

The Birthplace of Wynfrith, or Saint Boniface,

AS BEARING ON THE SAXON CONQUEST
OF DEVONSHIRE.

BY RICHARD JOHN KING.

THE birthplace of the Saxon Winfrith, better known as Saint Boniface, the "Apostle of Germany" as he is generally called—the greatest churchman of his age, not only in northern Europe but perhaps in all Christendom,—has been fixed by all writers, from Camden downwards, at Crediton in Devonshire. It is only of late years, since Dr. Guest and Mr. E. A. Freeman have investigated with so much zeal and success the various evidences, in written chronicles, in the geography and natural defences of the country, and in existing remains of dykes and entrenchments, bearing on the gradual conquest of western Britain by the English, that any doubt has been thrown on this general belief; and that it has been suggested that the birth of St. Boniface in the last quarter of the seventh century, at what is now Crediton, presupposing an important English settlement there, is inconsistent with what is known of the limits of the English kingdom of Wessex at that period, and with the relations between that kingdom and Domnonia, the West Wales of the English Chroniclers, then embracing, it is asserted, the whole of the present Devonshire and Cornwall, and a great part of

Somersetshire. The question in dispute thus assumes an especial interest. It is not only that we in Devonshire are unwilling to resign the right to claim Saint Boniface as one of our greatest worthies; but if it can be shown that all the accessible evidence tends to confirm the received belief, and that it cannot be set aside without assumptions for which there is no reasonable warrant, we shall be compelled to modify the conclusions at which Dr. Guest and others had arrived, and to admit that, long before the end of the seventh century, English colonists had pushed themselves far into Domnonia, either from the west, or from the southern sea-board. We may still allow that, on the north, there had been little, if any, advance of the English into Devonshire when in 710, Ine and Nunna fought with and overthrew Gerent, King of West Wales,¹ the "*gloriosissimus Dominus Domnoniæ*" to whom, five years before, Ealdhelm, then Abbot of Malmesbury, had addressed his well-known letter respecting the due observance of Easter.

The principal authority for the life of Saint Boniface is the work of Willibald, a priest of the church of St. Victor at Maintz, who, some thirteen years after the martyrdom of the saint at Doccum in Friesland, wrote his life at the request of Lullus and Megingoz, the former Archbishop of Maintz, in which see he succeeded Saint Boniface, the latter Bishop of Wirtzburg. Both had been companions of Boniface through much of his labours, and were his faithful disciples. It does not appear that Willibald had at any time received information about his life from Saint Boniface himself; but he was assisted by many persons who had been constantly with the martyred Archbishop, and especially by Bishop Lull or Lullus. Willibald's life

(1). "And Ine and Nun his mæg gefuhton wið Gerente Weala cyninge." Sax. Chron. ad. ann.

therefore has all but the value of a contemporary history. There exist, beside, a great number of letters written by Boniface, and many addressed to him by different persons from different countries. Some of these are from friends in England, chiefly members of religious houses. From them we gather one or two particulars about the family of Boniface; but for his early life we have to rely entirely on Willibald; for although, at a later period, longer lives of the saint were written, they are little more than amplifications of the first, and are of course without its contemporary authority.

Willibald, without naming the birthplace of Boniface, tells us that, when a boy of four or five years old, he was impressed by a visit to his father's house of certain priests or clerks, who were wandering as missionaries throughout the country.² His father, a great householder, and of "earl-kind" or noble birth, loved his son Wynfrith above his other children; and was greatly disturbed when the boy, still of very tender years, declared his resolution to embrace the monastic life. For a long time the father would not consent; but at last, in the crisis of a great sickness, when death seemed close at hand, he yielded, and Wynfrith, with the good will of his relations (*propinquorum facta conventionione*) was³ sent to a monastery at a place called

(2). "*Cum vero aliqui—sicut illis regionibus moris est—presbyteri sive clerici populares vel laicos prædicandi causa adissent, et ad villam domumque præfati patris familias venissent,*" &c. Willibaldi Vita S. Bon. cap. 1. These wandering clerks may have come from Exeter.

(3). "*Puerum, propinquorum facta conventionione, ad monasterium, quod priscorum nuncupatur vocabulo Adescanastre, spontaneus, a Domino quidem correptus, direxit, et fideli viro Wulfhardo, qui et abbas illius extitit monasterii, per fideles suæ legationis nuntios redditum commendavit.*" Vita, cap. 1. May not "prisci" here signify the Britons? If so, it would seem that the description and name of the monastery must have been supplied by some one (perhaps by Wynfrith himself to Lullus) well acquainted with the condition of the district.

"Adescanastre," and commended to the Abbot, whose name was Wulfhard. After remaining for some time in this religious house he passed to another named "Nhuts-celle"—whence in due season he crossed the sea,—to become the Christian missionary of Friesland and of all central Germany, to found the archiepiscopal see of Maintz on the Rhine, and the great monastery of Fulda in the midst of the Thuringian beech woods, to confirm the most important dynastic change which Christendom had hitherto witnessed, by placing the crown on the head of Pepin the Short, and thus transferring, with the sanction of the Church, the royal authority from the house of the Merwings to that of the Karlings; and finally, to die in the wild marsh country of Friesland, struck down by the swords of a ferocious heathen host, whose old supremacy had been endangered by his successes. With the life of Saint Boniface beyond sea, however, we are not at present concerned. The one clue to his birthplace which is afforded by Willibald is the name of the monastery to which he was first sent—Adescanastre,—which, in spite of some variety of spelling in the manuscripts, Mabillon, Pertz, Jaffé,—all, in short, who have edited, or been concerned with the life and letters of Saint Boniface, have agreed to regard as meaning Exeter,—the "Exanceastre" of the English Chronicles. Although this name is somewhat differently given in different manuscripts,—as "Adescanastre," "Ad Escan Castre," "Adestcanastre," and "Adestanastre," the variation is not very great; and, but for the assumption that Exeter was at this time still the Romano-British Isca, and that no Saxons had as yet penetrated so far into Devonshire, there would be no

(4). The "ad" represents the Saxon "æt," which was frequently used, as in "*Ættasfingstoc*"—Tavistock.

question as to the site of the monastery in which Wynfrith was first received. Escancastre can only be Exeter. There is no other "ceastre" or "chester" in the western parts of the country certainly within the limits of Wessex in the latter half of the seventh century, which can possibly be meant. "Akemansceastre" or Bath has been suggested; but this is a guess in no way supported by the manuscripts.

When Wynfrith, who seems already to have received the name of Bonifacius, left his second English monastery, Nhutscelle—which is held to have been Nutshalling or Nursling in Hampshire,—for his labours beyond the sea, he took with him commendatory letters to the princes and bishops through whose territories he might pass, from Daniel, Bishop of Winchester, whose diocese had been conterminous with the kingdom of Wessex, until in the year 705 Ine divided the bishopric into two sees,—Daniel remaining at Winchester, and having as his diocese the whole of Wessex "east of the woods,"—that is of Selwood, while the place of the second see was fixed at Sherborne, and Ealdhelm became bishop of all Wessex west of Sherwood. Nursling was thus in the diocese of Winchester; and letters were exchanged between Daniel and Boniface from the final departure of the latter in 718, to the death of the former in 745. A correspondence was maintained between Lullus, the successor of Boniface in the see of Mainz, and the English Church throughout the island. Kynehard, Bishop of Winchester, writes to Lullus at some time before the year 766, asking for books, and for a continuation of the good offices which had passed between Daniel and Boniface; and about 786, Cynwulf, King of Wessex, with his bishops and nobles (the letter was no doubt despatched after a witena-gemote), writes to Lullus to renew an engagement for mutual prayer made

with his predecessor Boniface.⁵ This was thirty years after the death of Boniface ; and more than half that time had passed since Willibald had completed his life of the martyr. I mention this in order to show that with this chain of intercourse between Wessex and its chief episcopal see, and Archbishop Lullus, who had directed the writing of the life by Willibald, there is a certainty that that life had, as soon as it was written, found its way to England ; and that, had it contained any serious error, it would have been corrected either by surviving relatives of Wynfrith, or by the ecclesiastics of Winchester. But the life was accepted as we now have it ; and with the life, the name of Wynfrith's first monastery, "Adescanastre." Had this been wrong we should surely have found some indication of a correction, either in the later lives, or in some decided variation in the manuscripts. But, as we have seen, the difference of spelling is so slight that there is no room for doubt, either that the same place is always meant, or that that place is Exeter.

Willibald gives no name to the place where Wynfrith was born, and refers to it only as "villa domusque patris sui." Nor does he tell us how far it was from the monastery at Adescanastre, to which, it would seem, the boy was sent while his father was still on his sick bed. There is no reference to his birthplace—nothing indeed which at all helps us toward finding even the district in which it was placed—in any of the numerous letters written by Boniface to different persons in Wessex. A certain Leobgitha who writes to him, tells him that her father Tinne—"cujus vocabulum est Tinne in occiduīs regionibus," who had been a friend of Boniface, is dead ;

(5). All these letters will be found in *Jaffé*, *S. Bonif. Epist.* ; and in *Haddan and Stubbs*, *Councils and Eccles. Doc.* vol. iii.

and that her mother Ebbe, who was his kinswoman, sought his prayers. Tradition makes Willibald bishop of Eichstadt (not the writer of the life), a nephew of St. Boniface—his father having been a certain Richard, called King of the West-Saxons, who married Winne, a sister of Wynfrith, and was himself recognized as a saint. But the name, Richard, which although Teutonic is not Saxon, makes all this story doubtful. Willibald's life tells us all that we know with any certainty about his family; and a local tradition of most ancient standing has fixed the "*villa domusque patris sui*" at Crediton. The earliest written record of this tradition is found in the *Legendary* compiled under the direction of Bishop Grandison, in 1336, for the use of Exeter Cathedral. This book, a finely-written manuscript in two thick folios, remains in the Chapter Library; and under the heading of Saint Boniface it is recorded that the future Archbishop was born of noble race—"ex bonâ prosapiâ," in the country of the West-Saxons, "*apud Creditoniam in Devoniam*." Such a statement implies that the belief at that time was of very great antiquity, and had probably never been questioned. No other place has at any time, or in any way, laid claim to have been the birthplace of Wynfrith; and although Saint Boniface was commemorated throughout the English church, he was nowhere more honoured than in the cathedral of his own district, which preserved, it must be remembered, the most ancient traditions of the diocese, although the place of the see had not always been at Exeter. When the Devonshire see was first established, at Crediton, in or about the year 909—about 150 years after the death of Boniface—it may well have been that recollections of the saint led to the fixing of the see at his birthplace. At any rate we know that by that time

Crediton had become an important English settlement,—the “villa” of an over-lord, in the open country, where his own dwelling was surrounded by those of his followers and dependents.

Under ordinary circumstances, this evidence, although it is not of the first order—that is, it has not the weight of a direct contemporary statement—would be accepted as sufficient ; and no shadow of doubt would ever have been thrown on the claim of Crediton to represent the birthplace of Saint Boniface. But it must be remembered that it has been pronounced as a certainty that no English—no Saxons—had before the end of the seventh century broken through the borders of the present Devonshire, or established themselves within its limits. It is held—that is, it is expressly maintained by Dr. Guest, whose conclusions are accepted by Mr. Freeman, that Dyvnaint or Domnonia was as yet a great unbroken kingdom ; that its chiefs were powerful, perhaps quite as powerful as the English kings of Wessex who were pressing on their borders ; that its ancient Romano-Keltic traditions were maintained with vigour, and that it was in close communication with Armorica on one side, and with the Britons of what is now Wales on the other. If this view is strictly correct we must give up Saint Boniface as having been in any way connected with either Exeter or Crediton. But let us see what additional indications may be found, to induce us still to hold by the evidence supplied by Willibald’s life and the local tradition. We may admit at once that the question is one of great difficulty, and that we can but feel our way in the darkness. Nevertheless, there seems to be considerable reason for hesitating before we allow that the condition of Domnonia in the latter years of the seventh century, was precisely such as it has been painted by Dr. Guest.

If we recognize Exeter in the *Adescanastre* of Willibald, it follows not only that a Saxon colony was already, about the year 680, in possession of part of the city, but that some kind of monastic establishment was in existence in the region occupied by the colonists. The West-Saxons, it must be remembered, had received their first Christian teaching from the Frank, Birinus, who died Bishop of Dorchester in 650. Not more than 30 years therefore had elapsed from this date, when we are called on to suppose a Christian settlement, with a monastery, at Exeter. But it is clear that Christianity spread at once, and rapidly, throughout all those parts of Britain which were under West-Saxon rule, and all that is known of Ine, King of Wessex, the contemporary of Saint Boniface, besides all that is recorded of the early life of Boniface himself, shows that the conversion had been general, and the zeal of the converts untiring. The Saxons who penetrated into and conquered *Domnonia*, whenever that conquest took place, came not as heathen exterminators, sweeping the country free of its British inhabitants. This had been the case in the portions of Wessex first conquered by them, and in the rest of Britain. But by the time they entered what is now Devonshire they had themselves become Christians, and the older inhabitants, subdued and perhaps intralled, were not exterminated. Thus, allowing that a Saxon colony had settled in Exeter so early as 680, there is nothing to surprise us at finding such a monastic establishment among them as that to which Wynfrith was sent, and over which Wolfhard presided. They would come as Christians, and as Christians with all the zeal of new converts; and the first church raised by them in their quarter of the city would in all likelihood be connected with a small body of monks, as at Dorchester, or at Winchester,—

wherever in fact an ecclesiastical centre was established. And the Saxon conquest of Exeter, whenever and however it occurred, differed altogether from the conquest of such Romano-British cities as Bath, or Gloucester, or Winchester. The Britons, to all appearance, were never driven entirely from it; and as late as the reign of Æthelstan (A.D. 926) they occupied the city "æquo jure" with the Saxons. Æthelstan, we are told, expelled them from Exeter, and set the Tamar as the boundary between the British sub-kingdom of Cornwall—the reduced Domnonia,—and the true Wessex. "The Lord of all Britain," says Mr. Freeman, "the conqueror of Scot and Northman, the lawgiver of England, deemed it time . . . to place the supremacy of the conquering nation in the chief city of the western peninsula beyond all doubt. Hitherto we may be sure that the English burghers had formed a ruling class, a civic patriciate. Now, strengthened doubtless by fresh English colonists, they were to become the sole possessors of the city."⁶ The questions for us are, for how long a time this double occupation of Exeter had continued, and in what manner it had begun? We have heard the evidence of Willibald. Mr. Kerslake of Bristol, in a very interesting paper read at the Exeter meeting of the Archæological Institute,⁷ endeavoured to trace the limits of the British and Saxon quarters of the city under the guidance, partly of the ancient walls and streets, and partly of the dedications of the several churches. We gather from it, and with tolerable certainty, that the

(6). "The Place of Exeter in English History," *Macmillan's Magazine*, Sept. 1873. The paper was read by Mr. E. A. Freeman, at the meeting of the Archæological Institute, in Exeter, in the autumn of 1873.

(7). "The Celt and the Teuton in Exeter." This paper has been printed in the *Journal of the Institute*.

Saxons had established themselves on the south and east ; and that a portion of the city on the north, in which we find the churches of the British saints, Petrock and Kerrian, together with the country beyond it, marked not less significantly by the church of Saint David, was retained by the Britons. The indications are, without doubt, that the Saxon colonists had reached Exeter either from the south, by the river, or from the eastern border of the county. It would seem, also, judging from the recognition of the division, that the occupation of Exeter had been comparatively peaceful. The newly Christianized Saxons found Christians and Christian churches within the walls of *Caer Isc*,—the Romano-Keltic city which had never been altogether destroyed or abandoned, and which must still have displayed many a trace of Roman occupation and magnificence. Nor, on the other hand, would they have been unrecognized by the British Christians. The letter of Ealdhelm to Gerent, King of Domnonia, written in 705, implies that the Christians of "West Wales," differing as they did from the Saxons on the question of Easter, and on one or two minor points, were by no means so unwilling to join in communion with them as their Welsh brethren beyond the Severn.⁸

The separation of the British and Saxon quarters, pointed out by Mr. Kerslake, must have been long in

(8). This is implied not only by the whole tone of the letter, but by a passage in which Ealdhelm dwells strongly on the errors of the Welsh priests—(North Welsh as they would then be called, in distinction from those of "West Wales.") "Illud vero quam valde a fide catholica discrepat . . . ; quod ultra Sabrinæ fluminis fretum Demetarum sacerdotes, de privata propria conversationis munditia gloriantes, nostram communionem magnopere abhominantur, in tantum, ut nec in ecclesia nobiscum orationum officia celebrare, nec ad mensam ciborum ferula pro caritatis gratia pariter percipere dignentur." See the whole letter in *Haddan and Stubbs*, vol. iii.

existence when Æthelstan visited Exeter in 926. No date can be fixed for its beginning; but the legend of Saint Sativola, or Saint Sidwell, whose church outside the eastern gate of Exeter is said to mark the place of her beheading by a certain scytheman or mower—(fæniseca)—falls in with the belief that Willibald's Adescancastre is Exeter, and that Wynfrith was born at Crediton. Her legend asserts that she was a contemporary of Saint Boniface; that her father, Benna, was a Briton; and that, after his death, her step-mother, covetous of her fortune, caused her to be killed while at prayer near a fountain which afterwards bore her name. Sativola is said to have been the eldest of three sisters, Juthwara, Wilgitha, and Eadwara,—names which are Teutonic and not British, unless they have been disguised by later hagiologists.⁹ Her own name seems to be Keltic; and one is half inclined to imagine that an inter-marriage between Saxon and Briton may not even at that time, have been impossible. Be that as it may, her legend distinctly asserts that she was a contemporary of Saint Boniface,—an additional, if faint, indication in support of the local tradition which makes Crediton his birthplace.

The distribution of Britons and Saxons in and round Exeter, implies, as we have seen, that the latter approached from the south or east,—perhaps from both quarters. There are other reasons for believing that Domnonia was attacked on its eastern side as well as by Ine on the north. There is, for example, a tradition that Æthelstan founded Axminster, the minster of the Axe, as the memorial of a great battle in which five kings and seven earls fell, and which raged from a point known as the hill of St.

(9). The legend of S. Juthwara is given by Capgrave. All the sisters were recognised as saints.

Calixtus—"munt Saint Calyxt"—to a place called Colecroft, close under Axminster. The tradition of this battle is recorded in the register of Newenham Abbey, a document of the age of Edward III.¹⁰ We have here, no doubt, recollections of Brunanburgh, and of the famous poem preserved in the English Chronicle; indeed, it has been suggested that Axminster was really Brunanburgh, and the scene of that great fight. Such a notion no one would maintain at present; for wherever may have been the real site of Brunanburgh, we know that it was somewhere in Northumbria. But the tradition of a great battle does not get fixed anywhere without some reason; and this fight at Axminster may very well have been a real struggle between Britons and Saxons, with which, at a later period, some of the Brunanburgh details were confused. There is more than one instance of a minster having been founded by the conqueror on the field of his victory. The great Abbey of Battle, on the field of Senlac, at once presents itself as the most prominent example; and, in 1020, Knut built a "minster of lime and stone" on the field of Assandun, where he broke the force of Edmund Ironside. It is quite possible that the minster of the Axe may, as tradition asserted, have been the memorial of a great battle. That there was a church at Axminster in 784, we know from the record in the English Chronicles, under that, and the previous year 755, of the deaths of Cynewulf, King of Wessex, and of an Ætheling, named Cyneheard. The body of the King, it is said, was buried at Winchester; that of the Ætheling

(10). This register was among the MSS. of Sir Thomas Phillipps. It contains two accounts of the battle, one in French, and another in Latin. The Cistercian Abbey of Newenham is within half a mile of Axminster.

at Axminster.¹¹ The bodies were conveyed from Merton in Surrey; and there must have been some strong and especial reason for taking that of the Ætheling so far west. He or his family must have had some close interest in the minster which already existed at Axminster. Tradition attributed its foundation to Æthelstan; but here is a proof that it had arisen long before his time; and the confusion of the fight at Axminster with that at Brunanburgh, led also, in all probability, to the introduction of Æthelstan's name as that of the founder of the minster.

The northern march of what is now Devonshire may for a long period—up to, and after the fight in 710 of Ine and Nunna with the British King Gerent—have run very nearly along the line which now separates Devonshire from Somersetshire. There are indications, such as the Simon barrow on the Blackdown hills, and the Simons bath in Exmoor—places which I believe to be named from Sigmund the Wælsing, one of those Teutonic heroes under whose protection march lands were generally placed¹²—that this frontier was one of some permanence during the struggle between Saxon and Briton. But it was broken at last. Saxon colonists and conquerors poured down from the north; and under Æthelwulf, father of Ælfred the Great, in the middle of the ninth century, the men of Devonshire, a mixed race it may be, had become West-Saxon subjects, and fought valiantly against the Danish invader. But if the evidence on which I have been dwelling is at all to be regarded, we must believe that long before the Saxons entered Devonshire from the

(11). "And so Cynewulf rixode xxxi geara. And his lic lið on Wintanceastre. and thæs æthelinges at Axanmynster." Chron. ad ann 755.

(12). See "The Folk Lore of Devonshire," a paper by the present writer in *Fraser's Magazine* for December, 1873.

north, they had passed the Axe on the eastern border, and had made themselves masters of part of Exeter, and of portions of the surrounding country. It is impossible to say in what manner this may have been effected,—whether by single leaders with their followers, penetrating at different points into the country, or, as the Axminster battle may indicate, with the full force of the royal “host.” But I am much inclined to believe that a careful examination of the whole southern coast of Devonshire—and perhaps of the coast west of the Tamar—will afford indications that isolated Saxon settlements may have taken place along it at remote periods; and it may even be a question whether the great keep mounds of Totnes and of Plympton may not have been the work of these first Saxon settlers—who needed strongholds near the sea,—rather than of Britons or Brito-Romans.

To return for a moment to Crediton. The position of the present church, marking that of the most ancient settlement, is precisely such an one as an early Saxon colonist would have most affected. It stands on a knoll of higher ground, open and sunny, at the head of a long green meadow which opens to the vale of the Creedy, the little river from which “Cridiantun,” Crediton, the “town” or enclosure of the Creedy, is named. There is no reason to believe that any Roman or British occupants had preceded the Saxon on this site. At any rate, no remains of that earlier period have been discovered at Crediton. A line of road runs over the hills by Whitstone from Exeter to Crediton, and is perhaps more ancient, since it avoids the lower marsh-lands, than that which, also of considerable antiquity, follows the course of the Creedy upward from its junction with the Exe. These may represent British trackways passing towards the north

coast ; but, although there are ancient camps and earth-works along their course, if at some little distance from it, there is no evidence and no record that any such stronghold ever existed at Crediton. The Saxon colonists may have found their way to it along the hills from Exeter—an approach which, according to Mr. Kerslake's disposition of the city, would be directly open to them. However they came, they, to all appearance, found the site unoccupied, and clear for their own settlement. The church which served as the first cathedral of the Devonshire see, after the erection of that see about 909, occupied it may be, the site of the timbered house in which Wynfrith first saw the light. Leland found a tradition existing, to the effect that this Saxon church stood somewhat west of the existing building. No traces of foundations have been discovered ; but in the valley west of the present church are two water springs, one of which is protected by an arch of Early English character ; the other is known as Saint Winifred's well. It seems more than probable that this should really be Saint Wynfrith's well, and that we have here a direct memorial—it is the only one which can be traced at Crediton—of the great Apostle of Germany. Wynfrith, although he received the name of Bonifacius, either on making his full monastic profession, or at his ordination as priest, continued to subscribe himself, almost to the end of his life as "Wynfrith qui et Bonifacius." In his own country he would be more likely to retain his English name.¹³

(13). The churches of Brancecombe, on the coast between Seaton and Sidmouth, and of Manaton, on the border of Dartmoor, are dedicated to Wynfrid or Winifred. This is far more likely to be Wynfrith of Crediton than the Welsh saint, whose legend did not come into existence before the twelfth century.
