

CANNINGTON COURT

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These notes, written in part several years since for another purpose, review the history of a house visited by the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society in June, 1960. The writer has introduced material not available when *Canyngton Priory*¹ was compiled by Thomas Hugo almost a hundred years ago: that work, however, remains the standard authority.

In the course of one of his later journeys, John Leland came to Cannington and found the place “a pratty uplandisch towne”— a description often quoted. The visit took place not long after the dissolution of the religious houses, and Leland set down in his note book that there had been “a Priory of Nunnes whos Chirch was hard anexid to the Est of the Paroch Chirch”.

The history of the priory of Cannington was closely bound up with that of Stogursey Castle — distant some four miles to the north-west — whose successive lords, during almost four hundred years, were its patrons and chief benefactors.

Stoke, known later as Stoke Curci and more recently as Stogursey, was granted by the Conqueror to William de Falaise, one of his most favoured followers. Although he held few manors in Somerset, William de Falaise and his wife, Geva de Burci, made Stoke a place of importance and founded a small priory there — a cell for a few monks from the abbey of Lonlay in Normandy.

Emma, the daughter and heiress of William de Falaise, married William de Curci, who enhanced the importance of Stoke by making it the head of the honor of Curci. He held estates in several counties, each estate being comparatively small as was the Norman custom. Stoke was held in succession by the son, the grandson, and the great-grandson of William de Curci. There were kindred in Normandy and in this country, and among them many notable men; indeed, few families provided the Norman and early Plantagenet kings with more councillors and warrior-statesmen².

¹ *Proc. S.A.S. XI* (1861-2); Hugo's *Nunneries of Somerset*.

² For the de Curci family, see *Curci* by Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte, *Proc. S.A.S., LXVI, ii*, 98-126; *Stogursey Charters*, ed. by T. D. Tremlett and Noel Blakiston, *S.R.S., LXI*.

It is not known whether the first castle at Stoke was built by William de Falaise or by William de Curci. The low mound, now surmounted by the remains of a late medieval castle, may indicate the site of an early Norman mote. There are still signs of a great outer bailey, added, it must be presumed, in the reign of Stephen, though perhaps strengthened at the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The siting of castles in England, except during the reign of Stephen, was not left to the whims of the feudal lords. Clearly, control was exercised by the king long before formal licences 'to crenelate' were introduced.

The first William de Mohun ruled Somerset as vice-regal sheriff from his castle at Dunster, where there was an isolated hill, irresistible to a castle-minded baron, but the site was not well-placed to form a unit in a concerted plan for the defence of the whole south-west of England, and when Stogursey castle was built, Dunster waned in importance.

On those occasions after the death of the Conqueror, when there was danger of invasion from France, it appears to have been part of the defence policy of the Plantagenet kings to maintain the castles of Corfe, Sherborne, Taunton and Stogursey — held either by the sheriff, or by a bishop or by a loyal baron — to protect the vulnerable territory between the Dorset coast and the mouth of the Parrett. When Bridgwater castle was built in the reign of king John, Stogursey castle was at first considered redundant. To ensure unity of control, Somerset and Dorset were held by a single sheriff.

The de Curci barons cannot have lived at Stoke continuously for any considerable period, for they were in frequent attendance on the sovereign and travelled in consequence from place to place in England and on the continent; but when they were free from duty at the peripatetic court, it must have been necessary for them to visit their estates. Their wives and children were not always taken on their arduous journeys and were, it may be supposed, often left at Stoke — the *caput baroniae*.

No doubt the de Curci barons liked to pass as much time as possible where sport was good, and nowhere on their estates can it have been better than in the neighbourhood of the Quantock hills. There was the happy routine of the deer-shooting, for deer were more often driven and shot from ambush with bow and arrow than

hunted in the modern sense. There was hawking — most exquisite of all sports — on the hills or over the lagoons of the Parrett. There was, too, every kind of fishing, if fishing were regarded as anything but a utilitarian occupation.

It was not found that the priory at Stoke provided all that was required to fulfil the spiritual needs of the de Curci family, and at a date unknown, but in the mid-twelfth century, a de Curci founded the priory of Benedictine nuns at Cannington. There is a statement in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* that Robert de Curci was the founder. Several members of the family bore the name Robert, but none of them seems to have held the lands which formed the endowment of the priory, and it is more probable that the founder was William de Curci II, known as “the steward”, and that he made the gift for the soul of his brother, Robert. It is certain that this William de Curci made a grant to the abbey of St. Martin of Marmoutier and the priory of St. Vigor-en-Perrières for the souls of his brothers Richard and Robert.

In the late thirteenth century there was a nun of Cannington called Maud de Meriet, who may have become prioress. When she died, her heart was buried in a niche specially constructed in the north aisle of Combe Florey Church among the graves of the de Meriets of Hestercombe. The inscription on a narrow slab of hard, black stone may still be seen:

LE QUER DAME MAUD DE MERRIETE NONAYNE DE CANYNTUNE

The lettering is in bold Lombardic capitals, beautifully designed, and of a quality reminiscent of a somewhat earlier manuscript.

The names of certain of those who were members of the community at Cannington at various periods have been preserved. The sisters came in many cases from families of knightly status in Somerset, Dorset and Devon. There were also among them daughters of rich burgesses of the same counties. The house was used as a retreat by the relations and friends of the nuns, and was doubtless a centre of education and learning, serving a useful purpose in the neighbourhood.

The priory of Cannington was never rich, nor was the community ever large. The number of fully professed sisters does not seem to have exceeded twelve or thirteen at any time. Again and again the nuns of Cannington were exempt from the payment of subsidies on account of their poverty. Their chief endowment was

the manor and rectory of Cannington. It must not be supposed, however, that they were indigent because their income was small, for the lords of Stoke and the relatives of the sisters were generous in donations for building and repair and other needs.

There is a story that Cannington was the birth-place of the celebrated Rosamund de Clifford, and that "within the walls of its priory she received such an education as the age afforded". Whether the story has the slightest foundation has not been established, nor even whether it is of any great antiquity. Little is known with certainty of Fair Rosamund except that Henry II built several bowers or, in modern parlance, small houses for her occupation, and that when she died in 1177 her body was buried in the choir of Godstow Nunnery, near Woodstock. The king caused an elaborate monument to be erected over her grave, but after his death, St. Hugh of Avalon, bishop of Lincoln, forced the nuns to have the tomb demolished, and the body of Rosamund reburied outside their Church. He feared — and apparently not without reason — that miracles would be alleged to take place in its vicinity. We are obliged to accept the familiar trappings of Rosamund's story — the maze at Woodstock, the silken clue, the dagger and the bowl of poison — as figments of imagination introduced in a later age. There is reason to believe, however, that she was a patroness of the arts and expert in embroidery.

The last of the de Curci lords of Stoke of the male line died c. 1194. The heiress was his sister, Alice, widow of Henry de Cornhill, by whom she had had a daughter, Joan, whose wardship was sold by the crown in 1196 to Hugh de Neville. Eventually he married her. In 1197, Warin FitzGerold, chamberlain of the royal exchequer, bought the hand of Alice de Cornhill from Richard I for the enormous sum of a thousand marks, and thus acquired the honor of Curci and, incidentally, the patronage of Cannington priory. The patronage was attached to the manor of Radway in Cannington, a member of the honor.

The FitzGerolds were on good terms with king John in the early years of his reign. He stayed at Stogursey as their guest when he was on a hunting expedition in September 1210, and gave his host 20s. for his play (*ad ludum suum*). In course of time, Warin's relations with the king deteriorated, and he was one of the barons responsible for the terms of Magna Carta.

Alice FitzGerold had by her second husband a daughter, Margaret, who was married at an early age to Baldwin de Redvers, son and heir apparent of William, earl of Devon. The fortunes to which they were the heirs were both very considerable. On 1 September 1216, Baldwin died aged only about sixteen years. Margaret had already borne him a son. Although her father was still living, she fell into the clutches of king John, who within seven weeks of Baldwin's death compelled her to marry the notorious Falk de Breauté. The death of king John occurred a few days after the marriage, and one of the first acts of Henry III, or of those acting in his name, was to cause Falk to have seisin of Stogursey.

The nuns of Cannington can have had nothing to fear from Warin FitzGerold, but it is not to be believed that Falk resisted the temptation to bully them provided by his position as patron, for "he feared not God, neither regarded man". It is recorded that in the days of his greatness, when he was almost as powerful as the king, having slain a monk of St. Alban's and appropriated much property belonging to the community, he was alarmed by a dream. It seemed to him that a huge stone fell from the tower of the Abbey and crushed him. On the advice of his wife, he sent a message to the abbot of St. Alban's and later strode into the chapter-house of the abbey, carrying a birch rod and followed by a train of knights similarly equipped. Thereupon Falk stripped and was flogged by the monks, afterwards receiving absolution; but before leaving the chapter-house he defied the abbot and refused restitution of the stolen property. Modern historians have quoted the story to show that Falk had some religious, or at any rate superstitious, feeling. The medieval chroniclers were awed and fascinated by his iniquity.

The famous siege of Stogursey, which took place in 1224, was followed by the fall of Falk de Breauté. Hugh de Neville was allowed to hold Stoke in right of his wife, the elder daughter of Alice de Curci. In 1266, his grandson, another Hugh de Neville, supported the popular side in the barons' war, and the castle was bestowed on Robert Waleran, a trusted servant of Prince Edward. Orders for the destruction of Stogursey castle had been given at frequent intervals since the death of king John, and it is inferred that it was little but a heap of rubble when Waleran took possession. He held a position corresponding to that of a modern Quartermaster-General, and in view of the danger of attack from Wales, seems to have been

authorized to build, within the enceinte of the demolished walls, the small castle of which the ruins still remain.

On the death of Robert Waleran in 1273, he was succeeded by his nephew, Robert, who was mentally deficient (*fatuus*). Robert was in turn succeeded by his brother, John, who also was mentally deficient, but lived until 1309. Their relatives, sir Alan Plukenet, and his son of the same name, acted successively as guardians of the unfortunate brothers. The younger sir Alan was found in 1309 to be the heir of Stoke, but Stogursey, Radway and the hundred of Cannington were transferred to sir Robert Fitzpaine, first lord Fitzpaine, in whose hands they had been since March 1308. No doubt this was fortunate for the nuns of Cannington; the younger sir Alan was over-masterful, as may be judged from a letter written in June 1315 by bishop John de Droghensford to the rectors of Curry Malet and Tintinhull. The bishop explained that sir Alan's mother, lady de Plukenet, who had lately died, had willed her body to be buried in Sherborne Minster, but that her son had buried her in a more humble place. Desiring to give effect to the wishes of the deceased, the bishop had sent the rural dean of Crewkerne to sir Alan at Haselbury with a letter monitory, but the said knight in his rage seized the rural dean by the throat and squeezed out blood. The rural dean escaped, but sir Alan retook him and made him swallow the letter and the wax seal. Upon the facts becoming known, a sentence of major excommunication ensued, but the knight proceeded to remove the heart from the body, thereby incurring a further excommunication. He intended, no doubt, to bury the body at Sherborne and the heart at Haselbury³. The two rectors were instructed to cite sir Alan to appear before the bishop. A copy of the letter was to be served in the manor house of Haselbury or was to be placed on the altar of the parish Church. Sir Alan obeyed, and on being charged with having forced the rural dean to swallow the letter monitory, denied it, stating that not believing the dean to be the bishop's messenger, he had indeed caused him to be severely beaten; there had been no other ill-treatment. He admitted that he saw the dean swallow the letter, but uncompelled, though he supposed the dean might have been alarmed by his threats. His

³ The practice of heart-burial was not approved by the ecclesiastical authorities; indeed, sir John de Meriet had been excommunicated in the previous year *occasione exenterationis uxoris suae defunctae*. *S.R.S.*, I, 70, 88-90.

conscience was much grieved. The bishop, considering his contrition, pronounced absolution, and on condition of his satisfying the injured dean, restored him to the unity of the Church.

The first lord Fitzpaine having died in 1315 was succeeded by his son, and early in 1317, the prioress of Cannington, Emma de Bytelescomb, resigned her office⁴. There was some irregularity in the election of the new prioress, and the bishop John de Drokensford intervened. He issued a commission to Thomas de Dillington, precentor, and Anthony de Bradeney, canon of Wells, empowering them as he was prevented from being present in person, on Tuesday next after the feast of St. Mark, in the Church of Wiveliscombe, to examine and proceed against certain delinquents and certain misbehaving sisters of the priory of Cannington, and also to prorogue the enquiry to the next juridical day after the feast of the Invention of the Holy Cross. The commission was dated 24 April 1317. Accordingly, on 4 May, Agnes de Novo Mercato and Sybilla de Horsey, sisters of the house, appeared personally before the bishop, the former on her own part and that of her sisters, and presented dame Matilda de Morton, who also appeared in person, as elected to the office of prioress. On her being questioned whether all things had been done in the election according to law, it was found that the presentation was without the necessary authority. The act was accordingly pronounced invalid, but at the sisters' urgent entreaty and the request of lord Fitzpaine, the patron, who was also present, another day was assigned. On 10 May, Matilda de Morton appeared before the bishop's commissaries, with the sisters, Agnes de Novo Mercato and Amabilia Trivet. Agnes exhibited a written declaration by which it appeared that she and Amabilia were empowered to petition in their own name and that of the convent that the previous election should be confirmed. It was further declared verbally by Gilbert de Shepton, clerk, that the election had taken place after the usual religious solemnities, and that it was irrevocable. In conclusion, there was exhibited the decree of the election, which had been proceeded with only after the bishop's acceptance of the resignation of dame Emma de Bytelescomb, and after the permission of the patron to elect a successor had been obtained.

⁴ The incident here recorded and the detailed particulars of the affairs of the Priory which follow, as far as the appointment of Johanna Gofyse as prioress in 1440, are taken from Hugo's *Canyngton Priory*.

The commissaries thereupon gave notice to all objectors to declare the reason for their opposition, and appointed 31 May for the next hearing. The bishop issued a new commission to Henry de Schanyngton, archdeacon of Taunton, Thomas de Dillington, precentor, Anthony de Bradeney and William de Lanton, canons of Wells, and Richard de Ford, doctor of laws, to examine the election of Matilda de Morton, the enquiry to be made on the appointed day in the chapter-house of the priory. A special enquiry regarding the voting was to be made secretly and "one by one", and the commissaries were to hear any who desired to offer objections to the election, and to send to the bishop on the Thursday following a faithful account of their proceedings, under the seals of four or at least three of them. They were also to assign 9 June for another meeting which was to be held in the parish Church of Cannington, when they were to proceed in the matter of a new election.

On 31 May, Matilda and the sisters being present, after the reading of the commission, the opponents were cited to appear and offer their objections according to law. Upon this, Johanna de Bratton (or de Bracton), a nun of the priory, fully professed, exhibited in writing a petition against the election and the person of the elect. The commissaries, having given her the aid of counsel in accordance with her request, proceeded to investigate the objections calling before them and examining several of the sisters. Unfortunately the record does not particularise the objections. It may be noted that sister Johanna, who was so insistent on the letter of the law, bore the surname of the great jurist who had died in 1268. He was a west-countryman and is thought to have come from Bratton near Minehead.

On 9 June, the commissaries met in the parish Church of Cannington and heard the evidence of the following sisters, Margery de Wythel, Johanna de Bere, Eugenia Durdent, Alice de Scolond, Alice de Hydon, Johanna de Scolond and Agnes Baril.

On 17 June there was a hearing in the parish Church of Langport where they seem to have examined Walter de Lof, William de Kingeston, John de Sattesden and others. That day and the Saturday following were occupied in these proceedings. The witnesses were examined under oath and their answers written down in full. At length the commissaries pronounced sentences. They found the election of Matilda de Morton, who was unfit and unworthy, "to

be none, frivolous, of no effect, and altogether without force". Further they declared the nuns to have lost their power of election for that turn, and that the appointment had devolved on the bishop or his commissaries. They thereupon selected Johanna de Bere, a nun professed, of lawful age, born of lawful wedlock, able to defend the rights of the priory, of known circumspection both in temporal and spiritual affairs, to be prioress of Cannington.

The matter, however, did not rest there. On 12 July, the bishop issued another commission. It was addressed to the archdeacon of Taunton and William de Lanton, canon of Wells. An infringement of the bishop's jurisdiction was alleged and contempt of his office. What answer was returned is not known, but a few weeks later a commission was addressed to John de Godelee, dean of Wells, and master Henry de Pencery, to accept the resignation of dame Johanna de Beare canonically appointed by the bishop to the office of prioress. The new commissaries were empowered to select some competent sister to fill the vacancy. They chose Matilda de Morton, whom their predecessors had rejected.

In 1332, lord Fitzpaine gave twenty-four acres of land in Cannington and Radway to the priory in aid of the maintenance of a chaplain to celebrate every day in the Church of Cannington for his soul and for the souls of his ancesters and heirs.

Ralph de Salopia, bishop of Bath and Wells, addressed a letter to dame Matilda in 1333 chiding her for not having admitted Alice de Northlode as a nun of the house in accordance with his directions when he was consecrated bishop in 1329. He had claimed the right to appoint a nun in virtue of his recent election after the custom of his predecessors. If the nuns had doubts as to the suitability of Alice de Northlode for the religious life, they were justified in the sequel.

After ruling the priory for nearly seventeen years, dame Matilda resigned her office on 12 January 1334.

Sister Willelma de Blachyngdon was elected prioress on the resignation of dame Matilda, but died two years later on 4 May 1336. The record of the election of the new prioress was entered in the bishop's register with a wealth of detail. Johanna de Bractone, now sub-prioress, wrote to the bishop informing him of the death of dame Willelma de Blachyngdon, and after the customary expression

of obedience, proceeded to give him the particulars of the election of the successor. Further particulars were given in the notary's certificate. After the burial of the deceased prioress, and the petition for and reception of the licence to elect from the patron, lord Fitzpaine, the sisterhood met in their chapter house on 16 May and appointed the day following for the election. On that day they again met and appointed sister Lucy de Raleghe as their procurator. All under ecclesiastical suspension or interdict were then ordered to depart, and three of the sisters Johanna de Beare, Christina Robe and Alice de Holtham, were selected as scrutators to take the votes, enter them in writing, and afterwards publish them. They retired to a corner of the chapter-house and took the votes secretly and one by one. As Agnes de Neumarch was confined to her bed, the scrutators waited on her and received her vote. It appears that there was no secret ballot, but that the votes were announced with the names of the voters. Christina Robe, Alice de Holtham, Margaret de Hampton, Avice Reyners, Lucy de Popham, Johanna de Alwynesheye, Matilda de Northlode, Johanna Trimelet, Alice de Northlode, and Agnes de Nywemarch were for Johanna de Beare. The names of the sisters are given with the variety of spelling of the original record. Johanna de Bracton, sub-prioress, and Johanna de Beare were for Avice Reyners, and Lucy de Raleghe was for Johanna de Bracton. Thus Johanna de Beare who had been appointed prioress by the bishop nineteen years before, but had almost at once been directed to resign the office, was elected prioress in the end. Alice de Holtham solemnly read the election to the assembled sisterhood. They then sang *Te Deum*, and bore the elect to the high altar according to custom, and the same Alice de Holtham, to whom they deputed that duty, announced the election to the clergy and a great number of the laity there present. Afterwards, "about the sixth hour of the same day, the election of said elect was presented to her by the said Alice, and she was questioned as to her assent. The said Johanna elect replied that she wished to deliberate, and having been again questioned and repeatedly urged to comply by the said Alice, in the evening of the same day, being unwilling to resist the Divine will, declared her assent".

The notary stated that John de Middelton, rector of Shepton Beauchamp, and Stephen Tryppe, rector of West Camel, were present, and that the former of them announced the election. On 3 June, being at Wiveliscombe, the bishop confirmed the election,

signified his confirmation to the patron, directed the archdeacon of Taunton to install the prioress, and wrote to the sub-prioress and convent instructing them to accept the elect and to pay her due and canonical obedience.

In October 1336 the bishop wrote to the prioress in very quaint French giving permission for two ladies, Johanna Wason and Maud Poer, with two *dammiselles*, to sojourn at the priory till Easter. Several similar permissions have survived, and it may be inferred that the guest rooms were generally occupied. If the wife of the patron wished to sojourn at the priory, no episcopal permission would have been required, and reading between the lines of the records which have come down to us, we are constrained to believe that Ela, the wife of lord Fitzpaine, availed herself of the privilege. Her indiscretions scandalized the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of Bath and Wells⁵.

Johanna de Beare died in 1343. She was succeeded as prioress by Avice de Reigners, whose rule at Cannington coincided with an unhappy period in English monasticism. The idealism of the thirteenth century had faded. Successive epidemics of the black death were reacting strangely on public morality. It was reported to the bishop that all was not well at Cannington, and on 21 October 1351, he appointed a commission to enquire into the alleged irregularities. The commission found that three of the nuns, one of whom was sister Alice de Northlode who had been forced on the community by the bishop, had not behaved in a becoming manner. The prioress herself had been guilty of simony and other misdemeanours. The commissioners directed that until it should be otherwise ordered, two of the sisters, discreet and circumspect, should be joined with the prioress in the administration of the temporalities of the house, and that no secular person should be allowed to sojourn therein. The government of the priory was thenceforth to be more stringent. There is no reason to suppose that there was any recurrence of such unfortunate incidents as those of 1351.

In 1354 permission was granted to Isolda, wife of John Bicombe, to reside in the priory from March until August. Lord Fitzpaine died in November of the same year, and Ela, lady Fitzpaine survived him only until February 1356. Her daughter, Isabel, was deprived

⁵ *S.R.S.*, IX, 87.

of the greater part of the Fitzpaine inheritance, and Stogursey castle, the manor of Radway with the patronage of Cannington priory, and the hundred of Cannington and much other property passed to sir Robert de Grey, whose mother had been a Fitzpaine, under a settlement made in 1324. Sir Robert at once took the name Fitzpaine. He was never summoned to parliament as a baron, and the claim to the Fitzpaine barony so often pressed by his descendants the Percys, was clearly without foundation. The claim to the barony rested with the heirs of Isabel, who married sir John Chidioc of Chidioc in Dorset. Sir John gave the rent and advowson of the Church of Witheridge in Devon to Cannington priory in 1354. This was a valuable accession to the nuns. Their original endowments, which had been no more than sufficient two hundred years earlier, were no longer adequate.

The surviving records of the priory from the death of bishop Ralph de Salopia in 1363 until the dissolution of the priory are neither full nor numerous.

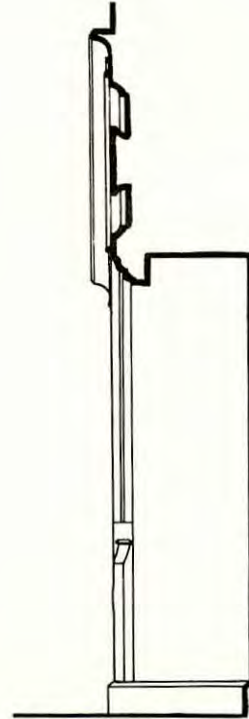
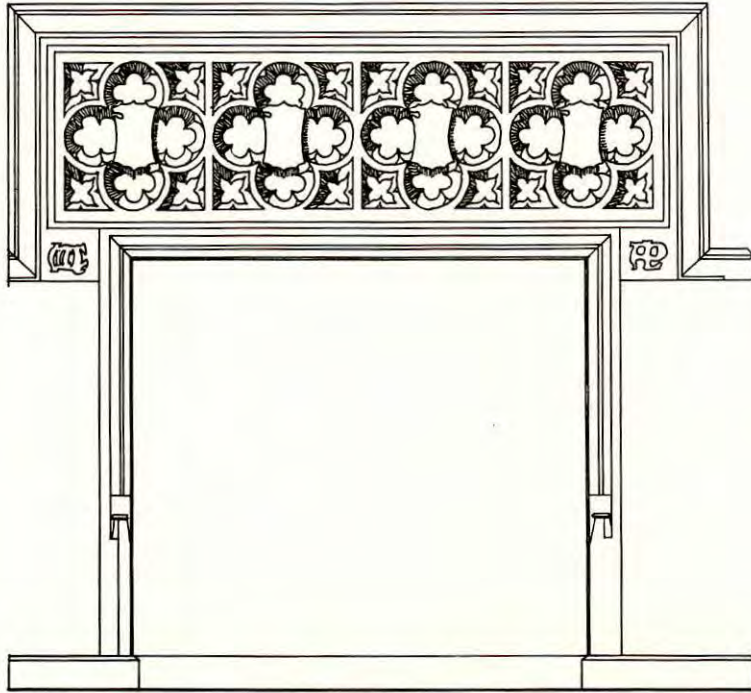
A certain Roger Montfort died in 1368. He was found at an enquiry, held at Ilminster two years later, to have been an outlaw possessed of no lands on the day of the promulgation of his outlawry, or afterwards till his death, but only of a corrody for life at Cannington by concession of the prioress. The corrody was of the yearly value of forty shillings. The sheriff of Somerset was the receiver of the said corrody for the use of the king.

In 1382, Robert Crosse, parson of the Church of Spaxton, gave six messuages, one hundred and nine acres of arable land, and eight acres of meadow, with appurtenances, in Pawlett, to the prioress and convent, for her and her successors, to find two sufficient and good wax candles, of the kind called 'torches', one at the right and one at the left of the high altar in the priory Church, to burn through and from the time of the consecration of the elements daily to the conclusion of the service.

In 1412 the prioress Johanna — we do not know her surname with certainty but she may have been a de Chesildon — found herself involved in a legal process for neglect and violation of contract. At an enquiry held at Stogursey before Robert Veele, the king's escheator in Somerset, it was found that the 'dominus de Coursy' had at some former time given to the prioress of Cannington and

her successors certain lands, tenements, meadows, pastures, wood, and the tithes of corn, and the rest of the small tithes in Pederdam by Combwich and in Combwich, to find a fit chaplain who should celebrate divine service for ever, praying for the souls of the kings of England and their successors; to wit, in the chapel of St. Leonard at Combwich, on every other Sunday and on every other double festival throughout the year; and also in the chapel of St. James at Pederdam, on every other Sunday and on every other double festival throughout the year; that the prioress had ceased to find such a chaplain for the chapel of St. James at Pederdam for the five years last past; that the lands and tithes in Pederdam were of the annual value of four marcs, and in Combwich of ten marcs; and further, that the prioress had appropriated the issues and profits. The prioress was accordingly called to account, and the case was heard in Trinity Term, 1414. The barons of the Court of Exchequer agreed that the prioress should be warned by writ of *scire facias* to show cause why she should not account and do satisfaction to the king out of the profits of the said lands from the time of cessation of divine service to that of the present hearing. After various legal preliminaries, the prioress replied by Richard Hukelegh, her attorney, that —“inasmuch as in the aforesaid Inquisition no finding was arrived at as to what name the aforesaid lord de Cursy bore, nor what lands or tithes were given to the aforesaid predecessor of the prioress and her successors, nor that the lands and tithes aforesaid were given before or after the passing of the Statute of Mortmain, nor that the king nor any of his progenitors were the founders of the church or priory of Cannington, nor that the then king nor any of his progenitors had given the aforesaid lands and tithes or any other to the aforesaid prioress or any of her predecessors — she sought a cessation of the action and a release in respect of the issues specified”. “The judges ruled in her favour, and decided that the Inquisition was not sufficient in law for putting the prioress on her answer, or for the delivery and seisin of the aforesaid lands and tithes into the king’s hand, or for burdening the prioress in respect of their issues. Judgment was accordingly given for the defendant”. It would not have been convenient to the prioress to produce her charters, but it is tantalizing not to know whether the early documents of the priory had already been lost, nor whether there was already an element of uncertainty about the identity of the founder and early benefactors.

PLATE I



CANNINGTON COURT
FIREPLACE IN PRIORRESS'S LODGING
(Scale $\frac{1}{2}$ inch = 1 foot)

J. Davey, del.

The reason for the cessation of service at Pederdam was, no doubt, that the village was suffering from the inundations which eventually destroyed it. A letter from Pope Martin V. written in 1427 refers to injury sustained by the priory of Cannington *propter ipsius maris fluxus et refluxus et alios diversos casus*.

In 1440, the prioress Johanna de Chesildon died, and sister Johanna Gofyse or Gouvis was elected in her place. The former may well have been a daughter of John Chesildon, squire of Holcombe Rogus. The latter must have belonged to the very ancient Norman family of the Gouvis, long seated at Kingsdon in Somerset, and which was still represented in Dorset at that time.

The ownership of Stogursey and the patronage of Cannington were acquired by Richard, lord Poynings, through his marriage to Isabel, daughter of sir Robert Fitzpaine. Lord Poynings died at Villalpando in Spain in 1387. In due course his grand-daughter, Alianor, brought the Poynings estates to her husband, Henry Percy, who was summoned to parliament as lord Poynings. In 1445, he succeeded his father as earl of Northumberland, and in 1461, he was killed at the battle of Towton leading the vanguard of the Lancastrians. It was while he was in possession of Stogursey, that Henry VI bestowed the endowment of the alien priory there on the new foundation at Eton. After the battle of Towton, the estates of the Percys were forfeited by attainder, but Alianor Poynings was permitted to keep Stogursey and certain other properties of her own inheritance. Her son was imprisoned in the Tower of London from 1461 to 1469, and during those years she was certainly patroness of Cannington. Whether she passed part of her time in Somerset as we should like to believe, has not been discovered. She lived on until 1482. Her son had made his peace with Edward IV in 1469, and had been restored in honours.

There is a carved stone fireplace at Cannington Court (still *in situ* but in the wall of a passage sliced from a large room) which may safely be dated *c.* 1475. The deep carving of the four quatrefoil panels, and the tall narrow tilting-shields with serrated edges in chief and in base, are characteristic of the latter part of the reign of Edward IV. There are monograms on either side. That on the left defies elucidation. That on the right may be read as A.P., and it has been suggested that the fireplace was a gift from Alianor Poynings to the prioress. (Plate I).

The nave and chancel of the parish Church of Cannington were rebuilt towards the end of the fifteenth century, the earlier tower being retained. As lords of the manor and patrons of the living, the nuns of Cannington were responsible for both nave and chancel, and they are thought to have obtained contributions towards the cost from their patron, Henry Algernon, fifth earl of Northumberland. Two representations of the Poynings badge — a dragon's head between wings addorsed — may be seen flanking the porch. The Church seems to have been enlarged and lengthened at the rebuilding, and the axis, as may be seen on examination of the east side of the tower, was swung southwards to avoid the priory Church, the position of which, was so "hard anaxid" to the new chancel that no windows were inserted on the northern side.

The last prioress, Cecilia de Verney, was appointed in 1504. She was a daughter of William de Verney of Fairfield from whom the present owner of Fairfield has inherited in direct succession.

An account of a visitation of the priory, made by the bishop's vicar-general in 1526, has survived in a note-book of the time of Henry VIII, preserved in the Diocesan Registry at Wells. The visitation took place on 21 August. The prioress and nuns, having assembled in the chapter-house, were questioned as to the state of the sisterhood. The opportunity was taken to elect a sub-prioress, the office being vacant. Dame Cecilia, on being examined, stated that sister Elizabeth Bowler⁶ on pretext of some past indisposition, was not attending services in the Church. She also stated that sister Juliana Burges was arrogant. Sister Elizabeth Bowler voted for the appointment of Johanna Towse as sub-prioress, and said that insufficient provision was made for the needs of infirm nuns. She also said that sister Juliana Burges was "stuck up" (*elatum habere animum*), but that otherwise all was well. Sister Letesia Pomerey, sister Juliana Burges, and sister Radegunda Tilly gave their votes for the election of Johanna Towse, but sister Margaret Ashley said "she cared not whom they chose provided the choice was appropriate". Sister Johanna Towse said that all was well except that sister Juliana Burges was somewhat arrogant.

⁶ 'Bowler' or 'Bowser' seem to be sixteenth century variants of the name 'Bouchier'. Catherine Bowser or Bouchier was last prioress of Minchin Buckland.

On the following day, sister Johanna Towse was duly installed as sub-prioress. She is believed to have been the seventh daughter of John Towse of Taunton, a wealthy cloth-dyer, and perhaps also wool-merchant⁷.

It may be seen from the visitation of 1526 that there were only seven nuns at Cannington in August of that year. We have no information as to the number of the sisters ten years later at the time of the dissolution: dame Cecilia, however, still survived as prioress.

The new learning, half-assimilated by public opinion, had destroyed the general acceptance of the monastic life as part of the established order of society. Cannington was one of the first nunneries to be dissolved. The formal act of suppression took place on 23 September 1536, and the property of the priory passed into the hands of the king. It consisted of the lands round the priory, the rectory with the manor of Cannington, single tenements at Blagdon and Fiddington, land at Pawlett, single tenements at Stowey, at Bristol, and at Skilgate. In Dorset, there was the free chapel of Puddlewalterston and a small property annexed. In Devon, the rectory of Witheridge with a small property attached; and also a small property at Goodleigh.

II.

In 1538, Henry VIII "of special grace, and in consideration of good, true and faithful service" granted to his servant Edward Rogers who had been in possession as "farmer" or lessee since the dissolution, "the whole house and site of the late priory of Cannington in the county of Somerset, and all the Church, bell-tower, and cemetery of the said late priory. Also all messuages, houses, buildings, granaries, stables, dove-cotes, gardens, orchards, &c., as well within as without, and adjacent or near to the site, sept, circuit, precinct, &c. of the said late priory. Also all the manor of Cannington, and all the rectory of Cannington and the nomination and presentation to the vicarage of Cannington whensoever vacant, with all the rights, members and appurtenances belonging to the said late priory. Also all messuages, lands, tenements, mills, meadows, pastures, woods, pensions, portions, tithes, offerings and emoluments whatsoever, as well temporal as spiritual, situate, lying or being in Cannington,

⁷ *S.R.S.*, *XXXIX*, 221; *XIX*, 25.

Pawlett, Stowey, and Fiddington in the county of Somerset or elsewhere soever". The property was rated at the clear annual value of forty-five pounds, eight shillings and ten pence; and it was to be held by Edward Rogers, "and the heirs male of his body lawfully begotten, in chief, by the service of a tenth part of one knight's fee, and a yearly rent of sixteen pounds, eight shillings and ten pence". The grant was dated at Westminster on 8 May. In 1546, Rogers received a similar grant of the manor of Radway and the hundred of Cannington.

In comparison with the terms of many grants of monastic property made by Henry VIII, the provisions were not generous. The relatively high rent to the crown, and the restriction to heirs male, were irksome. A little later, the king granted or sold outlying portions of the estates of the priory to certain of those purchasers of monastic property whose names occur so frequently in the records of the time.

Edward Rogers was born *c.* 1498. He was one of the first Devonians who carved out careers for themselves at the court of the Tudors. There can be no doubt that he obtained his initial introduction to the great world through his grandmother, Catherine Courtenay, who died in 1515. She was the daughter of sir William Courtenay of Powderham and was married at an early age to sir St. Claire Pomeroy — a fitting alliance. There were no children of the marriage, and after his death, she married Thomas Rogers of Bradford-on-Avon, serjeant-at-law, by whom she had a son, George Rogers. She married thirdly sir William Huddesfield, Attorney General to Edward IV, and subsequently a councillor of Henry VII. George Rogers held a few scattered properties in Somerset, but is described in a herald's visitation as of Luppitt in Devon. There, as is believed, he acted as steward to the Carews who had their chief seat at Mohun's Ottery in that parish, and with whom there was a close connection through the Courtenays and the Huddesfields — a connection very valuable to his son, Edward. As his cousins, the Carews, advanced in favour with Henry VIII, so did young Edward Rogers advance at court in a somewhat humbler sphere. His name occurs in 1524 as "of the chamber". Later, he was esquire of the body to Henry VIII.

Edward Rogers was bailiff of Sandgate and Hampness from 1534 to 1540. After he became of Cannington, he soon began to take

some part in county affairs, and in 1544 was captain of two hundred men in the local musters. His favour continued under Edward VI, and he was knighted at the young king's coronation. In 1549 he became one of the chief gentlemen of the privy chamber. When the Protector Somerset fell in 1550, sir Edward Rogers was for a time confined to his house in connection with the misdemeanours of the earl of Arundel, but his credit was not seriously injured, and in 1552 he received a grant of a hundred marks a year. In 1553, he first sat in parliament as a member for Somerset, and in the same year obtained a grant of East Pennard, one of the numerous estates which had been forfeited on the attainder of the Protector. He also had a house at Pilton which he sometimes occupied. In February 1554, sir Edward was imprisoned in the Tower by queen Mary Tudor. Having remained there for about a year, he was released and allowed to go abroad, but in 1558 he was again in England and was a member for Somerset in the last parliament of the reign.

When Elizabeth I ascended the throne, sir Edward was too old to be regarded as a rising courtier, but the young queen trusted him, and at her first privy council she made him a privy councillor and deputy captain of the guard. Later, she made him captain of the guard, and in 1560 comptroller of the household. He continued to sit as a member for Somerset. In 1565 or 1566 he resigned the comptrollership, and was speaker of the house of commons in the latter year, and until he died in 1567.

A portrait of sir Edward Rogers, bearing the date 1567, but probably painted a few years earlier, as he is shown holding the white wand of the comptroller, was acquired for the National Portrait Gallery in 1951. (Pl. II).

It is unlikely that many changes were made in the buildings at Cannington in the time of sir Edward Rogers or of his son, sir George, apart from the destruction of the nuns' Church and bell-tower. Sir Edward, however, seems to have inserted the doorway with four-centred arch and carved spandrels, still to be seen above a modern building on the east of the courtyard, but formerly approached by a flight of steps. This doorway led into a screens-passage introduced at the end of the nuns' dormitory, and the room was thus turned into a hall of normal domestic type.

Sir George Rogers was recorded to be forty years of age and upwards when he inherited. He had a far less active career than his

father, but was a county member in the parliament of 1571, and served as sheriff for Somerset in the same year⁸.

The interest in the neighbourhood of Porlock, which was to play so important a part in the fortunes of the Rogers family, began through sir George's wife, Jane, daughter of Edmund Wynter. Her mother was Eleanor, daughter of Silvester Sydenham, and she acquired a rent charge in the manor of Bossington near Porlock through the Sydenhams. From her father, she inherited several manors in Cornwall. Sir George died in 1582, leaving a direction in his will that his widow should occupy his mansion at Cannington, but she preferred to spend as much time as possible at Bath in order to be near her daughter Mary, the wife of the courtier-poet, the Rabelaisian sir John Harington of Kelston. "Dame Jane Rogers, by her deed dated 20th September 1594, gave to her only daughter, Mary, her own coat of arms (Wynter) with five others quartered therewith", and this remarkable transaction was "afterwards confirmed by the College of Arms". The quarterings were brought in by the heiresses of certain families whose manors had been inherited by Jane Rogers — manors which Harington was hoping to acquire. When she lay dying in 1602, he went to Cannington, broke open her chests, and endeavoured to take possession of her property. Her death was followed by a Star Chamber suit⁹.

The priory may first have been called the "Court House" or "Cannington Court" in the time of sir George's son, Edward. When Edward Rogers inherited, he seems only lately to have attained his majority. It is inferred that he decided at once to modernize the ancient buildings. The work executed for him is so similar to that carried out at Combe Sydenham for one of his Sydenham cousins a year or two previously that we may presume the same builder-architect was employed. All the medieval windows at Cannington were ripped out, and large Elizabethan windows, well-proportioned, but with mullions and transoms on which the moulding was of somewhat indifferent quality, were inserted. As the moulding is not of completely consistent design throughout the building, it seems that the whole transformation was not effected

⁸ For the Rogers family, see *Brown's mss.*, Taunton Castle.

⁹ Sir John Maclean, *Trigg Minor*, III, 258; Coll. of Arms mss., Isaac Heard's *Misc. Pedigrees*, VI, fo. 385; Star Chamber Suit Depositions, Coll. of Arms, *Talbot Papers*, Vol. M, 249.

simultaneously; probably the work was carried through within a decade. The particularly large windows in the west wall of the former dormitory were, perhaps, the last to be provided.

The oblong block on the north of the courtyard, the original outline of which has become blurred by later accretions and can only be traced on a ground-plan, had, no doubt, contained the refectory and domestic offices. It was used still for domestic purposes.

The range of buildings, which forms the west front, is thought to have contained the prioress's lodging to the south of the entrance, and to the north, perhaps the guest-chambers of the priory. This range may have been prolonged northward by Edward Rogers, but it is difficult here to distinguish Tudor from medieval masonry, for the traditional method of building was used and the same local stone in both periods. The staircase-turret in a corner of the courtyard, however, is certainly post-reformation.

The porch added to the west facade by the young Edward Rogers must originally have been very similar to that at Combe Sydenham. Shorn of most of its ornament, it is scarcely worthy of its position. The effect of the whole facade was marred towards the end of the seventeenth century by the addition of a third storey.

It is surprising that the medieval oak grill, heavily bound in iron, was retained at the time of the Tudor reconstruction. The grill still survives and is in the form of a pair of gates which fold back into recesses in the walls on either side of the entrance to the inner courtyard. There can be little doubt that it marks the point beyond which no lay person was allowed to pass without special permission from the prioress. The design and workmanship suggest the mid-fourteenth century, and it may well have been erected after the troubles of 1351. A simple entrance with a horizontal beam above, supporting a superstructure, was common in the bartons of west Somerset. A good example may be seen at Bratton Court. The shape of the grill indicates that the early entrance to the inner buildings of the priory was of this primitive type. A more imposing gateway must have been a feature of the entrance to the precinct, the walls of which, preserved by the Rogers family, remain almost intact to the present day.

The young Edward Rogers married Catherine, one of the daughters of sir John Popham of Wellington, Attorney General to Elizabeth I, and eventually Lord Chief Justice. Popham's sons-in-law were chosen with care.

In 1606, Edward Rogers bought Worthy manor near Porlock, and in 1610 he acquired the whole manor of Porlock from a company of land adventurers for the sum of £1,913. We know that he had four sons and seven daughters, but there may have been other children who did not survive infancy. When Edward Rogers died in 1627, he was succeeded at Cannington by his eldest son, Francis, the Porlock estate being left to his second son, George¹⁰.

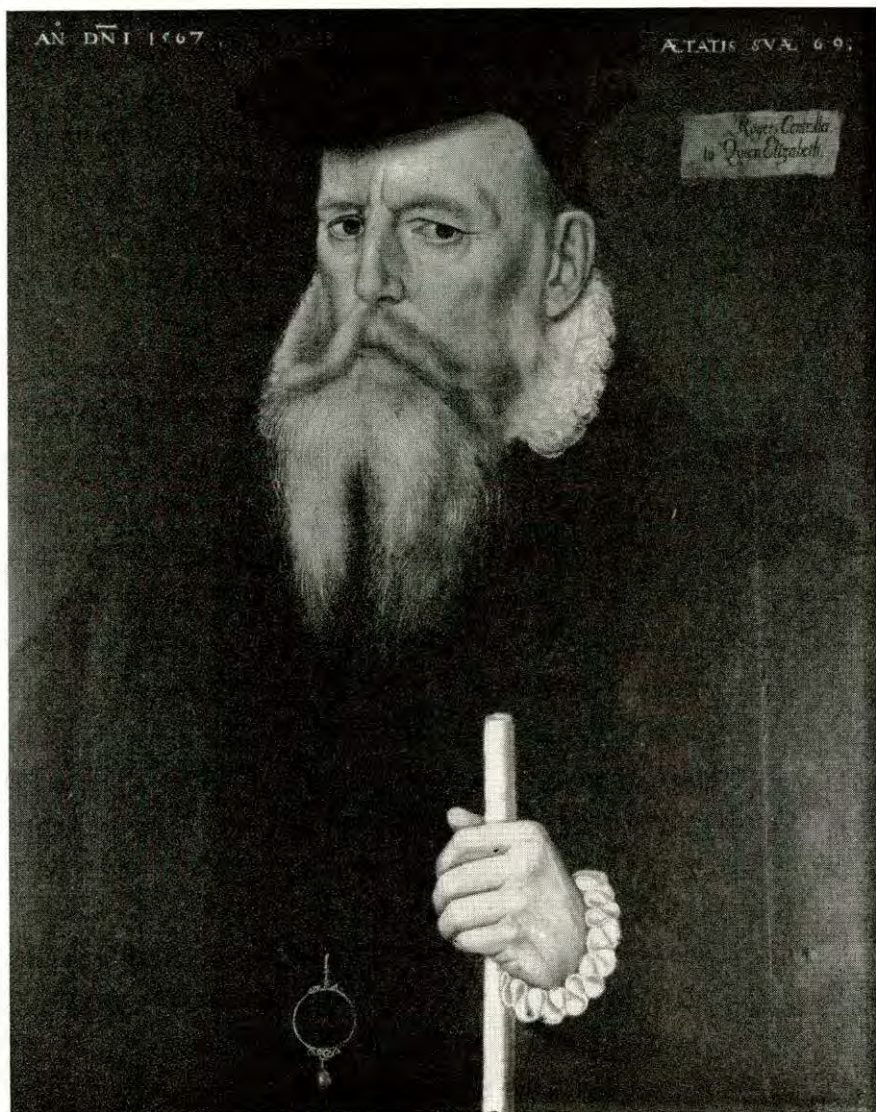
Francis Rogers was knighted by Charles I, but we have singularly few particulars of his career. By his wife, Helena, daughter of sir Hugh Smyth of Long Ashton, he left at his death on 28 August 1638, an only son, Hugh, stated then to have been about sixteen and a half years old. Hugh married, apparently within a year of his father's death, Ann, daughter of sir Edward Bayntun of Bromham in Wilts.

George Rogers, the eldest of Hugh's uncles, died unmarried in 1637, leaving the Porlock estates to his younger brothers, Edward and Henry, but Hugh was to inherit them if he attained his majority. They were to be held in tail male. Edward Rogers died in 1639. The succession to Cannington was becoming precarious. The only surviving heirs male of sir Edward Rogers were Hugh, the young squire, and Henry, who was unmarried.

At the outbreak of the civil war, Hugh joined his Popham cousins and his father-in-law, sir Edward Bayntun, who were actively engaged on the side of the parliament, and in due course he became a colonel in the parliamentary army. He died in September 1653, and was buried by night in the chancel of Cannington Church. Somerset Quarter Sessions records contain depositions regarding certain happenings at the funeral. It seems that John Skutt of Kingston, who was present at the burial, stooped down in the stairs of the vault and took away a linen sheet that was on the coffin; and that being met afterwards by Christopher Gadd of Cheddon and asked what he had under his arm, Skutt said, "I could find it in my heart to have a bout at those scutcheons", and further said, "Yes, I have gotten the linen". Presumably the linen sheet was a pall on which coats of arms were painted. On being examined, Skutt stated that "he had taken the sheet from the coffin and had carried it through the Church with intent to convey it into the house, but a tall woman meeting him by the way, demanded the same of him,

¹⁰ Chadwick Healey, *History of Part of West Somerset*, 292, 322.

PLATE II



By permission of the Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery
SIR EDWARD ROGERS OF CANNINGTON

the which he delivered unto her, but her name he knew not"¹¹.

The Cannington and the Porlock estates passed to Henry Rogers, but Hugh left a daughter, Helena, who married her cousin, sir Francis Popham of Littlecote. Henry Rogers was also a parliamentarian, and was pricked as sheriff of Somerset a year after his nephew's death. He was active as a magistrate under the Commonwealth and after the Restoration, but he was still unmarried, and it became accepted that he would be the last male descendant of sir Edward Rogers, and that before long, Cannington would lapse to the Crown. In a long will, he provided elaborately for the succession to his other estates, and he founded a valuable charity at Cannington. Much property passed to the descendants of his sister, Amy, who had married Henry St. Barbe of Ashington near Yeovil and Broadlands in Hampshire. She had died in 1621 aged thirty-three, and there is a monument in local alabaster to her memory in Cannington Church. The Porlock estates passed first to Henry Rogers's great-great-nephew, Alexander Popham of Littlecote, who died without male issue in 1705. It was provided in the will that if the male issue of Alexander Popham failed, the Porlock estates were to pass to the heir of line of Henry's sister, Mary, who had married sir George Winter of Dyrham in Gloucestershire, son of the John Winter who had been Drake's second in command on the adventurous voyage to the Pacific in 1577. In 1705, William Blathwayt was the representative of sir George Winter and Mary Rogers, his wife. He was the son of William III's Secretary of State, William Blathwayt, who had won the hand of Mary Winter, heiress of Dyrham — as it is said, by defeating a rival in a duel in Dyrham park. The Blathwayt family are accounted the representatives of Henry Rogers, and still own the greater part of the Porlock estates.

In anticipation of the reversion of Cannington, Charles II in 1662 granted a financial interest in the property for thirty-one years after it should lapse to the crown, to sir John Mennes, an old cavalier, and to Robert Phelips, who had acted as guide during part of the flight from Worcester — a younger brother of the squire of Montacute. A life interest was also granted to sir Thomas Daniell. But Henry Rogers was "an unconscionable time a'dying", and was still alive ten years later.

¹¹ This incident is dealt with more fully by Dr. Thomas Barnes in *Somerset and Dorset Notes and Queries*, XXVI, 230.

In 1672, the reversion seemed to be imminent, and on 15 July, Charles II granted Cannington, subject to the interest of Henry Rogers and the heirs of sir John Mennes and of Robert Phelips, to be held in socage by Thomas, Lord Clifford of Chudleigh, Lord Treasurer of the household. Henry Rogers died on or about the second of September of the same year.

III.

Thomas Clifford of Ugbrooke in the parish of Chudleigh came of a Devonian family. He was born in 1630, and was at Oxford during the Commonwealth, taking his degree in 1650. He afterwards read law and became a barrister of the Middle Temple. At the restoration he was elected member for Totnes, but his duties in parliament did not prevent him from distinguishing himself in several naval actions, and he was knighted. When the Dutch war ended in 1669, as a zealous promoter of the French interest, he was opposed to the ensuing treaty, and became one of the five councillors who formed the *Cabal*. The treaty of Dover of June 1670 was mainly his work, and in 1672 he was created Baron Clifford of Chudleigh. He was Lord High Treasurer from November 1672 until June 1673, when, the Test Act having been passed, as he had already declared himself a Roman Catholic, he felt bound to resign. He died at Ugbrooke on 17 October 1673, thirteen months after the grant of Cannington had taken effect. Pepys wrote of him in 1666 as "much set by at Court for his activity in going to sea, and stoutness everywhere and stirring up and down"; and Evelyn described him later as "a valiant uncorrupt gentleman, ambitious not covetous; generous, passionate, a most constant sincere friend".

The second Lord Clifford was only about ten years old when he succeeded his father. It is believed that he added the third storey to the west front of Cannington Court soon after attaining his majority. Red brick instead of the traditional stone was used, giving an incongruous effect which is further increased by the introduction of *lunette* windows. He died on 12 October 1730, at Cannington, and although a Catholic was buried in the parish Church. The fine, wrought-iron grill on the north side of the chancel seems to have been erected by him to divide the family vault from the body of the Church and the gaze of the protestant congregation. Towards the end of his life, he is thought to have built the 'chapel' at Cannington

Court, causing it to be specially designed for the performance of sacred music¹². This chapel or music room is not only by far the most interesting architectural feature at Cannington, but one of the finest Georgian rooms in Somerset. The proportions are more distinguished than those of the large rooms in Bath designed by the Wood family at a slightly later date. It is octagonal and has a coffered dome of the type so frequently introduced for acoustic reasons in the eighteenth century music rooms. The Corinthian capitals of the pilasters appear to be of precisely the same design as those in the hall at Wingerworth in Derbyshire — a house built for sir Windsor Hunloke, who also adhered to the old faith. The architect employed at Wingerworth is said to have been ‘Smith of Warwick’, and it is possible that he was employed also by Lord Clifford. The effectiveness of the room has lost nothing by the simplicity of its present decoration. Originally, no doubt, it was coloured more richly and in more variety. The large, flat panels were, perhaps—again for acoustic reasons — covered with tapestry or hangings.

The six elder sons of the second Lord Clifford died during his lifetime, and he was succeeded by his seventh son, who survived him only eighteen months. His grandson, Hugh, fourth Lord Clifford, rebuilt the house at Ugbrooke in 1760 and died in 1783. It is doubtful whether he lived at Cannington in his later years, for Cannington Court fell into disrepair and is described by Collinson in 1791 as “the old ruinous mansion of the lords Clifford”. The fifth Lord Clifford passed the greater part of his time on the continent, and died at Munich in 1793, being succeeded by his brother, who did not attempt to live at Cannington but converted the house for use once more as a nunnery.

In the reign of Louis XVI there was a religious house in Paris called the Priory of Our Lady of Good Hope — a daughter house of the Abbey of English nuns at Cambay. The nuns were taken from Paris during the Revolution and were imprisoned at Vincennes, but eventually they were able to come to England. They went first to Marnhull in Dorset, and then in 1806 accepted the hospitality of Lord Clifford and came to Cannington. In spite of all the changes that had taken place there since 1536, the building was still admirably adapted for their purposes. They too, like their predecessors at

¹² There is a tradition that the “chapel” was built in 1806, and it may be inferred that it was restored in that year, or that the sanctuary was then added.

Cannington in the middle ages, were Benedictine nuns. They remained at Cannington until 1835 or 1836. The community is now at Colwich in Staffordshire.

When Hugo wrote his notes on *Canyngton Priory*, the house was deserted and tenantless, but in 1863 a community of Sisters of the Most Holy Sacrament came to England from France, and were allowed to settle at Cannington Court. Their house had been at Bollène in the Department of Vauclure. In 1867 the sisterhood acquired St. Paul's House in Taunton.

For many years Cannington Court was used as a school for Roman Catholic boys, but the school was moved eventually to Prior Park on the outskirts of Bath.

In 1919, the tenth Lord Clifford of Chudleigh granted a long lease of Cannington Court to the Somerset County Council, and the house was adapted for use as a Farm Institute.

During the course of eight centuries, the precinct of Cannington has been the setting for very varied activities, but none have been more valuable to the county than that for which it has been used in the past forty years¹³.

¹³ The writer's thanks are due to Dom. Aelred Watkin for information relating to the Priory of Our Lady of Good Hope, and to Mr. I. P. Collis, County Archivist, for assistance in research.