

## Thomas Chard, D.D., Last Abbot of Ford

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IN connection with the Society's recent visit to Ford Abbey, it may be of interest to consider briefly some of those points of controversy with which the name of the last Abbot is associated.

Questions have been raised with regard to his name, his birthplace, and his exact ecclesiastical status.

It was in 1891 that the Rev. F. Weaver, formerly Secretary of the Society, published a paper in the *Proceedings*, wherein he propounded the theory that the name of the last Abbot was not Chard but Tybbes, Chard being only an alias, indicating his birthplace.

Mr. Weaver's argument from the analogy of certain other personages, whose names are adduced, showing that in their case an alias was used in this way, might seem at first sight sufficiently specious to justify his contention; especially as he claims to have discovered a family of the name of Tybbes, living at Chard about that period. At the time in question, it was certainly no unusual thing to adopt an alias, and not improbably this additional, or alternative, name was often derived from the birthplace of the person adopting it. But there is no warranty for assuming that such a rule was general; and there appears no sufficient justification for its application to the last Abbot of Ford.

Nearly thirty years earlier than Mr. Weaver's paper the late Dr. James H. Pring, of Taunton,—my father,—published a 'Memoir of Thomas Chard, D.D., Last Abbot of Ford,' in whom, for family reasons, he was much interested. I should myself be more inclined to accept Mr. Weaver's arguments, if I did

not know that the question of the Abbot's name had been carefully considered and investigated by my father, before the publication of his book, and he was led to a contrary conclusion.

I still have in my possession some letters of the late Dr. Oliver, the historian, of Exeter, showing how Dr. Pring had discussed the matter with him, and Dr. Oliver, at least, had arrived at a precisely opposite conclusion to that enunciated by Mr. Weaver. Dr. Oliver strongly held the view, not that Chard was the alias of Tybbes, but that in accordance with the common custom of those days to adopt an alias, 'Tybbes' was the name so used by Abbot Chard. 'I believe,' writes Dr. Oliver, 'that Chard was the paternal name of the last Abbot of Ford, although his old friend and promoter, Bishop Veysey, in his *Register* (vol. i, fol. 40; and fol. 100) styles him simply, Thos. Tybbes.' Dr. Pring appears to think that Tybbes may have been the maiden name of Thomas Chard's mother.

After all, the point really seems to turn upon the place of the last Abbot's birth.

'Chard, Thomas, Doctor of Divinity, and Abbot of Ford, was born,' says Prince, in his *Worthies of Devon*, 'at Traceys Hays, in the parish of Awlescombe. This house took its name from its old lords, the Tracys, whose antiently it was; and was some time part of the mannor of Ivedon, which place also had antiently lords so called; William Ivedon, the last, had issue three daughters, his heirs; married to Stanton, Membiry, and Tracy. Tracy called his part after his own name, in which, after some generations, the heir-female of that tribe, brought it to her husband, Mabbe; and Alice, daughter of Roger Mabbe, being heir to her father, brought it to her husband Chard; from whom it descended unto Thomas Chard, their son; and in that name it continueth this day. Which Thomas, we may suppose, was the father, or grandfather of this Abbot Chard, of whom we are speaking.'

Dr. Oliver, I observe, in one of his letters, characterizes Prince as 'a careless and inaccurate writer, when he has not Sir Wm. Pole, or Wescote, to guide him.' As, however, it appears on reference that the foregoing quotation from Prince's *Worthies* is taken practically word for word from Sir



Wm. Pole's *Description of Devon* (p. 217), it may so far be accepted as accurate.

In fact there is no evidence, so far as I am aware, that this statement about Abbot Chard's birthplace was ever questioned, till Mr. Weaver, assuming his name to be Tybbes, suggested something different.

The 'Mannor of Ivedon,' or parts of it, have been held in the name of Pring since about 1540, and the main portion of the estate is still in my possession. A Daniel Pring, of Ivedon, married a Mary Chard, of Tracy, in 1690. The Tracy estate continued in the hands of the Chards altogether about four hundred years. It has always been a tradition in our family, which may at least be allowed to go for something, that Dr. Thomas Chard, the last Abbot of Ford, was born at Tracy, in the parish of Awliscombe, contiguous to our own property.

But what seems to clinch the matter is this : namely, that the last Abbot of Ford made certain additions and improvements to the parish church of St. Michael, Awliscombe, including a porch, and a window in the s. chantry, of which Dr. Oliver writes in his *Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Devon* : 'The glory of the Church is in its Chantry on the s. side. The whole perpendicular window, with its gorgeous tabernacle-work, deserves to be engraved.'

This fully accords with all we know of Thomas Chard, the last Abbot of Ford, who did so much to add to the architectural beauty of the noble foundation over which he presided.

But, if the name of the last Abbot of Ford, who made these improvements in the church at Awliscombe, was not Chard of Tracy, but Tybbes of Chard, what was his connection with the parish ? What possible reason had he for lavishing his bounty on the parish church of Awliscombe ? On the other hand if, as many authorities tell us and tradition fully upholds, the last Abbot of Ford was Thomas Chard of Tracy, and not Thomas Tybbes of Chard, then we can fully understand his interest in his native parish.

Mr. Weaver, after referring to the Chards of Tracy, makes the astonishing statement, 'there is not the slightest evidence to connect the Abbot with this family, except an account given by Prince.' But in the work carried out by Thomas Chard on

Awliscombe Church, he has himself provided 'evidence' which is both substantial and convincing.

The third point of controversy has to do with Abbot Chard's official ecclesiastical position. He is stated to have been both Abbot and Suffragan Bishop, and doubt has been thrown upon his holding both offices.

Prince, following Anthony Wood, speaks of two Thomas Chards; but there are reasons for doubting this. I may quote again from one of Dr. Oliver's letters.

'Let me begin,' he says, 'by expressing my *unbelief* that Thomas Chard the Abbot of Ford, and Thomas Chard Prior of Montacute, were distinct persons. From all quarters Pluralities were heaped upon Thomas Chard—Bishop of Solubria 'in partibus infidelium,' the Coadjutor or Suffragan of Dr. Hugh Oldham, the Bishop of Exeter,—to support his honourable station; in the same way as Cardinal Wolsey was allowed to hold 'in commendam' the Abbot's rank in St. Alban's Monastery; and the Bishoprick of Winchester, on the death of Richard Fox. The duties of superiority could be exercised by Deputy. . . . In the nine Cathedrals in this country, which were served by a community of Benedictine monks, *viz.* : Bath, Canterbury, Coventry, Durham, Ely, Norwich, Rochester, Winchester and Worcester, their Bishops, whether members of the Secular Clergy, or of any Religious Order, Franciscan, Dominican, etc., always ranked as Abbots of those Benedictine Communities.'

Dr. Pring, in his 'Memoir' of Thomas Chard, draws attention to the fact that 'Dugdale, Cleaveland, Risdon, Lysons and many other authorities make no allusion whatever to any second person of this name; whilst on the other hand several of them concur in speaking of the Thomas Chard who was born at Tracy as being at the same time the last Abbot of Ford and also Suffragan to Bishop Oldham.'

In another of Dr. Oliver's private letters addressed to Dr. Pring (Jan. 22, 1859), it is stated that 'the Episcopal Registers throw no light on the date of Thomas Chard's succession to his office, but at the end of Bishop Oldham's Register are given the several dates of his holding Ordinations, "vice et auctoritate" of his Ordinary, Hugh Oldham, Lord Bishop



of Exeter. The first was in St. Mary's Chapel, within the Palace, 23rd September, 1508,—“consecrationis suæ anno primo,”—and as Bishop of Solubria he performed this office for the said Diocesan Bishop, 38 times; and for his successor, John Veysey, he administered Holy Orders about 34 times.’

All this appears sufficiently succinct to show that the Abbot and the Suffragan was one and the same person. There is moreover an inherent improbability in the existence of two men of the same name, in the same vicinity, possessing similar qualifications, and exercising similar if not identically the same functions at the same time. It is at least more likely that some confusion having arisen through the varied activities and multiplied offices of one man, an erroneous attempt should be made to present him as two different persons.

But this point again may be said to be decided by the material evidence of Abbot Chard's own handiwork; or of work, at least, which he caused to be made.

In a panel, figured in Dr. Pring's book, and described by him as ‘occurring in the frieze over the Cloisters,’ and with which Prof. Hamilton Thompson tells me he is well acquainted *in situ*, we find the initials T. C. (for Thomas Chard) in the upper corners, while the lower corners are occupied with shields bearing respectively an abbot's crozier and a bishop's pastoral staff. Within the lozenge, forming the central feature of the panel, is shown, on the one side, a stag's head cabossed, which appears to have been the recognised armorial device of the Abbey, overlying a bishop's staff; while, on the other side, a scroll inscribed with the name ‘Thos. Chard’ entwines an abbot's crozier. Surmounting the whole appears a bishop's mitre over an abbot's cap.

If not a ‘sermon in stone,’ this is at least a graven guarantee,—*monumentum ære perennius*,—of greater value than any written document, because it represents a record from which the possibility of bias of any kind is excluded.

It may surely be admitted that ‘stronger evidence can scarcely be needed, to prove that Dr. Chard united in his own person the offices of Abbot and Suffragan Bishop.’

The learned author of *The Cistercian Houses of Devon* (Mr. J. Booking Rowe) clearly accepts this view, and his remarks

about Abbot Chard may be worth transcribing as serving to sum up and sustain what I have written.

‘The last Abbot,’ he says, ‘Thomas Chard, otherwise Tybbes, has left something more than a name. He was one of the most distinguished men of whom the Abbey could boast. He was not only an eminent scholar and divine, but the buildings at Ford show him to have been an artist of no mean capabilities. . . . He was evidently fond of building. . . . The beautiful Tower, the north walk of the Cloister, all that now exists, and the new Refectory, with his initials, mitre and abbot’s cap, were as much admired by his contemporaries as by succeeding generations. He surrendered his house 8th March 1539, at which time there was the full number of 13 monks. He did not survive the fall long, dying full of years and honours, early in 1544.’