

LETTERS OF AN ARCHITECT

LETTER I.

JOURNEY TO PARIS.

Paris, 16th April, 1816.

It is a great advantage to me that I can address letters on architecture to a person for whose taste and judgment I have so much esteem, but who at the same time is not an architect. Being obliged to avoid a great many technical phrases and forms of speech, which often serve as a convenient shelter for ignorance or superficial knowledge, I shall find it necessary to study the subject myself more attentively on all those points which can interest a general observer, and to explain myself with more care and precision.

I shall not trouble you with any observations on English ground; and indeed, between London and Paris, the road is so well known, and so often travelled, that it seems almost an impertinence to detain you on it, except to examine the two magnificent cathedrals of Amiens and Beauvais; yet there are some particulars on this frequented track which strike an architect more than they would a general observer.

My bed-room at Calais, with its high ceiling and broad striped paper, was very different from what one finds on your side of the water. The bed is, almost every where in France, placed sideways against the wall. It has head and foot boards, and the square uprights which support them are terminated with a vase, or some such ornament, at least on that side of the bed towards the apartment. Above, a pin with an ornamented head, whose projection from the wall is equal to the width

of the bed, supports a long curtain of white dimity, which falls in a pleasing curve over the head and foot boards, and being of a considerable width, may be drawn forward so as nearly to conceal the bed. This arrangement certainly leaves the room much more at liberty than ours, and looks better; and as it is not considered any impropriety to receive company in a bed-room, these circumstances are of more consequence here than in England; yet they are desirable every where, and the only disadvantage I perceive arises from the necessity of rolling out the bedstead in order to make the bed, an inconvenience apparently very trifling.

There are doubtless some peculiarities in the French towns, but on the whole fewer than I expected: the principal are, perhaps, that the houses are without parapets, and that they have dormer windows,* the front of which is usually upright over the wall of the house, the eaves being sometimes continued across, and sometimes omitted. There is no flat paving for the footpaths, but the streets are not narrower, if so narrow, as in the country towns in England.

Every body knows that the road from Calais to Boulogne is not pleasant. About Boulogne the scenery is much more agreeable, as we pass along a valley adorned with trees and hedges. There is, I am told, a law that all proprietors shall plant the sides of the road which passes by or through their grounds: unfortunately there is no law which compels the trees to grow, and a green stake is thrust into the ground, which may either live or die; if the latter, it is very easy to thrust in another the succeeding year. After passing the town of Samer, about ten miles from Boulogne, we again ascended the chalk hills, and had a most beautiful view, coloured with uncommon richness and splendour, as the landscape faded under the shades of evening; but I believe the charm depended principally on this colouring. We continued our journey through the night, and the next morning at eleven reached Amiens.

You did not, I believe, when in France, see the cathedral of Amiens, but you have heard of it, and of the beauty of its nave. The French say, that to form a perfect cathedral you must unite the front of Rheims, the spire of Chartres, the nave of Amiens, and the choir of Beauvais. The parts would not combine very well, but I hope at a future time

* Windows in the roof.

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to conduct you to all these edifices. The cathedral of Amiens was founded by Bishop Everard, in order to provide a suitable depository for the head of St. John the Baptist and the body of St. Firmin. The former saint, according to Rivoire, (*Description de l'Eglise Cathédrale d'Amiens*, p. 160) was beheaded in the prisons of the castle of Macheronte, or of Sebaste, (i. e. of Samaria). The Emperor Valens endeavoured in vain to transfer the head to Rome. Theodosius, more fortunate, brought it from the village of Cosilaon in Siberia, to enrich Constantinople; but whereabouts this village is situated, or when, or why, or how any part of St. John the Baptist travelled into Siberia, I have not been able to learn. A gentleman of Picardy being present at the assault of Constantinople, on the 12th of April, 1204, found among the ruins of an old building, called the Palace of the Arsenal, two great dishes of silver, in one of which was this head of the Baptist, and in the other that of St. George, as was fully testified by their respective inscriptions. The dishes were large and heavy, and the discoverer was in want of money; he therefore sold them to pay his expenses, reserving, however, two smaller vessels which immediately contained the sacred relics. What became of the head of St. George we are not told, but that of St. John was transported to Amiens, where it arrived on the 17th of December, 1206, the clergy and people going out to receive it. The record of this event bears date in March, 1210. The skull is not entire, the back part being apparently deficient, and there is an oblong hole over the left eye, supposed to have been made by the knife of Herodias.

After such a long account of one relic it would be unfair not to make some mention of the other. The bones of St. Firmin had been discovered some time before the acquisition of the head of St. John the Baptist, by a miraculous ray of light which shone upon the spot where they were buried; and the authenticity of the relic was farther proved, not only by a delightful and healing odour which arose from them, but also by a supernatural warmth which dissolved the snow then upon the ground, made the grass grow, and the trees put forth their leaves, and, in short, turned winter into summer.

I have given you quite enough of these fables, let me now turn to facts better authenticated. An old cathedral was destroyed by fire in 1218. The foundations of the present edifice were laid in 1220, according to the

designs of Robert de Lusarche. Bishop Everard, the founder, died in 1222. The pillars of the choir and nave were completed in 1223; the north transept was erected in 1236, Geoffry d'Eu being bishop. Robert de Lusarche had, probably, died in the interim, as the architects, at the latter period, were Thomas de Courmont, and Renault de Courmont, his son. The vaulting of the nave and side aisles was completed under Arnold, who governed the church of Amiens from 1236 to 1247; at the same time a magnificent stone tower was erected over the centre of the cross. This tower was entirely of open work, it was destroyed by lightning in 1527, and the wooden spire, which at present exists, was erected two years afterwards. The building, exclusive of the side chapels, was completed in 1288, according to an inscription formerly existing on the pavement, now no longer legible. The following dimensions are from Rivoire, (p. 24) reduced to English measure. They are, perhaps, not all of them perfectly exact, but I had not opportunity to examine them minutely, and am not apprehensive of any material

	Feet.	Inch.
Length of the front platform	153	5
Width of the central porch	38	4
Depth of ditto	17	0
Side porches, each in width	20	7
Depth of ditto	14	10
Width of each pier between the porches	9	7
Whole length of the front	160	0
From the portal to the gate of the choir	234	6
Length of the choir	138	6
From the choir to the chapel at the end of the rond point	19	2
Length of this chapel	50	1
Whole length internally	442	3
Ditto, externally	479	5
Width of the nave between the piers	45	6
From one chapel of the aisle to the opposite chapel	104	5
Length of the transept	194	0
Breadth of ditto	45	7
Height from the bottom of the piers to the summit of the vaulting	140	8

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	Feet.	Inch.
The pavement to the springing of the arches	45	4
Thence to the moulding under the galleries	24	2
Thence to the frieze*	21	3
Thence to the vault	51	1
Height of the side aisles	64	0
Distance between the piers	17	0
Height of the spire from the ridge of the roof, including the cock	} 214	2†
From the pavement	422	0
Slope of the roof	53	3
Perpendicular height of roof	46	10
Height of the choir	137	5
Breadth of ditto	45	6
Height of the aisles and side chapels	64	8
Lateral width of the chapels	28	9
Depth of ditto	28	10
Circumference of the dial of the clock	102	3
Diameter of ditto	34	1
Height of the figures	2	0
Distance which separates them	7	5
Height of the north tower	223	8
Height of the south tower	205	0
Number of steps to the top of the highest tower	306	0

Having thus given you a sketch of the principal dates and dimensions of this magnificent edifice, I will endeavour to give you some idea of its present appearance. A detailed account of all the parts would require a residence of some weeks on the spot, but my object is rather to communicate the impression produced on the mind of the observer, and to point out the leading sources of that impression, than to enter into minutiae. The distant view exhibits a great square mass of building, a little varied by the slightly superior elevation of one of the western towers, and by a very slender spire or pinnacle of wood rising from the

* I do not understand what is here meant by the frieze, and there appears to be some error, since the sum of the heights, of the parts, is made rather to exceed the whole height.

† Rivoire gives his dimensions in feet and in metres, which in this instance do not agree. I have, throughout, followed the metres.

centre to twice the general height. The ridge of the roof of York Minster is 112 feet from the pavement. That of Salisbury Cathedral, 115 feet; St. Paul's at London, 112; Westminster Abbey, 140; the cathedral at Amiens, 208 feet. This comparison may help you to form some idea of the appearance of the last mentioned edifice, towering above the houses of a provincial city. What was the design of the original central spire of open work in stone, and what was its height, it would be curious to determine. Central towers of that date in England seem to have been low and heavy, and if that of Norwich Cathedral be cited to the contrary, still it does not at all help us to form a judgment of what a spire of *open work* would have been. The spire and the upper part of the tower at Salisbury are thought to be of a more modern date. The highest western tower is surmounted by one of those steep roofs which still seem to have something attractive to French eyes, but which to mine are absolute deformities. On approaching the edifice, the richness of the western front is very striking. There is a certain similarity in the disposition of this part in all the French churches of the thirteenth century. The cathedrals of Amiens, of Nôtre Dame at Paris, and at Rheims, are distinguished from our English buildings by nearly the same particulars, though they differ much from each other. They assume in this part more of a pyramidal form; the space between the western towers is proportionally smaller than with us. The doorways are much larger; a rose or marigold window is placed over the central opening, and above that is one or more ranges of niches, with statues nearly hiding the triangular gable end of the nave. Sometimes one, or even two ranges of niches occur below the marigold window, as is the case in the example before us. Sometimes the window is between two ranges of niches, and in some instances there are two rose windows. These windows and niches form the elements of the composition, but the arrangement varies in almost every edifice. The division immediately above the porch at Amiens is marked by a range of twenty-two niches, containing as many statues, which are supposed to represent the kings of France, from Charlemagne to Philip Augustus; the latter died in 1223, and this coincidence of his death with the æra of the building seems to have been used by the modern antiquaries in assigning names to the statues. The profusion of ornament in this front is not without its effect, but we endeavour in vain to trace any simple principle of arrangement,

and a certain degree of confusion diminishes the pleasure which would otherwise be felt. This objection is applicable more or less to the external of all Gothic buildings, and the more the parts are multiplied the more obvious it becomes: yet it is not a style of architecture which can succeed without a considerable proportion of ornament, and perhaps even of intricacy. On the inside of a Gothic edifice of the best periods, although the parts are numerous, yet they all seem to arise from the mode of construction, and to follow each other so naturally, that the eye and mind are led from one to the other through the whole system. With the outside the case is otherwise; the form of no one part seems to depend on that below it, but each might as well be surmounted by something different as by that which really succeeds it. The ranges of arches in these fronts have the effect of dividing the height of the composition into horizontal bands, and there can be no doubt that in the pointed architecture, the perpendicular lines should prevail over the horizontal. I think that in the present instance these horizontal lines are less striking in the building than in the usual engravings, perhaps because in reality we have no point of view sufficiently distant to permit the eye to embrace the whole composition.

I have a few more words to say on the outside of this cathedral. The two towers are of unequal height; the seat of the archbishop alone, according to my usual guide, Rivoire,* was distinguished by two equal towers, as is the case at Paris and at Rheims. In Turkey the privilege of more than one tower is still restricted to the royal mosques, but I believe it is altogether the fancy of this author that any similar regulation existed for the forms of Christian churches.

There are three doorways. This disposition, which is sometimes observable in our cathedrals, is very general in the larger religious edifices of France. The middle, says Rivoire, was for the clergy, that on the right for the men, that on the left for the women. The middle door at Amiens is called that of the Saviour, because his image adorns the pilaster at the meeting of the two leaves of the door, which here, and very commonly elsewhere in France, divides the doorway into two parts. The two sides, and the parts above, present a very elaborate composition, representing, as is supposed, the Last Judgment. Mr. Rigollot, a member of the Academy of Amiens, imagines that he traces in it the preva-

* Page 42.

lence of the superstitions of Sabeism, and has given a description wherein he corrects some errors and inaccuracies of Rivoire; and a very ingenious, and I think in general satisfactory, elucidation of his own opinion. The right, or southern doorway is called that of the Mother of God, the image of the Virgin Mary being in a similar manner placed in the middle. That on the north is distinguished by the statue and name of St. Firmin, to whom the cathedral is dedicated. The latter doorway is farther remarkable by the twelve signs of the zodiac, which are sculptured on it, with the rural labours of the corresponding months of the year. It exhibits also fourteen figures of saints, of which St. Firmin and St. Dionysius are represented carrying their heads in their hands. Was it not St. Severinus who not only took his head in his hand after he had been decapitated, but actually walked with it to the altar, and participated in the holy communion?

On entering the church one is immediately struck by a fine appearance of space and airiness. This is partly owing to the great dimensions; the nave is 10 feet wider, and above 50 feet higher than that of Salisbury Cathedral. The side aisles at Salisbury are only 38 feet high. Those at Amiens are 64; and this I have no doubt also contributes greatly to the impression of superior magnificence. In length the French cathedrals are generally inferior to ours, but they are without screens, and the whole extent presents itself at once to the eye of the spectator. A range of side chapels, corresponding with the divisions of the side aisles, is also a noble feature which we have not in any English building, or have it only very imperfectly in Chichester Cathedral.

These dimensions and comparisons may perhaps assist your imagination in forming an idea of the building, but it is impossible to communicate the feelings produced by the first view of its interior. It not only far surpassed my expectations, but possessed a character and expression quite new to me. In our English cathedrals the eye is confined to one avenue, and the sublime effect is nearly limited to the view along it. Here the sight seems to penetrate in all directions, and to obtain a number of views, all indeed subordinate to the principal one, but all beautiful, and offering, by the different position of the parts with regard to the spectator, the greatest variety. I sat down for some time to enjoy this sublime scene, and then paced slowly up the nave, as far as the intersection of the cross, where my attention was arrested by the beautiful

rose window at each end of the transept. Without seeing them one can form no idea of how much beauty a rose window is capable; the splendid colouring of the glass, glowing among the rich tracery, has a brilliancy and magnificence for which I can cite to you no parallel in England.

On the rise of the Italian school of architecture the preceding style, which then received the appellation of Gothic, was reproached as heavy, dark, gloomy, and void of simplicity. Nothing can be more unjust than this censure. In its interiors, on the contrary, it offers the greatest simplicity and harmony; not entirely free from defects, and occasionally exhibiting traces of the rude age in which it flourished, but bearing these as slight blemishes on a beautiful face. It is extremely light, as opposed to heavy, for no style of building performs, or appears to perform so much with so little material; and the blaze of daylight from its numerous and spacious windows is insufferable, when not corrected by the deeply coloured glass, and even by its coarse joinings. These rose windows, brilliant as they are when seen from below, I found, on nearer inspection, to be divided by very wide strips of lead, and these again had collected about them a quantity of dust, which still farther obscured the light, but all this was lost in the general splendour of the effect as seen from below. These two large roses of the transept open into a square space underneath them, so that, strictly speaking, they are not rose windows, but merely rose-headed. The circle, however, occupies so large a portion, and the remainder is comparatively so insignificant, that we must be permitted to call them rose windows. That of the nave comprises only the circle. The design of the tracery is, probably, somewhat later than that of the building; at least, in England we should attribute it nearly to the middle of the fourteenth century, here we know enough of the building to assign it with confidence to the thirteenth. Those of the transept I judge to be later still, chiefly on account of their union with the window below. The western rose has become internally the dial of the clock; the figures denoting the hours are more than seven feet apart, and the hour hand moves nearly an inch and a half in a minute. In that of the northern transept we find the pentalpha, a form to which some persons imagine a mysterious meaning to be attached. The same arrangement which prevails in the nave is continued in the choir, only the outer aisle being no longer divided into chapels, there is a double side aisle continued from the transept to the polygonal end of the building; to this

part chapels are again attached, presenting five sides of an octagon. The ladies' chapel, in the centre, is lengthened, but terminates in the same manner.

In the French Gothic there is no moulding along the ridges of the vault, except, and that rarely, in some of the latest edifices. This moulding, in drawings of English buildings, is generally represented as a straight line, but does, in fact, usually form a crooked one, descending to the direct arch, and rising to the intersection of the groins. In the French buildings this mode of construction is much more evident than with us, the intersection of the groins being always considerably higher than the point of the direct arch, and sometimes so much so, for instance, in the church of St. Germain des Près, in Paris, as to form almost a portion of a dome. In some of the late Gothic examples I think I have seen exactly the reverse take place, and the point of the direct arch made the highest in the vaulting.

It is totally impossible that any style of building should be peculiarly calculated for a particular set of opinions. Some Protestant writers attribute to Gothic architecture a mysterious connexion with the Roman Catholic religion, and, indeed, seem to think that all magnificent churches have a tendency to support that system. Such an opinion does not deserve consideration, but it is certainly true, that some buildings are calculated to excite emotions favourable to religious impressions, to produce a serious frame of mind, and one in which we are more inclined to acknowledge the present existence of superior power, and more ready to submit to the influence of this conviction. Such means of excitement are liable to abuse, and no person can remain long in these edifices, and observe what passes before him, without being made sensible of the power they possess by the degree to which it is abused. But as this abuse is by no means a necessary attendant on the use, it is not a fair argument against it. Mankind in general, at least in France and England, are dull and sluggish in the affairs of religion; they find it difficult to detach their thoughts sufficiently from worldly affairs. It is desirable, therefore, that every help should be given them, for in this, as in every other good object, human means are to be used, when they are put within our reach. A place of worship should, therefore, in the first place, possess in its style and decoration, a decidedly different appearance from a common dwelling-house: this tends to break the associations with