

Public Records in the County of Somerset.

BY MR. T. SEREL.

Having commented upon the interest centred in old documents, and to the fact that a complete history of Somerset had not been published, he alluded to the taste which had of late years been manifested to investigate the Records belonging to private bodies and in private repositories. He spoke of the efforts of Lord Romilly, the present Master of the Rolls, who had, by the issue of several volumes, materially added to their knowledge of by-gone generations. They had also to thank Lord Romilly for the Royal Commission appointed in 1869 under the name of "The Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts." The Commission recites "that it would be of considerable public advantage in its being generally known where such papers and manuscripts are deposited, and that the contents of those which tend to the elucidation of history and the illustration of constitutional law, science, and literature should be published." The Commissioners accordingly engaged the services of some experienced persons, and two gentlemen—one, Mr. Henry T. Riley, who had published several works on the Corporate Records of London, and on other subjects, had inspected the Records belonging to Bridgwater, Glastonbury, and Wells, as well as those of the Bishop and Dean and Chapter of Wells.

Mr. A. Howard had also inspected the contents of the muniment rooms at Dunster Castle and Montacute House, and the result of those researches had been published in a Blue Book, which could be purchased at the low price of 1s 6d. Mr. Riley had visited Wells a second time. An old list of documents belonging to the Dean and Chapter having been found, a communication was made to Mr. Dickinson, who instituted diligent enquiries, but at first without success. Perseverance, however, rewarded his efforts, and the result was the discovery of a large box full of "rubbish" (as it was described), which proved to be documents not only included in the old schedule, but also many others. The "rubbish" consisted of more than a thousand documents, mostly original, and many of a most interesting and valuable character. He was sure that all would join with him in thanking Mr. Dickinson for his perseverance, the Dean and Chapter for allowing free access to the Records, and Mr. Bernard, the Chapter Clerk, for the facilities he rendered. Mr. Serel having detailed the documents in the possession of the Cathedral dignitaries and the corporations of Wells and Axbridge, said—"Now you will probably wish to know my reasons for thus noticing these old and dusty parchments and papers. My earnest wish is that an effort should be made to put some of the members of this Society in motion, and through them to bestow some of the "ways and means" at our disposal in making a systematic and careful examination of the Records with the view of compiling a Calendar, or Index of the contents of such as may be "new" to us, and useful in the preparation of a work deserving to be called a "History of Somersetshire." In thus employing our revenues we should be performing one of the most important, one of the main objects for which this Society was formed, and for which it has been

kept up. The task once entered on with a real desire of accomplishing it, difficulties would disappear. So important a work must, of course, require careful consideration and deliberation, and many preliminary enquiries must be made before its actual commencement. But "where there's a will, there's a way." Once begun, progress would of necessity be gradual, and perhaps slow, but that ultimate success would be the result I have no doubt.

To prove the value of Calendars, or Indexes, such as I have suggested, needs no argument. If anything were wanting to convince us on that point, I need only refer to the recently compiled Calendars of the contents of the public Records in London and elsewhere, which convey to us in a plain and intelligible form the pith and marrow, so to speak, of almost every document of importance now to be found in our national repositories.

Calendars of our Somersetshire Records could be made to form part of the contents of our periodical reports, and I am sanguine enough to believe that these Reports would thereby become so interesting, and thereby so increase the numbers who would desire to possess and read them, as to enable us (with judicious management in publishing) to produce at least two volumes yearly, instead of, as at present, one in two or three years.

As a means of conveying unquestionable and authentic evidence, and a true and correct knowledge of past events, of the habits and customs, social and political, of past generations, nothing can be more clear, certain, and important, than documents of contemporaneous dates."

To prove how necessary it was that some effort should be made for preserving the Records of the county, Mr. Serel mentioned that three or four years ago a butcher at Wells was using the leaves of a book to wrap meat in for his

customers, which book was a Register of Wills—150 in number—dating from 1537 to 1541. Another still more lamentable instance was the destruction of the contents of the Dean's Registry over the west cloister of the Cathedral. For two or three years the manuscripts were used in lighting fires in the College Lecture Room, and thousands of documents were thus destroyed. Those were not the only instances of Records being irretrievably lost. The county has also lost a large number of manuscripts which were sold at the sale of the late Lord Auckland's effects as waste paper. For a few shillings several boxes full of papers and parchments were knocked down—a small portion of which was within a few minutes passed over to another person for a consideration of £15 or £16! These Manuscripts had remained concealed in boxes since the time of Bishop Law, to whom they had belonged. Mr. Serel concluded by asking that a committee might be appointed to consider the subject and for maturing a plan for effecting the objects he had in view.

Mr. Dickinson proposed, and the Rev. Mr. Scarth seconded, that the council be empowered to appoint a special committee to carry out Mr. Serel's suggestions. Carried unanimously.*

The Parish Church

was then visited, and its main features pointed out and described by the President and others.

It was described as one of the great cross churches of the county. The west front, often neglected by architects,

* The committee for this purpose subsequently appointed consists of—the Rev. Canon Meade, Mr. Dickinson, Mr. John Batten, Mr. Serel, and the Secretary, Mr. W. A. Jones.

is here a fine specimen of architectural design. The gable of the nave is flanked with octagonal turrets, embattled, with vestiges of small pinnacles. Following the almost universal rule in the county, the nave is of better work than the chancel. It is also much higher. The majority of the churches in the district were built in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the people of the neighbourhood were wealthy. There was a good deal of trade going on, and the parishioners made the nave without considering the ecclesiastical owners of the chancel. There is a porch on the south side of great size, something similar to the south transept. One of the curious changes which had been made, was that the porch had been converted into a transept, and the transept into a sort of porch. The windows in the nave are very wide, so that there are only three bays where usually there would have been five in a nave of that length. The extreme flatness of the windows in the transept was noticed, and it was observed that the north transept is the most elaborate portion of the church. Special attention was directed to the indications of a vestry projecting below the east window. The building itself has been destroyed, but the door-ways are still left, as they are also at Ilminster. The niche in the south-east corner of the church is deserving of notice. Indications still remain of an iron grill by which the figure of the Saint placed there was originally protected. It was clearly proved not to have been a pulpit but a shrine.

At 4 o'clock the *Annual Dinner* took place at the George Hotel, the President in the chair, after which the usual loyal toasts were given and duly honoured.