. Peter Mancroft, at Norwich, where the tower is at the limit of the space allowed, and arches have therefore been cut through it on each side for the procession to pass under.

The extreme steepness of the ground on which Hythe church is built, doubtless made the task of providing a processional path not an easy one. If we return to the porch we shall see a doorway on each side, which the flight of steps has rendered on the level of the churchyard. These doors enabled the procession to pass through the porch, and it then proceeded towards the entrance to the eastern crypt, or rather ambulatory, with a door at the north by which it emerged. The ground has altered a good deal, so that it is probable there were steps up to this ambulatory instead of going down somewhat to it as it is at present. When we enter, it is to see an extraordinary sight. For here are stacked on shelves hundreds of human skulls, while on one side is an orderly pile of bones.

What a mute sermon! what a lesson of that future about which we think so little! Many people visit this crypt, and the sight of healthy men and women in such surroundings brings very strikingly to mind the solemn text: " In the midst of life we are in death."

There are skulls and bones of men, women and children, representing some 4,000 persons. Some of the bones show—so authorities

say—that rheumatism was a common occurrence, and some of the teeth of the skulls tell that much harder and more common food was eaten at that time than is now; the bones also show that people were much shorter then they are at the present day. But how did these hundreds of skulls come here?

When churchyards were so small in mediæval days, it was often necessary, after a certain period, to remove the bones from the churchyard in order to make space, and these were reverently placed in crypts or chambers for the purpose, as at Norwich, where a special charnel house was built, and where mass was daily said for the soul of the founder, all the bishops of the see, and for the souls of those whose bones were carried thither. But the crypt at Hythe was not built for the purpose of an ossuary. It is noticeable that the piles of bones are stacked in such a manner that a walking way for processions was left, and this would not have been done if it had only been used as a convenient receptacle for the bones. After the Reformation, when such processions were no longer allowed, the north doorway was closed. It is apparent, therefore, that the bones were placed in position before the Reformation, and it is thought they were put here about the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The large number of these bones has been and still is a matter for much controversy and speculation. At one period it was thought they were the remains of those who had fallen in a great battle between the Britons and Saxons in 456, and that marks on the skulls pointed to wounds received in the fight. This theory has, however, been disposed of, and the marks were probably received when they were exhumed. The idea that the number is accounted for by the Black Death which swept over England has also been placed on one side, and the latest opinion, as far as we can gather it by what has been written on the subject, is that they were exhumed from the churchyard when it was required for more burials. There is, moreover, a very interesting point which, we understand, has not yet been finally settled. Many of the skulls are very different to the average skull of the Englishman of that period. Mr. Parsons thinks the explanation may be due to a special settlement at Hythe of the Vandals, which would account for the peculiarity. But this is by no means a definite statement, and there is, doubtless, a great deal more to be discovered about this difficult question.

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