

NOTES ON THE PRIORY OF SAINT MARY, AT PILTON.

BY

TOWNSHEND M. HALL, F.G.S.

*[Reprinted from the Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the
Advancement of Science, Literature, and Art. 1867.]*

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THE Priory at Pilton appears to have been in former times one of the most important, as well as one of the most ancient, ecclesiastical establishments in the neighbourhood of Barnstaple, and a few notes on its history may, therefore, be of some little interest to the members of this Association.

History and tradition are so much intermixed that it is always more or less difficult to separate between them, and to fix with any degree of certainty the date of the foundation of any building which lays claim to great antiquity. The assertions of Leland, Speed, and other historians, that Pilton Priory was founded by king Athelstan, might almost, therefore, be looked upon with distrust, were it not for the strong and independent testimony afforded us by the official seal of the Priory, impressions of which are still in existence. This seal bears on one side the image of the Virgin Mary, to whom the Priory was dedicated, and on the other is a figure of a man wearing a crown, and carrying in his right hand a sceptre, whilst the orb, another symbol of sovereignty, is borne in his left hand. That this figure is intended to represent king Athelstan is proved beyond doubt by the inscription which surrounds it:—

“HOC · ATHELSTANUS · AGO · QUOD · PRESENS · SIGNAT · IMAGO.”

The Priory belonged to the Benedictines, one of the most powerful orders of monks, who, even as early as the year 1354, are said to have possessed 37,000 monasteries in different parts of Europe, and could boast of having numbered amongst their followers no less than 24 popes, 200 cardinals, 7,000 archbishops, and 15,000 bishops. The monks are described as wearing a long black robe, with a hood or cowl of the same colour; and hence they were frequently styled the “black monks.” It was usually the custom for a priory to be de-

pendent upon some abbey, and to be subject in a certain degree to its jurisdiction. That at Pilton is mentioned by Leland as forming a cell, or appendage, to the Abbey of Malmesbury, in Wiltshire; and the records of this priory show, that on two occasions priors of Pilton were thought worthy of being selected to fill the high and responsible position of abbots of Malmesbury, which then ranked as the principal Benedictine establishment in England.

One of the most interesting relics connected with the Priory at present in existence, and one which belongs to a very early period in its history, is now in the possession of John R. Chanter, Esq., vice-president of the Association. It is a ring of gold found a few years ago in the neighbourhood, and which is supposed to have belonged to the prior. It bears two inscriptions: that on the back or inside of the ring is in Latin,

“NOBISCVM · SIT · IHESV · ADONAL.”

Whilst the front bears an inscription to the same effect in ancient Hebrew:

אל אלהים יהוה ישו יהי עמנו

In the centre is a large sapphire, fastened, for the sake of additional security, with a pin or rivet of gold, which passes through a hole drilled in the stone. I believe this ring has been pronounced by a good authority at the British Museum to date about the early part of the tenth century.

A list of the priors of Pilton was collected from different documents by the late Dr. Oliver of Exeter, and was published in his *Monasticon*. It begins, however, only with the year 1200, or nearly three centuries after the Priory was founded. Most of Dr. Oliver's data were taken from the scattered entries contained in the registers of Bronescombe, Stapledon, Grandisson, Lacy, and other bishops of Exeter; for none of the actual records of the monks are known to exist. They were probably destroyed at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries.

Until the middle of the 15th century, the town of Pilton was separated from Barnstaple by an almost impassable marsh, and no direct communication could be carried on between the two places except by a dangerous ford, which could only be crossed at low water. Pilton, therefore, had to maintain a kind of separate independence, and had its own special market days and fairs. The monks, however, are supposed to have possessed a private means of holding com-

munication with this town. Tradition says that an underground passage still exists between Bull-house, which is close to Pilton church, and the Rack-field in Barnstaple, on which stood the Barnstaple Priory. No attempt has, I believe, ever been made to ascertain the truth of the tradition; although in 1819 a subterranean passage was discovered in making the tan-yard at the end of Pilton bridge, it was never explored, and as recently as 30 or 40 years ago the supposed entrance under Bull-house was still to be seen choked up with rubbish.

I should add that Bull-house was formerly an ecclesiastical establishment where papal indulgences were sold. The house evidently derived its name from the *Bulla*, or seal, attached to these documents, some of which, for the same reason, are known at the present day by the name of the Pope's Bulls.

The landed property of the Pilton Priory was not extensive, whilst the monks of Barnstaple possessed, on the other hand, several valuable estates at Puntynghdon (now called Pottingdon), Bradford, Yernewood, and other places on the Pilton side of the river. This fact led to several disputes between the two communities about their respective boundaries, and the contest was not finally settled until 1435, when Bishop Lacy being on a visitation at Pilton, it was agreed to lay the matter before him, and to leave it to him to decide which of the two parties was in the wrong. We are told that the bishop examined sixteen witnesses, and, after taking nearly three months to consider the subject, he gave judgment in favour of the monks of Pilton, and confirmed their ancient boundaries. The historian further adds, that the worthy bishop, in his generosity, presented ten marks to each of the priories, "to keep them in good humour with each other." This, perhaps, was not altogether an unnecessary expedient on the part of the bishop; for the two priories were to a certain degree rivals, the priory of St. Mary Magdelene at Barnstaple being not only of a comparatively recent foundation, but it was also an alien establishment, belonging to a different order of monks, dependent upon the abbey of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, at Paris; its estates were therefore liable to confiscation whenever war broke out with France.

At the time of the suppression of religious houses, by Henry VIII. Pilton Priory was inhabited by only three monks besides the prior. The latter (John Ross by name), subscribed to the king's supremacy on the third of September, 1533, and to this deed was attached the splendid seal of king Athelstan, which I have before noticed. The revenue of the establishment at the time of its dissolution, amounted to £56

12s. 8d. The "temporal" possessions (such as the manor, &c.,) being returned as yielding £22 18s. 8d., and the "spiritual" possessions, which consisted principally of tythes and oblations, amounted to £33 14s. Of these a few items are worthy of notice, as showing the customs of that period:—

| | s. | d. |
|--|--------|------|
| Exitus decimarum lane (tythe of wool)..... | xxx. | — |
| „ agnellorum (of lambs) | xxj. | — |
| „ vitullorum (of calves) | vj. | ij. |
| „ porcellorum (of pigs) | ij. | vj. |
| „ porri (of leeks) | — | xx. |
| „ le hympe (hemp) | — | ij. |
| „ pomorum (of apples) | — | xx. |
| „ feni (of hay)..... | xxii. | iii. |
| „ oblacionibus | xxxij. | — |

The actual history of the priory would naturally terminate with the expulsion of the monks in the year 1533, when the building and adjoining estates were leased by the king. The principal part of the monastic buildings were, no doubt, destroyed, either at this period or shortly afterwards. The church and adjoining chapelries appear to have undergone but little alteration until the civil war, when the tower was partially demolished, and all the northern and eastern parts were laid in ruins. It has been popularly supposed that this work of demolition was carried on by the soldiers of Fairfax during the time they were entrenched at Fort-hill, which is situated on the other side of Barnstaple, and that Pilton Tower was cannonaded by them, "merely because it happened to stand a conspicuous mark within range of their shot."* Fort-hill is nearly one mile in a straight line from the church, and I believe that no cannon balls have ever been found in this neighbourhood of a weight exceeding 5lbs. Considering also the imperfection of the artillery of that period, I think it very doubtful that any amount of cannonading would, at that distance, have sufficed to knock down walls of such thickness. It is well known that Barnstaple was re-taken by the Royalists after its first capture by the Cromwellians, and it was one of the last places which remained faithful to the king. The Roundheads, however, after they had taken possession of Exeter in 1646, again came back to Barnstaple, and the Royalist garrison held out till the 10th of April in that year, when they were obliged to surrender. As Pilton Tower overlooked the Castle of Barnstaple, it would most likely be destroyed by the victorious Cromwellians at the close of the contest, in order to prevent the possibility of such a

* Memorials of Barnstaple, page 461.

commanding situation being occupied by a hostile force, should any future disturbances occur.

Amidst the general wreck of the church the parish registers fortunately escaped destruction; they commence with the year 1569, and in some of the very first entries made after the partial demolition of the church, we can trace the commencement of the plague, which lasted for ten months, and carried off about 300 persons in Pilton, and five times that number in Barnstaple. The tower was rebuilt fifty years afterwards, but all the ruins of the north and east parts of the church have been removed. Rows of dripstones on two sides of the tower still remain, to show the original height of the buildings; and the north wall of the church bears also marks of having formerly had a series of cloisters attached to it.

The principal objects of interest contained in the church at present, are a pulpit of stone, with an iron arm attached to it for the purpose of holding an hour glass; the font, surmounted by a singular carved canopy; two oak screens and monuments to the memory of the ancient family of Chichester (one of which contains six life-sized effigies). There are also three monumental inscriptions of considerable antiquity. The oldest of these, in Latin, requests the reader to pray for the soul of Richard Chichester, who died in December, 1498. The others are brasses bearing date 1536 and 1540 respectively; but as I have already described them in the Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries,* I will not trespass upon your time by alluding to them further.

* Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians, vol. iii., page 320.