

## Inaugural Address.

MY first duty to day is to thank you for the honour you have been pleased to confer upon me by electing me as President of your Society : an honour which I highly value, both on account of the kind feeling which it evinces on your part towards me, and because of the opportunity it affords me of profiting still more by the observations and labours of the many learned archæologists, naturalists, and geologists, who have devoted no small portion of their time and talents to subjects connected with this county.

I have in the second place a very pleasing duty to perform in thanking the Mayor of Bridgwater for his kind invitation, and for the generous hospitality he has offered to the Society on the

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occasion of this our Annual Meeting. I can assure him that his kindness is fully appreciated by every Member of the Society; and I trust that our visit, which cannot be other than most gratifying to ourselves, will also prove interesting to the town over which he presides.

It is my duty, in the third place, to address you on some subject connected with the county of Somerset—and more especially with the town and neighbourhood where we are now assembled. An objection is sometimes raised against local societies, like ours, that their scope is too limited: that the objects of archæological, or geological, or historical interest which can be found in a single county are necessarily few, and that consequently, however warmly the work may be entered upon at first, such societies are ultimately doomed to failure, and must die out from want of fresh objects of interest. But there is a fallacy in this argument. All branches of science undoubtedly require wide views—but wide views can only be of value when they are based on the exact knowledge of individual facts; and it is above all the special province of local labourers and local societies accurately to ascertain those facts. As regards our county of Somerset, many long years must elapse before all the local facts of history, of geology, and of the natural history connected with it shall have been worked out. Much remains to be ascertained regarding the state of this portion of Britain in Roman and British times. And as regards a later period, Somerset possesses, as yet, no such work as Wiltshire does in the admirable publication of Rev. Mr. Jones's *Domesday for Wiltshire*. Whenever such a work appears, it will be seen what a large number, not only of villages, but of farms in the neighbourhood of Bridgwater, have preserved their names unchanged from times anterior to the Norman Conquest.

The name itself, of Bridgwater, is a subject of some interest. In Latin documents of the 16th or 17th century I find it mentioned as *Aquæ-Pons*, which is a literal translation of Bridgwater; but even then I have found the suggestion advanced that

the original name of the town may in reality have been Bridge-Walter, or even Byrge-Walter—the bridge or the town of Walter. The late Mr. Hugo, of our Society, in his admirable work entitled "*Medieval Nunneries of the County of Somerset*," has produced two documents, one dated A.D. 1331, and the other 1468, in which the town is distinctly called Brugge-walter and Bryg-Walter.<sup>1</sup> I think there can be no doubt that this is the real origin of the name. We find in Domesday that Walter de Douay was the owner of many possessions in this neighbourhood. He held Wembdon, and Bawdrip, and Horsey, and Paulet, and Burnham, and Huntspill, and Brean, and with these he held *Brugie*, or Bridge, with 30 acres of pasture land, and 100 acres of brushwood, "*silvae minutae*," such as then abounded in the marsh lands of Somerset. There can be no doubt that "*Brugie*" is Bridgwater, called up to that period simply Brydge, but afterwards receiving from its owner, Walter de Douay, the additional name of Bridge-Walter (just as we have Sampford-Arundel, Norton-Fitzwarren, Staple-Fitzpaine, and many others), to distinguish it, probably, from another bridge further up the Parret, called Borough Bridge, to which I shall refer later.

In a paper which I had the honour some years ago of reading before this Society, I have shown my reasons for believing that Bridgwater was not improbably the town or fort wherein the Danes took refuge after the defeat they sustained from Alfred (A.D. 878) at Ethandune—which I believe to be Edington on Polden Hill, and not Eddington in Wilts. On the present occasion I propose to say something concerning another spot in this neighbourhood, the name of which is closely connected with the interesting events of that same period. I refer to the Isle of Athelney, which, according to the Programme, we shall visit to-morrow. Athelney is known 1st, as the hiding-place of King Alfred; 2nd, as the fort whence he assailed the Danes; 3rd, as the spot where he erected a monastery in gratitude to God for

(1). Cannington, p. 127. Ibid, 134.

his victory. My observations will bear reference to Athelney under each of these different aspects.

The name, Athelney, implies "Noble Island ;" and is said to have been applied to the island in consequence of Alfred having for a considerable length of time concealed himself there from the Danes. But in Asser, the Chronicle, Domesday, and all the more ancient authorities, the island is uniformly styled *Æthelingsæg* (*eg* or *igg*), which signifies Island of the *Ethelings*, in the plural number: that is to say, either Isle of *the Nobles*, or of the *Royal Children*—for these, and not the King himself, bore the name of *Ethelings*. From them, therefore, rather than from Alfred, the name of the island would seem to have originated. In fact, not only is there no reason to believe that Alfred for any considerable length of time lay concealed at Athelney, but such a notion (widely as it is spread) is in contradiction to undoubted historical facts.

The Danes captured Chippenham, and then rode over and subdued the country on the 6th January, 878. Alfred raised a work at Athelney, whence he assailed the Danes at Easter of that same year, which fell on the 23rd of March. A period of exactly eleven weeks intervenes between these two dates, and this, therefore, is the utmost length of time during which Alfred *could* possibly have remained concealed, even if we suppose him to have remained inactive during the whole of the period which elapsed previously to his raising a fort at *Æthelney*. But is it true that Alfred hid himself, and forsook his post in the hour of his country's greatest need? Far from it! Though the people were panic-stricken by the sudden inroad of the Danes, Alfred never lost courage or despaired of his country. "The Danes," says the writer of the Chronicle, "rode over the country and subdued it to their will, *all but Alfred the King*. He," continues the chronicler, "with a small band, uneasily sought the fastnesses of the moors." "He led a wandering life," writes Asser, "amongst the marshes and forests of Somerset, in great hardships, for he had nothing to support himself and

his followers, except what he captured during his inroads on the Danes."

Three things are clear from these passages. 1st. If during those eleven weeks Alfred led a wandering life, he cannot for any considerable period of time have lain concealed, either at Athelney or anywhere else. 2nd. If he had with him all along a small band of faithful followers, it cannot be true that he had forsaken his people. 3rd. As he constantly assailed the Danes, they must have known in what part of the country he was, though they were ignorant of the exact spot.

Alfred, therefore, did not for any considerable space of time lie concealed, either at Athelney or elsewhere.

But besides providing for his own safety, and for that of his followers, he had another anxious duty to perform in providing for the safety of his wife and children (of whom he had at that time at least four, all young). They were unable to follow him in his wanderings; and he feared for them, not only the cruelty of the Danes, but the treachery of spies and false men. For them, therefore, he provided a refuge and hiding place in the cottage of one of his herdsmen in the Isle of Athelney. He was never far from them in his wanderings, and he visited them at intervals during those eleven weeks, but *always alone*, for he revealed the secret of their hiding place to no man. And so it is true what the old writer of the life of St. Neot says, that there were times during those weeks when even his most trusted followers knew not whither he had gone. In this sense only is it true that Athelney was used as a place of concealment by Alfred; and it seems most probable that from the circumstance of the island having given shelter to the royal children, it received the name of *Ætheling-aeg*, or Island of the *Æthelings*.

I must not, however, omit to notice that the circumstance recorded by Asser and Ethelward, of Alfred having permitted none but nobles to accompany him when he proceeded to fortify Athelney, and made it the centre of his daily attacks on the

Danes, is not improbably another reason why it received that name.

Let us now see what Alfred did at Athelney, as soon as the return of spring allowed him to try his fortune in the field. "This same year (878)," writes Asser, "after Easter, King Alfred, with a few assistants, built a fort in the place called *Ætheling-aeg*, and from that same fort he, with the nobles of the vale of Somerset, unceasingly, and indefatigably, waged war against the Pagans." "At Easter of this year," the Chronicle says, "King Aelfred, with his little force, raised a fort at *Ætheling-aig*, and from that fort he, together with the men of Somerset that were nearest thereto, waged war against the army."

Now the first conclusion to be drawn from the passage just quoted is this : that the Danes were in force somewhere in the neighbourhood of Athelney, otherwise Alfred could not have constantly assailed them from his fort. We further gather from the Chronicle, that this Danish force was no other than that which the said Chronicle throughout this narrative uniformly describes as *the Army*, viz., the forces led by Gothrum, which captured Chippenham in January, and then rode over the country and subdued it ; and the same which was ultimately vanquished by Alfred at Ethandune. Gothrum, therefore, with his army, had, by Easter, left Chippenham, and had marched towards the Bristol Channel, or the Severn Sea, and had occupied a position not far from Athelney. It must have been on this occasion that the Danes (as William of Malmesbury relates) burned Glastonbury. Gothrum's object in this move was, apparently, that he might act in concert with another Danish force which had come over from Wales, under the leadership of Ubba, so as to crush Alfred (who was known to be somewhere in the marshes) between their two armies. This auxiliary force had received a severe check, and had lost its leader and many men on landing, near a place called Kinwit, which I identify as Cannington Park. The remainder joined Gothrum, who, with these united forces, was now preparing to avenge the death of Ubba, and complete the

conquest of Wessex. This was the enemy against which Alfred had to contend. They were encamped not far from Athelney, and not far from the coast, and therefore not far from the spot where we are now assembled.

Alfred began operations against this army by raising a work at Athelney. What was his object in choosing this spot? and what was the nature of the work he raised there? The whole aspect of the country has greatly changed since the days of Alfred, but with the assistance of a map which I have prepared for the purpose, and aided by the descriptions of the place which have been handed down to us by ancient writers, I trust to make clear to you the nature and object of Alfred's work. Many of you have probably seen during the past winter the desolate aspect which the country between Bridgwater, Taunton, and Langport presented during the floods, which reduced many thousands of acres of lands to a vast lake. Those floods were caused, 1st, by the insufficiency of the outlet for the great quantity of water brought down by the rivers, swollen by the winter rains; and, 2nd, by the bursting or breaking down of several artificial embankments, which had been raised in modern times to facilitate the drainage of the land, and protect from inundation large tracts of country, the level of which is below that of the sea. Now if you reflect that a thousand years ago none of these embankments had been raised, and that, moreover, the great Sedgmoor drain, which empties itself at Dunball, had then no existence; that the River Carey emptied itself into the Parret above Borough Bridge, and that therefore the bed of the River Parret was the only outlet for all the rivers, and marshes, and floods of the valley, you will see that the inundations which we witnessed last winter must fairly represent what was the ordinary condition of the country each winter in the days of Alfred. In summer the aspect was different from anything we see in our times. The low land near Bridgwater, and towards the sea—which even now bears the name of the *levels*—is sufficiently elevated to be free from floods, even in winter; but as



we proceed inland the land becomes more depressed, so that even after the winter floods had passed away large tracts of country remained occupied by a lake, which rose and fell with the tide (Sedge-mere, a sea-lake), and partly by peat beds and marshes, and swampy land, covered with brushwood and alders, which gave shelter to vast herds of deer and game of various kinds. In the midst of these lakes and marshes rises a long tract of elevated land. This was known as Zoyland, the island; or Middlezoy, the centre island. At its western extremity is the village called, from its position, Weston Zoyland, or Weston on the Island; just as we have Weston-super-Mare, Weston in Gordano, and many other Westons throughout the county. This tract of land was during the winter truly an island, surrounded on all sides by water: but in summer, as the floods subsided, the water retreated from its western extremity, leaving it connected by a wide tract of low pasture land with the Flats near Bridgwater. The eastern extremity still remained surrounded by lake and marshes. There was another smaller island in the valley, called Chedzoy, which in like manner seems to have been an island only during the winter. And besides these two there was a third, viz., the island *Ætheling-aegg*, or *Athelney*, the position and extent of which I must now describe.

William of Malmesbury, who saw the island in the 12th century, scarcely 300 years after the days of Alfred, thus writes concerning it (*De Gestis Pont. Angl.*):—"Aedeling-a-g is an island, surrounded, not by the sea, but by fens and overflowing marshes, so as to be altogether inaccessible, except by means of boats. On this island is a forest of alders of vast extent, giving shelter to stags and roebucks, and many other kinds of game. Of dry land there are barely two acres. There is a small monastery, with offices for the monks."

We have, moreover, the description of the place given by Asser, who visited it in the lifetime of King Alfred:—"Alfred," he says, "built a monastery for monks in the place called *Aetheling-aeg*, which is surrounded on all sides by water and by



river Brue

Sedgemoor  
Lake

vast and impassable peat bogs. Access can be had to it only by causeways, or by a single bridge, built and lengthened out with great labour between two elevated forts. Towards the western extremity of this bridge a fort of very great strength and most beautiful construction has been raised by the King."

You will find it difficult to trace any resemblance whatever between the *Ætheling*-egg, described by these eye-witnesses, and the Isle of Athelney of our days. Not only have monastery, monks' offices, and church, vanished, and with them the two forts, the far-stretching bridge, and the forests of alders, but the island itself seems to have all but faded away. The small hill which rises out of the plain close to the village of East Ling (a corruption, no doubt, of *Ætheling*), and which bears the name of the Isle of Athelney, would only give room for the church and convent, and the few acres of pasture land. There are peat-beds at the far side of the Parret, about a mile distant, and we may recognise in the meadows which surround the hill on all sides the site of the ancient marshes. But where are we to look for the wide forest of alders which grew on the island, and gave shelter to deer and game? It is the solution of this difficulty that enables us not only to understand the passages I have quoted from William of Malmesbury and Asser, but also to appreciate the choice made by Alfred of this spot as the basis of his operations against the Danes.

At the distance of about a mile from East Ling, on the far side of the River Parret, rises a remarkable conical hill, such as the Britons would call a *Tor*, the Saxons a *Stan*. From it the adjoining moor derives its appellation of *Stanmoor*. This Stan, or rock, as also the hillock now called Isle of Athelney, are only projecting points of a sunken ridge of rock, which stretches across the marsh from near East Ling to the neighbourhood of Othry, on the middle island, or Zoyland. It is this ridge of rock that determines the course of the River Tone, and causes it to flow into the Parret at right angles, not far from the spot where the Stan rises on the opposite bank. Formerly it influenced in

a similar manner the course of the River Carey, causing it to flow into the Parret a little above Stanmore Bridge. But the course of the Carey has since then been artificially diverted from the Parret, and made to empty itself into the new Sedgmoor cut. The flat country between East Ling and Othery was formerly a marsh, which has been silted by mud deposited by the overflow of the Parret. The process of filling up is a gradual one, and some portions of the marsh were reduced to a more or less solid condition sooner than others; till by degrees the whole country became reduced to its present uniform level. Now you will observe that as the tidal stream flowed up the Parret, the rapidity of its course on reaching the Stan was suddenly checked, by the River Tone meeting it at right angles. It was forced, in consequence to deposit a portion of the mud which it held in solution, and inasmuch as the *Stan* prevented the river overflowing the marsh on the right side, the deposit of mud must have taken place on the left, and thus a constantly increasing delta was formed at the junction of the two rivers, which became a large tract of marshy land, extending to the hillock now known as Athelney in one direction, and for a considerable distance down the left bank of the Parret in the other direction, the rest of the marsh still being occupied by water. It was this delta which, being overgrown with alders, became the resort of deer, and formed the wide swampy forest of the Isle of Athelney, as described by William of Malmesbury; the only dry land was on the hillock, which at this day bears the name of the Isle of Athelney. And this afforded room enough for a small church and monastery, and a couple of acres of pasture. The Stan did not form part of the island, but stood immediately outside it, being only separated from it by the River Parret; and the sunken ridge of rocks between the Stan and Othery (along which the turnpike road now runs) formed one of those natural causeways by which the marshes could be crossed at certain times of the year and states of the tide, by men who were well acquainted with the country.

It now remains for us to see what was the nature of Alfred's work, and what was his object in selecting this position. He raised a work at Æthelingæg, says the Chronicle. This work is the same which Asser speaks of as a fort of great strength and beautiful construction, standing on an eminence at the west end of the far-stretching bridge. It stood on the *Stan* outside, but close to the entrance of the island, and it served not only to guard the bridge and the entrance to the island, but also as a watch tower, from which to observe the movements of the Danes, and so choose the best time for attacking them, and gain timely notice of any contemplated attack on the island. The bridge mentioned by Asser crossed the Parret from the low portion of the island to the foot of the Stan, about the spot where Borough Bridge now stands (so called from the Borough Bury, or castle, which rose above it on the Stan); and its prolongation (the *operosa prolungatio* of Asser) stretched far away across the marsh, along the causeway or ridge of rocks, to the Zoyland, or high ground near Othery, where another smaller fort was erected to guard its eastern approach. Asser does not say of this bridge (as he does of the principal fort), that it was the work of Alfred. Later writers have attributed it to him, but it seems more probable that at first he only threw a bridge of timber across the Parret at the foot of the Stan, where his fort stood, and made use of the causeway (which he may have improved in places) for the purpose of traversing the marsh to the Zoyland. The continuation of the bridge along the causeway, which Asser describes as *operosa prolungatio*, was probably added at a somewhat later period, when the monastery was founded by Alfred.

The object and the advantages of the position chosen by Alfred now become clear. The Danes were in the neighbourhood of Bridgwater, and in the surrounding country grazed the flocks and herds which formed their support, and were the result of their pillage. Their numbers were vastly superior to the small band of men of Somerset which Alfred had gathered around him. But numbers were of no avail against such a

position as Alfred had formed for himself at Athelney. The only approach was by the bridge, and this a few resolute men could hold against any number of assailants, who could only gain access to it along the narrow and dangerous causeway, and who would then find themselves at the foot of an impregnable fort. On the other hand, Alfred had in the fort shelter for his men, and in the island he had room to stow the cattle and corn which he captured from the enemy, for the support of himself and his followers, in the daily raids he made against the Danes. From the top of the Stan he could watch his opportunity, and then steal out by his bridge and causeway to Zoyland, whence he could suddenly fall upon any part of the country occupied by Danes, either to assail the army or make prey of their cattle; for in April and May there was ready access from the western end of Zoyland to the flat country round Bridgwater. Thus, with a small band of brave followers—men of Somerset, well acquainted with the fords of the marshes,—he was able constantly to harass a large army of Danes, and provide for the maintenance of his men, and impress the enemy with the idea that his forces were much more numerous than they actually were, and so occupy the attention of Gothrum, and prevent his moving elsewhere, till Alfred's own forces, which were being assembled out of sight of the enemy, on the east side of Selwood Forest, were ready for action. They were ready by the end of seven weeks—the middle of May. Then Alfred secretly left Athelney by night, and rode to meet them at Egbertestain—that is, at Whit Sheet Castle, on the borders of Wilts. Placing himself at their head, he led them by a forced march by the old road through Selwood Forest, to Eglea, at the foot of Glastonbury Tor. And next day, early, he marched along the old road through Street, and along the ridge of Polden Hill, till he reached a point over Edington—the Ethandune of Aesser and the Chronicle. By thus gaining command of the heights above the Danes, and shutting them up between the marshes and the sea, he was able to crush them, and gain a complete victory.

Of Alfred's work at Athelney it is now difficult to trace any remains. The present Borough Bridge is of modern construction. The marsh being now drained, a turnpike road occupies the site of the causeway, and has superseded the laborious prolongation of the bridge spoken of by Asser. The site of the smaller fort near Othery has been removed by quarrying. Only on the Stan near Borough Bridge we may perhaps trace the remains of the terraces of Alfred's fort or Borough, whence the bridge took its name of Borough Bridge. The monastery and church which Alfred built at Athelney stood on the raised portion of the island, which still bears the name of Isle of Athelney. Almost every vestige of it has been destroyed, and there would be very little for me to say to you concerning the foundation of Alfred, were it not for a most interesting relic of this King, the connexion of which with the monastery at Athelney I believe I have been able to trace.

Most persons who have taken an interest in the life of Alfred are acquainted with a beautiful specimen of 9th century gold work, preserved in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, commonly known as Alfred's gem, or Alfred's jewel. It was dug up in the year 1693, at Newton Park, about half-way between Athelney and Bridgwater. It has been repeatedly engraved, and a photograph of it was published with the edition of the works of King Alfred, by the Alfred Committee, on the occasion of King Alfred's Jubilee, 1852. The gem, which is almost oval in shape, but somewhat pointed at one end, is rather more than two inches in length, and half an inch thick. It consists of a cut and polished crystal, set in a case of pure gold, of exquisite workmanship. The back of the crystal is flat, as is likewise the thin gold plate on which the crystal rests, and which forms a portion of the setting. The upper side of this gold plate is inlaid with enamel, worked in red, green, and yellow. This enamel is visible through the crystal which covers it, and represents the outline of a royal personage seated on a throne, and holding in both hands a sort of fleur-de-lis. It is probably intended as a representation

of King Alfred himself. On the under side of the gold plate a flowery ornament is engraved. The front, or upper side of the crystal is smaller than the back, consequently the setting slopes inward all around, and forms a ledge, on which is worked in pierced letters of gold the following inscription, "Ælfred mec heht gewyrcau"—Alfred had me worked. It is to be remarked that the letters are arranged with their heads towards the centre of the gem, so that in order to read the inscription the eye of the spectator must be directed, not from the centre, as in coins, but from the outside, as is the case with inscriptions encircling recumbent tomb stones. This circumstance (which I have not noticed before) shows that the gem was not intended to stand in an upright position, for then the inscription would appear reversed, and would run from right to left. The narrow end of the gem, where the first and last letter of the inscription meet, is formed into the head of a griffin, the mouth of which is a round socket, less than one-fourth of an inch in diameter, traversed by a strong gold rivet, which still remains *in situ*, though the object it was intended to secure is no longer there. The gem itself is perfectly intact, and is no less remarkable for elegance of design and skill of execution, than for the costliness of its materials. What adds greatly to its value and interest is, first, the inscription, stating that it was made by order of Alfred (for Asser relates that the King himself loved to take part in directing the work of his goldsmiths); and secondly, the circumstance of its having been found so near Athelney, a spot in so many ways connected with Alfred. Yet, when we come to inquire into the object and use of this costly jewel we seem doomed to disappointment. The opinion, at first most commonly adopted, that it is a pendant, and as such was worn by the King, and lost by him during some of his raids from Athelney, is evidently not correct; for if this had been the use of the jewel, the seated figure of the King would have been worn with his head inverted and feet uppermost. Moreover, if the jewel were a pendant, the mouth of the griffin would have been pierced to hold a ring, and would



not have been shaped as a socket. Others, therefore, have suggested that it may have formed the head of a sceptre, somewhat similar to the fleur-de-lis depicted on the jewel itself. But, as I have remarked above, if the figure is held upright the inscription round it appears inverted; moreover, the hole of the socket being less than one-fourth of an inch in diameter, the object inserted cannot have been larger than an ordinary cedar pencil, which is far too small a size for a sceptre.

I shall not detain you with reciting all the other purposes for which it has been conjectured that this jewel may have been fashioned. Its real use will, I think, be made clear to you by the following observations. I have told you that the socket in the head of the griffin is traversed by a strong gold rivet. The gem is intact, and the rivet is still in its place, but the object has disappeared from the socket. It follows that this object was made of some perishable material—such as wood, or bone, or horn, and has rotted away. Had it been made of metal or stone it could not have been extracted *whole* without first removing the rivet; and if we suppose it to have been broken off by a blow or wrench, the delicate gold-work would show evidence of the violence done. Moreover, the portion of the object at the back of the rivet would still remain there, as it could not be extracted without removing the rivet, though the portion in front had fallen off. Now, is there any article likely to have been used in the days of King Alfred, a portion of which would be made of such precious materials as this gem exhibits, whilst the other portion was made of wood, or bone, or horn?

Amongst the articles of church furniture used in the middle ages, frequent mention is made of "*Baculi Cantorum*," or choir staves. In the year 1222 there were eight such staves in the treasury of Salisbury Cathedral. "The staves at Canterbury Cathedral" (writes Dr. Rock, *Church of our Fathers*, vol. 2,) "were as rich as they were curious, in the year 1315." He gives a list of them, and among them are iv. baculi de cornu, cum capitibus eburneis—four staves of horn with ivory handles;

others were adorned with gold and silver and precious stones. The use of these staves was to enable the *Cantor* or master of the choir to point out to the singers and to the readers their places in the book, and so prevent the manuscripts and their illuminations being soiled by the touch of fingers. When the lessons were read, the choir master not only pointed out the spot where the lesson commenced, but handed, if necessary, the staff to the lector, that he might use it to guide his eye along the lines in reading. This precaution was not only observed with regard to those beautifully illuminated volumes used for the church services, but was equally, if not more so, required in the case of books which were intended for the use of the general public. Most readers required to use their fingers to assist their eyes in following the lines, a practice which, if allowed, would not only soil the manuscripts, but in course of time obliterate them. Therefore, when books were intended for public use it was customary to place by them a small staff or pointer for the use of the reader, even as in modern days a paper knife forms one of the ordinary articles of furniture on a library table. In many instances these little staves or pointers were inserted in the binding of the books themselves, something after the fashion in which pencils are inserted in modern pocket books.

I may seem to be widely departing from Alfred and from Athelney, but you will soon perceive the pertinency of these remarks. Alfred, as you know, did much to encourage learning amongst his subjects, and he was especially anxious that useful works should be translated into English, and copies of them be arranged in public places, where all might gain access to them and read them. To encourage this good and noble work by his example, he became himself an author. And he thus describes, in the preface which he wrote to the book he translated, the steps he took to start what I may call the first public reading in England:—"When I reflected," he says, "how the knowledge of the Latin tongue had fallen away throughout England, though many still knew how to read English writing,

I began in the midst of divers and manifold affairs of this kingdom to turn into English this book (of S. Gregory the Great), which in Latin is named *Pastoralis*, and in English *The Herdsman's Book*; sometimes word for word and sometimes sense for sense, even as I had been taught by Plegmund my Archbishop, and Asser my Bishop, and Grimbald my Mass-priest, and John my Mass-priest. After I had learned of them how I might best understand it, I turned it into English. And I will send a copy to every bishop's see in my kingdom, and in each book there is an aestel" (*i.e.*, a staff) "of" (the value of) "50 mancusses; and I command, in God's name, that no man take the staff from the book, nor the book from the minster, seeing that we know not how long there shall be such learned bishops, as now, thank God, there be. Therefore I command that these remain always in their places, unless the bishop have them with him either to lend somewhere, or to have other copies made from them."

Here, then, we have the explanation of Alfred's gem. It is the handle of a book-staff or pointer, which, like those at Canterbury, and elsewhere, was made of horn (which has perished), the handle itself being of precious and durable materials. The inscription on it bears witness that it was made by Alfred's order, "Alfred had me worked;" and this circumstance, taken in conjunction with the costliness of its material and the beauty of its execution, make it in the highest degree probable that it is one of those aestels which Alfred says were worked by his order, and inserted in the presentation copies of his translation of *The Herdsman's Book*, and which were valued at 50 mancusses, or (taking the value of the mancuss at 7s. 6d.) £18 15s., a large sum for those days.

But if so, how came this gem to be found in this neighbourhood? Alfred presented one to each Bishop's see in his kingdom, and there was no Bishop's see in those days in these parts nearer than Sherborne in Dorsetshire. You will have remarked that Alfred in his preface mentions four persons who assisted him in

translating the book. Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury ; Asser, Bishop of Sherborne ; the priest, Grimbald, who presided over the school which Alfred had founded for the training of the English youth ; and the Priest John, who was placed by Alfred as Abbot over the monastery which he founded at Athelney. Copies of the book, each having a book-staff, were sent to Plegmund and Asser, for they both were Bishops. Can there be any reasonable doubt that this mark of attention was equally observed in the case of the other two collaborators ? More especially as Grimbald was at the head of Alfred's school, and it was in order to promote English reading that Alfred had undertaken the translation of the book, and John, though not a Bishop, was Abbot over the monastery which Alfred himself had built in gratitude to God for the victory he had gained. A copy of the book, with the costly aetel in it, was no doubt sent by Alfred to his friend John, at Athelney, as well as to the other three collaborators. The book and the staff were, agreeably to Alfred's order, preserved in the Minster, till, in the days of trouble, (probably at the dissolution of the monastery,) both were hidden out of sight, and for that purpose buried in the grounds of some neighbouring friend at Newton Park in the hopes of recovering them in better days. As time passed on, the secret of the place where they were hidden died with the man who had hidden them, and when after many years chance revealed the place of the deposit, the book itself and the perishable portion of the staff had rotted away, leaving only the gold and crystal handle, with the words "*Ælfred had me worked,*" to tell the tale. This I believe to be the true history of Alfred's gem. When I visited the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, in the month of July, I was shown by the courteous Curator, by the side of Alfred's jewel, a smaller specimen of ancient goldsmith's work which was dug up a few years ago at Minster Lovel in Oxfordshire, on the site of an ancient abbey. It is smaller than Alfred's gem, but, like the latter, it is evidently the handle of a reading-staff. The handle of Alfred's staff was

made of a size that might be conveniently grasped in the hand ; the one from Minster Lovel was intended to be held between the finger and thumb. It is smaller and less costly, but the workmanship of the gold is so like the larger one of Alfred as almost to suggest its being the work of the same man.

The Bishop's address was illustrated by a map, which had been specially prepared.

Mr. DICKINSON, in thanking the President for his valuable address, said he could not help thinking that the whole of the country where Alfred took refuge, and which must be at all times deeply interesting to Somersetshire men, had undergone in process of time such a change that none of them were in a position wisely and rightly to determine anything with respect to its former condition. There were, however, indications that there was formerly a water-course of some importance east and north of Chedzoy, and also that that portion of the country was very different in its contour than at the present time. It seemed probable, also, that at one time there were islands along, around and between the Parret and the Carey. The lowest ground was probably full of underwood, but without a great deal of very careful archaeological investigation one could hardly tell how that was. He only regretted that Mr. Freeman and others, who were much better qualified to offer an opinion with respect to these matters than himself, were not present. With respect to Alfred's gem, referred to by the President, he had a little picture with him showing the jewel in question. He thought that Bishop Clifford was right in believing it to be the head of some ecclesiastical instrument, but that it was not needful to construct such an ingenious theory to account for it. He believed it was the termination of a staff held by the chanter or the precentor, as it was now called in a cathedral, and probably used for beating time.

The Rev. A. N. BULL, of Woolavington, exhibited a sketch of Chisley Mount, at Puriton, which the President said they intended visiting that afternoon, adding that they would be able,

perhaps, to devote a little more attention to it on account of the intended visit to the Sydenham Manor House having been abandoned.

The PRÆSIDENT then announced that the Meeting had closed, and suggested that they should now partake of the Mayor's hospitality.