

## PLEA FOR ENGLISH GOTHIC

BY HERBERT BAKER.

In our June issue we published a letter with the heading, "Plea for English Gothic," which had appeared in a contemporary under the signature of Edward W. Hudson, Asso. Royal Inst. British Archts., New York. The subject is of such educative interest that we are not surprised that an exceedingly interesting controversy is likely to result. The following valuable letter has been received to begin with. [Ed. T.A.A.]

Sir,—Mr. Hudson's advocacy of the Gothic style for the architectural needs of South Africa is of so much interest that I trust you will encourage further discussion. He has written on the subject to several South African papers, but his best letter, it appeared to me, was to the "Natal Mercury," reproduced in the "Star" of June 1st. This letter, unlike the others, seemed to confine his plea—and wisely, I think—to ecclesiastical architecture. There is much to be said for his contention, if he would thus limit it to our church buildings, and if we could widen the definition of Gothic architecture to include all those forms of developed Romanesque or half-Gothic that were created in the south and centre of Europe *pari passu* with the growth of the purer Gothic in the north. Sympathy will be generally felt with any endeavour to impress on a new colony the stamp of the national characteristics of the architecture of the Mother Country; but a blind and pedantic attempt to achieve this end would only defeat its object; for the impress must be of the spirit, and not of the outward form only. The vitality and adaptability of the parent nation must be expressed in its children's architecture.

### Primitive Gothic

It is true that there is much in the earlier and more primitive Gothic of England which may be adaptable to South Africa. But the examples which are of most value for adaptation are to be found in the less fully developed forms, built when architecture was being slowly evolved from the Norman-Romanesque in the simpler churches, and the semi-fortified castles and monasteries. A pointed arch in itself does not alone constitute Gothic architecture. The ideal of the builders of Amiens, Westminster, and Cologne was to rear a framework of stone, filled in with glass. They built "in light itself," as has been well said. Such buildings would be intolerable in the glaring sunlight of the Transvaal. Without these wide-spreading windows, and the peculiar construction they demand, the meaning and charm of the characteristic features of Gothic architecture—the flying buttress, the pinnacles, the higher form of tracery, and continuous masses of stained glass—must, to a great extent, disappear. York Minster can measure its glass by acres. Its east windows, and those of Gloucester Cathedral, have each an area of about 2,500 superficial feet. Try and realise the blinding effect of such windows exposed to a South African sun!

### Ruskin Quoted

Mr. Hudson gives an interesting quotation from Ruskin. Ruskin sang the praise of the purer forms of Northern Gothic, with its huge windows, and of the Romanesque, Byzantine, and the so-called Gothic of

Northern Italy. But the Venetian Gothic, which he especially idolised, is not really, in its essential feature, Gothic at all. Its style may be suited to South African needs; but then its use, according to Mr. Hudson, would be "impolitic and unpatriotic."

But the best answer lies in the unanimity of critics that the attempt to introduce pure Northern Gothic into Italy in the fourteenth century was a failure: at least it failed in so far as the more essential features of Gothic were attempted. The cause of the failure was due as much to the unsuitability of the style to the climate as to the dominance of classical tradition amongst the Italians.

Ruskin was a poet and prophet, and we architects cannot go to him for inspiration too often, but we must always remember that his one great attempt at practical architecture—the Museum at Oxford—was a dismal failure.

### Norman Shaw's Church

Mr. Hudson's reference to Norman Shaw's church near Port Elizabeth is an exception which proves the rule against himself. In the original design for this church the external windows of the north elevation were entirely covered by lattice screens, showing how this great master instinctively felt that Gothic architecture required modification to suit the bright climate of South Africa. Emerson, too, the introducer of Gothic into India (whom Mr. Hudson also refers to), if we may judge by his last design—the Coronation Memorial Buildings—seems to have at last repented of his error.

But I, for one, am not in favour of throwing overboard all our national traditions in church architecture. I feel, however, that the more sincerely we architects set about our work, the more nearly we shall find ourselves unconsciously approaching the forms of the Romanesque rather than those of the more highly-developed Gothic style.

### Mr. Rhodes' Ideals

I cannot think where Mr. Hudson got his odd notions of the architectural ideals and intentions of Cecil Rhodes. I do not remember hearing Rhodes ever mention the word "style." His favourite buildings were certainly those which were not conspicuous for any definite style. He had truer instincts, and seemed to feel for the great elemental principles underlying great architecture, rather than the superficial and accidental shapings, which give names to the different styles. He thought that the Cape homestead embodied right principles for homely domestic buildings; and that the classic simplicity and bigness of Greek and Roman architecture met the more monumental demands of the vast and rugged landscape of South Africa. And so, perhaps, for all of us architects, the less we think of styles, the better for our craft. We cannot ignore tradition; we must be scholarly, "soaked in the old masters," as Reynolds told the first Academy students; then there is hope that hard and sincere work, gentlemanliness, and good craftsmanship, may produce results creditable both to our old and adopted country.—I am, etc.,

HERBERT BAKER.