

## Woodspring Priory.

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BY REV. F. WARRE.

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THE rise of the celebrated Thomas a' Becket, otherwise St. Thomas of Canterbury, to almost unlimited power under King Henry II.; his contest with that monarch on the subject of Papal jurisdiction and the rights of the church; and his bloody murder at the very foot of the altar, in the year 1170; are historical facts known to everybody: and whether we consider him according to the bias of our religious and political opinions, a turbulent traitor, a patriotic assertor of the rights of the commons, a champion of the oppressed Saxon against his Norman tyrant, a hot-headed zealot, or a martyr to the Church of Christ, we can hardly deny him the credit of having been a sincere, honest, fearless, and single-minded man. But though these are facts generally known and now almost as generally admitted, there are perhaps, even among the present company, some who may not be aware that of the four fierce Barons who in consequence of a hasty speech of their King, perpetrated the atrocious murder of an Archbishop at the altar of his own cathedral, three at least, if not all, were west countrymen, and two undoubtedly residents in this county. Fitzurse, of Williton; Brito, of Sandford Bret; Tracy, of Morthoe, near

Ilfracombe, and Morville, who I believe was also a land-owner in Devonshire, were the actors in a tragedy which caused a general feeling of horror through the whole christian world. That powerful monarch, Henry II., proud Plantagenet as he was, submitted to a degrading penance, having been publicly scourged before the high altar by the monks of Canterbury, while a' Becket, canonized by the Romish church, was even to the time of the Reformation held in veneration as a saint and martyr, and miracles were said to have been worked at his shrine, which the gifts of persons of all ranks and nations soon rendered one of the richest in Europe.

Under these circumstances we can easily suppose that the descendants and relations of these unhappy men would have been most anxious to testify their regret, and according to the custom of the day to endeavour by gifts to the church to expiate the crime of his murder. It was to this feeling that the Priory of Woodspring,\* or Worspring, owed its foundation. We find preserved in the Cottonian Library an autograph letter from William de Courteney, who was nearly related to the Tracy family, to the Bishop of Bath, signifying and submitting to him his intention of founding a conventual house at Worspring, for the good of the souls of his father, Robert, there buried, of his mother, himself, his wife, and those of his ancestors and descendants ; and we find that in the year 1210 the same William de Courteney removed the house of canons regular of St. Augustine, dedicated originally to the blessed Virgin and St. Thomas a' Becket, from Dodelyn, to his manor of Woodspring, and endowed it with considerable property. At this removal it was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, St.

\* Woodspring is situated in the parish of Kewstoke, 8 miles N.W. of Axbridge, Somerset.

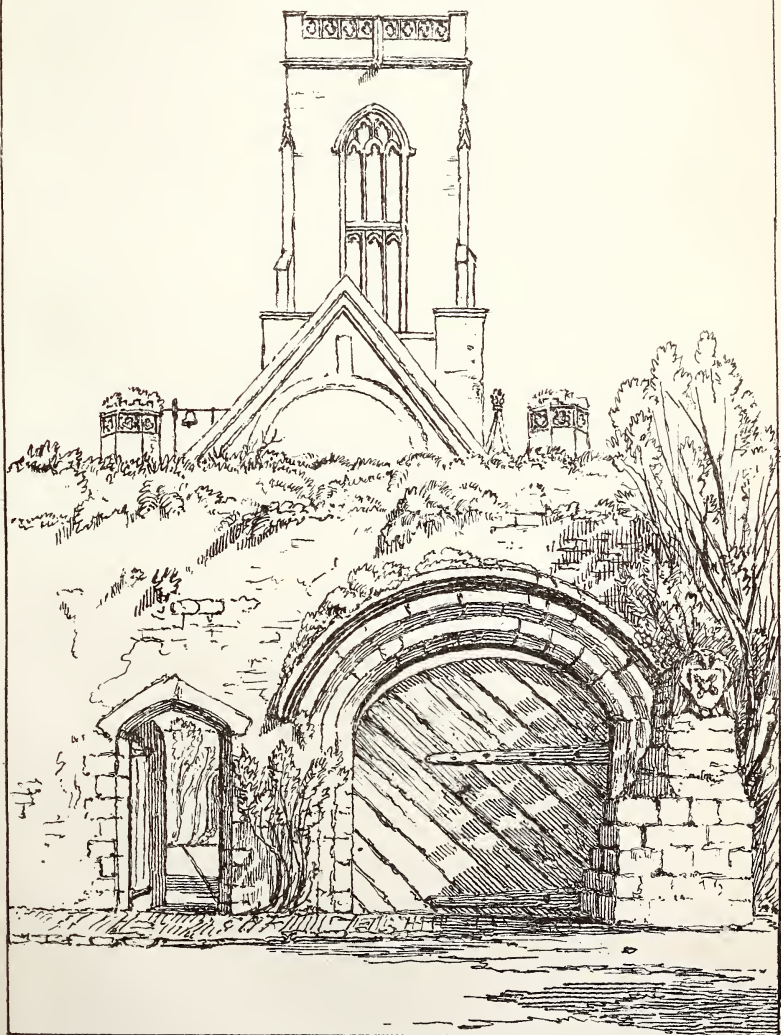
Mary the Virgin, and St. Thomas the Martyr. The accounts of this Priory are unfortunately very meagre. The canons probably led a contemplative and unambitious life, and we may hope a religious and useful one also; for they enjoyed a good repute with their neighbours, as may be inferred from a charter of the 18th of Edward II., which recites and confirms the grant to this Priory of lands in Somerset, Wilts, and Dorset, by William de Courteney, Galfrid Gilbeyn, Hugo de Nyweton, Henry Engayne, Robert Offre, John de Eston, Alicia Offre, Henry de Pendeny, Henry Limechest, and Richard de Hordwell, many of them names still in existence in this part of England. At the valuation of its estate in the 26th of Henry VIII., its annual income amounted to £87: 2s. 11½d., and the head is styled Abbot, though it was undoubtedly a Priory of canons regular of St. Augustine, following the rule of St. Victor, and connected with the great Abbey of St. Augustine, founded at Bristol by Fitzharding of Berkeley. A very imperfect impression of the common seal of this Priory is extant in the Chapter House of Westminster, appended to the acknowledgement of supremacy, A.D. 1534. It represents an ancient church, situated over an arch, underneath which is the gigantic head of a man; the impression is in red wax.\* This is all that I have been able to collect of the history of the society which for so many years inhabited these conventual buildings; and though it might be

\* From Rutter's Somerset, page 59. "The name of the earliest recorded Prior was John, in 1266, 50th of Henry III. Reginald Prior, in 1317, 10th Edward II. Thomas lived in 1383, 6th of Richard II. Thomas de Banwell died in 1414, 2nd of Henry V. Peter Loviare was elected in the same year. William Lustre died in 1457, 35th of Henry VI. John Turman was elected in the presence of six canons, in 1458, 36th of Henry VI. Richard Spryng was Prior in 1498, 13th of Henry VII., and resigned in 1525, 16th of Henry VIII. The last Prior was Roger Tormenton, elected 24th September, 1525, but on 21st day of August, 1534, subscribed to King Henry's supremacy."

more interesting had they taken a more active part in the affairs of their times, it certainly can be no cause of blame to a body of churchmen that they followed, as we will charitably hope they did, the duties of their profession according to the light they possessed, and abstained from interference in temporal matters.

I will now proceed briefly to point out the most remarkable features of the venerable remains of this once beautiful structure. The first point to which I would draw attention is the entrance, which consists of a large gateway. There is a smaller door or wicket on the north side. The arches in both cases are segmental or small segments of large circles, a form not uncommon in buildings of the 14th century, to which date their construction may safely be referred. The weather moulding of the large gateway, is a very fine specimen of the style, being composed of the scroll moulding, with a bead under it, which is rarely met with except in buildings of that period. The projections on each side of the road ornamented with escutcheons, on one of which is blazoned the fine stigmata or wounds of our Saviour ; on the other, a chevron between three bugles ; are probably of comparatively modern construction. We now find ourselves in a small court, bounded on the north by a range of domestic buildings, which I should be inclined to suppose of Post-reformation date, though some parts, particularly the string course, may be older ; and on the west by the wall of the cloisters, which retain some fine gurgils. Immediately before us is the west front of the church. This, when perfect, must have presented to the beholder a very fine composition of late Perpendicular character, though now sadly mutilated by the insertion of modern windows. The large west window, now built up, occupied nearly the whole of this front, rising from a bold

string course which extends from buttress to buttress ; these are in the form of octagonal turrets. The cornice moulding of the building, is peculiarly bold and good, and passes round these turrets, which are raised above it and terminate with an embattled parapet, under which is a course of quatrefoils, each side of the octagon being occupied by one quatrefoil within a square ; that part of the turret which is above the cornice moulding, projects slightly beyond the lower walls. On each side of the window was a canopied niche, and there appears to have been a similar one above ; this and that on the south have been totally obliterated ; in that on the north an episcopal figure may still be traced. We now enter the cloister ; the entrance to it from the church is now the door of the farm house, into which the whole nave and north aisle, as far as the tower, have been converted. The nave, with the central tower, a fine Perpendicular structure of somewhat earlier date than the rest of the church, consists of three bays having large windows, (now built up) of a character similar to that in the west front. On the south side of the tower is a staircase turret, terminating in a pyramidal pinnacle, with a finial and parapet of Tudor flowers, an arrangement very common in this neighbourhood. On the north side is an aisle of three bays, (having an entrance to the church in that at the western extremity,) extending as far as the eastern side of the tower, into which it opened by a splendid arch, the effect of which, together with that opening to the nave, must have been very fine. The whole of the remaining part of the church, with the exception of the tower is occupied by the present dwelling-house. I am unable to say anything as to the piers and arcade between the nave and aisle. The fan tracery of the tower is very beautiful. The chancel or



COWELL'S ANASTATIC PRESS, IPSWICH

Woadspring Priory.

choir, which, as in all conventual buildings, was long, no doubt extended much to the east of the tower, and took away from the apparent height of the church. It is now totally destroyed, though the chancel arch remains. I wish to call your attention to the fact that the lower part of the south-west buttress of the tower is composed of part of the jamb of a window, similar to that in the tower, which would lead us to suppose that it had been built up after the destruction of the chancel, perhaps to supply the support the tower was deprived of by the demolition of the chancel walls. There is also on the north side of the tower, at the height of the roof of the aisle, a mass of masonry, for which I am totally at a loss to account. The remains of the cloisters, which are of the 14th century, occupy the space on the south of the nave and tower, the west wall of the enclosure standing flush with the west front of the church; the entrance from them to the church, is, as I have before mentioned, the door of the modern farmhouse, above which the pitch of the cloister roof is distinctly marked upon the wall. All vestiges of the interior of these cloisters have vanished, with the exception of what appears to be the remains of a corbel table, and the entrance to a small turret at the south-west corner. Opposite to this there was a passage to the refectory, and in the east wall of the enclosure are two arches, now built up, and the mutilated remains of a doorway, the arch of which is of Decorated character, and must, with its elaborate cusps, have been exceedingly beautiful. The domestic buildings of the Priory, including the Prior's lodging, occupied the greater part of the orchard on the east of the church, as is evident from the marks of foundations, extending nearly over its whole extent. All these, however, are gone, with the exception of the refectory, which is now used as a

waggon-house. This is a very beautifully proportioned room of early Perpendicular character, 45 feet long, and 19 wide ; the eastern part has suffered from the ravages of time and violence, but the rest is nearly perfect ; on the north side it was lighted by two very beautiful windows, the traces of which still remain ; they are of two lights, and are divided by a transom. Two doorways give access to this noble hall, one at the west end, over which is a small window of two lights ; the other at the east end of the north side, the very elaborate mouldings of which are still in fine preservation. A staircase turret may be observed in ruins, on the south side, but I can find no traces of any fire-place. These, with the exception of a very fine monastic barn, which stands in a perfect state on the north side of the Priory, are all that remain of the magnificent foundation of William de Courteney.

I cannot, however, leave the subject without mentioning the discovery of a very curious reliquary in Kewstoke Church, as it is probably connected with the dedication of Woodspring Priory to St. Thomas of Canterbury. The weight of the clerestory having forced out the north wall, which was of fourteenth century work, it was recently pulled down, and a mutilated piece of carved work, built into it, on being removed, was discovered to be a reliquary. In the front is carved a figure in an arched niche, having shafts of Early English character. This figure, the face of which seems to have been purposely mutilated, holds something, probably a heart, in its hands, but it is so defaced that it is now quite impossible to decide what it is. At the back was discovered an arched recess, having within a small wooden cup, containing what is supposed to be the residuum of human blood. This reliquary is manifestly of earlier date



than the wall into which it was built, and appears from the capitals of its shafts nearly to correspond in style with that in use about the time of the dedication of Woodspring. The opinion of the Archæological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, to which it was submitted, was, that it probably contained the most valuable relique possessed by the Priory,—some of the blood of Thomas a' Becket, and that the monks, foreseeing the desecration of their conventual church, had deposited it in the parish church of Kewstoke, hoping by that means to preserve from profanation a relique, in their eyes, of the greatest sanctity, being no less than the blood of their murdered patron, St. Thomas of Canterbury.

This invaluable reliquary is, by the kindness of the Rev. R. C. Hathway, the Vicar of Kewstoke, at present in the Museum of the Society at Taunton, and is perhaps the most curious discovery of the kind that has been made in England for many years.

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