

# A short Memoir of Bishops Aldhelme, and Athelme, or Adelme.

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ALDHELME, BISHOP OF SHERBORNE.

THERE is so much resemblance between some of the Saxon names, and yet the mode of spelling them varies so much, that it is not surprising if Aldhelme, the first Bishop of Sherborne, should be sometimes confounded with Athelme or Adelme, the first Bishop of Wells.

Brihtwald, the eighth Archbishop of Canterbury, rejoices in no less than twelve *aliases*, or different spellings of his name.<sup>1</sup>

It may be not inappropriate, therefore, to call to mind the points of difference between these ancient occupiers of the sees of Sherborne and of Wells.

Although desirous to do full justice to OUR first bishop (Athelme of Wells), a divine who seems to have been raised solely by his character for learning and piety to the

(1). Brectwaldus (Hoveden), Britwold (Huntingdon), Brithwoldus (Brompton), Brichtwaldus (Diceto), Berthwaldus (Simeon of Durham), Berechtwaldus and Bertwaldus (Bede), Biretwaldus (Malnebury), Brihtwaldus (Flor. of Worcester), Berchtwald (Chron. Marl. and S. Cruc), Brithwaldus (Matth. Paris), and Bricwaldus (Birchington). See Richardson's note in Godwin, quoted by Hook.

highest stations in the Church, yet it must be acknowledged that the friend of Archbishop Theodore—of Hadrian the scholar and divine,—Aldhelme, the monk of Malmesbury, Sherborne's first bishop, takes a still higher rank among the learned and holy men of the age in which he lived. Aldhelme or Ealdhem was the nephew of the celebrated Ina, King of the West-Saxons, being the son of Kentred, Ina's brother. His early life was devoted to study; and from his retreat at Malmesbury he mentions in letters to his learned friend Hadrian several of the subjects of study on which he there employed himself.<sup>2</sup> Such were "Latin versification, Roman jurisprudence, astronomy, astrology, and arithmetic"—the last he says that he found a "laborious science," and well it might be, when all calculations had to be performed by the Roman numerals, the seven letters, C. D. M. L. V. X. L.<sup>3</sup>

The reputation of Ealdhelm for learning became so great that persons came from Scotland and France to study under his guidance. He was ordained by Eleutherius, Bishop of Winchester, between the years 670 and 675, and not long after his ordination we find him raised to the abbot's chair at Malmesbury.

In 689, having gone to Rome with King Ceadwella,<sup>4</sup> he obtained a grant from the Pope Sergius, exempting his abbey from episcopal jurisdiction, and from secular service, and conferring on the monks the privilege of electing their abbot. On the death of Hædda, Bishop of Winchester, in the year 705, that extensive diocese was divided,

(2). The account of Aldhelme's studies and learning at Malmesbury is given in Bede Hist. lib. 5, c. 18.

(3). Arabic numerals were not introduced into Europe till 1050, into England 1253.

(4). Who is said to have gone thither for baptism. He was the immediate predecessor of Ina.

Daniel became Bishop of Winchester, and Aldhelme, much (it is said) against his will, received the western portion of the diocese, with the title of Bishop of Sherborne. His diocese comprised the counties of Wilts, Dorset, Devon, and Cornwall; and Bede tells us that for four years he administered the affairs of his see—"strenuâ diligentia"—"with unwearied diligence." Indefatigable in preaching and giving instruction to the ignorant, he was liberal in employing his augmented means in building and endowing churches; his zeal was tempered by a charity in advance of his age; for, although he considered the Celtic churches of Wales and Cornwall as schismatical, he earnestly desired their reconciliation, and in his letter to Gerontius, Prince of Cornwall (King Gerunt),<sup>5</sup> he admits the orthodoxy with which they inculcated the doctrines of the gospel, and preached the mystery of our Lord's incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension.

Aldhelme seems plainly to have held the great principle that schismatics were to be convinced not by *force*, but by *reason*.

It will be recollected that at this period two subjects of controversy existed in the Christian Church, which excited the minds not only of prelates, but also of princes, viz., the proper period for the observance of the Easter festival, and the tonsure.

The Celtic bishops agreed on these points with the Eastern Churches, the Anglo-Saxon with the Latin. Theodore, the Archbishop of Canterbury at this time, was originally of Tarsus, the birthplace of St. Paul; but although at first a Greek churchman, he had conformed to the formularies of the Latin Church; and Hadrian, who

(5). As Hook calls him ! !

had been appointed by the Pope<sup>6</sup> to accompany the Archbishop to England, had also to conform both to the Latin mode of resolving the question of Easter, and also to the Roman method of tonsure. The oriental mode permitted the long hair to fall down behind, but shortened that on the front—and the Archbishop and his assessor were delayed some time in Rome, till the hair of one or both was long enough to be submitted to the scissors of orthodoxy.

In due time, "the flowing locks at the back of his head were absconded, the licentious prolixity of the beard curtailed, and with the legitimate amplitude and circularity of crown, Hadrian started with Theodorus as 'amicus curiæ' for England."<sup>7</sup> Some years after, there appears an order in the canons of Archbishop Richard, requiring this portion of the clerical toilet to devolve not on the *barber*, but on the *archdeacon*—a duty this for which, in the modern revival of ancient usages, it may be well that our present archdeacons should be prepared!

I would not, however, be supposed to imply by these remarks that Christianity in these early times was merely nominal or trivial, on the contrary there was much in it, as the examples of Aldhelme, Anselm, and others shew, which was deep, loving, and real. An edition of the works of this eminent man, the father of Anglo-Saxon literature, was printed at Mayence in 1601,<sup>8</sup> but his life written by King Alfred has unfortunately perished.

He died A.D. 709, and was buried at Malmesbury.

#### ATHELME, BISHOP OF WELLS.

It is well known that Ina, King of Wessex, a sovereign not more eminent for his courage and success as a warrior,

(6). Vitalianus.

(7). Hook, p. 144.

(8). Dict. Historique de l'Avocat—Librn. of the Sorbonne.

than for his qualities as a statesman, a legislator, and a devout Christian, about the year 704 (five years, *i.e.*, before the death of Aldhelme, the subject of the preceding memoir) founded a collegiate church at Wells for four canons; the church was dedicated to St. Andrew, and the little foundation is said to have been augmented in 766, by Cenulph (successor of Sigebert in the West-Saxon territories). In this state this humble seminary of religion remained for 200 years, until the year 905, when, as we are informed by the historians of the times,<sup>9</sup> a Synod was held; in pursuance of an edict issued by King Edward the Elder, at this synod it was resolved to increase the members of the episcopate and to erect three new bishoprics, to be taken out of the large dioceses of Winchester and Sherborne, these sees having become vacant in 909, some others also being found void at the same time. The Archbishop of Canterbury consecrated seven bishops, it is said, on one occasion. At this time, and since the year 890, Plegmund,<sup>10</sup> once the hermit of Plegmundesham, or Plemstall near Chester, was Archbishop of Canterbury, having been appointed to that see by King Alfred, who is said to have had a high opinion of his piety and learning.

Athelme had been chosen President, or as it was afterwards called Provost (now Dean), of the Canons at Wells, and was promoted to fill the new office of Bishop of Wells. By some authorities he is said to have been also Abbot of Glastonbury, but as his name does not appear in the list of the abbots in Dugdale's *Monasticon*, it is probable that he was only a monk of that religious house. Glastonbury, as is well known, was the Eton of Anglo-

(9). Ralph de Diceto, and William of Malmesbury, &c.

(10). Plegmund was consecrated in 890.

Saxon England, "the chief seat of education for the upper classes of society." From this great school of learning, when Plegmund had resolved to form Somerset into a diocese, he fixed on Athelme to be its first bishop.<sup>11</sup> The bishop elect may not have held so dignified a post as abbot of that important monastery, he may not have been either the provost or even the head master of the Eton of those early days, yet is it a sufficient attestation to his eminence as a scholar, a theologian, and a man of piety, that he was chosen by the King and the Archbishop to fill the office of first bishop for the Somersætians at Wells.

The Canon of Wells tells us that the dioceses supplied at this time by Archbishop Plegmund, were Dorset, Somerset, Wilts, Devon, and Cornwall; and that the bishops then consecrated were Fridstan, Bishop of Winchester; Brornock, Bishop of Selsea (for Sussex); Eadulph Bishop of Crediton, for Devon; Athelme, Bishop of Wells; and Athelstan, who was seated at Petrockstow, or Padstow, in Cornwall, with two others.

After occupying the see of Wells for nine years, Athelme was considered the fittest person to be advanced, on the death of Plegmund, to the see of Canterbury. Collinson, in his notice of Wells, and Cassan, in his *Lives of the Bishops*, speak of "the strict integrity of his moral character, and of his intuitive knowledge of mankind."

However that may be, having filled to the satisfaction of the Church and the crown the office of a suffragan bishop, it is surely no small confirmation of the esteem in which he was held, that, in the year 914, Athelme was selected

(11). It has been said by some (see Hook in Plegmund) that the vacancies in many of the dioceses were occasioned by King Alfred rigorously declining to appoint any but men of learning to the vacant bishopricks.

for the highest position which a prelate of the Church of England can be called to fill.<sup>12</sup>

If the question occurs, "Why was Wells thus fixed upon as the seat of the bishop in this county?" no better answer can be given than that which Mr. Freeman has suggested in his able and interesting little volume on *The Cathedral Church of Wells*,—neither of the two larger towns then existing in the county, neither, *i.e.*, the "Roman city of Bath, at one extremity, nor the English town of Taunton, founded by King Ina, on the south-west, were sufficiently central to form a suitable place of residence for the bishop. Glastonbury, surrounded by water in its Island of Avalon, was occupied with important pursuits, and of a different character, neither would its mitred abbot be likely to have approved the planting of a rival authority either on his chair, or in his immediate neighbourhood. Wells, therefore, seems to have been chosen for its more central position, where was already a body of clergy attached to the Church of St. Andrew, and the salubrity of whose springs was probably bringing the place, called also Welwe and Fonticuli, into some notoriety.

Most ecclesiastical preferments at this period were given to monks. Not that monastic institutions seem to be suited to the character of the English people—on the contrary there is a love of liberty, of independence, of self-conquest, and self-control, which are far more truly characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race. But many of the kings and archbishops under the influence of the

(12). From the dates which are assigned to the episcopate of Ealdhelm, sometimes called Adhelm, at Sherborne, and the appointment of Athelm or Adhelm first Bishop of Wells, it will be seen that there was an interval of about 200 years between the two prelates. Ealdhelm died at Sherborne in 709; Athelm of Wells died after his translation to Canterbury, A. D. 923.

Popes, discouraged the secular clergy, favoured and advanced the regulars.

It is very interesting to observe how steadily Wells has maintained the original character of its foundation amidst all vicissitudes of its history, from the very beginning down to the present day. Notwithstanding the power and prejudices of kings and archbishops—of the Edreds, the Odos, and Dunstons—the services of the Church have been continually performed, not by “cucullated” clergy, as was the case in all cathedrals of the new foundation, but by a dean and canons, as is the case now. And its “president” and four canons, such as they were in the 9th and 10th century, are represented now by the dean and four canons of the present period.

Mr. Irvine, who has acted as clerk of the works during the recent restoration of the west-end of Wells Cathedral under Mr. Ferrey, the architect, took a deep interest in the constructional history of the church. His very careful observations of the fabric, which are now published in the last volume of the *Proceedings of the Somerset Archæological and Natural History Society*, convinced him that there were five periods in which the chief works of construction were effected. These five divisions are indicated by particular characteristics in the architecture and masonry.

To me this remark seems full of interest. It shows the zeal which prompted the clergy and people of Somerset in so many different periods to promote the enlargements, improvement, or restoration of their diocesan church—these costly additions or repairs prove in what high estimation their cathedral and its services were held, through so many successive ages. I look at these several restorations as “*petrifactions*” of the motto, “*esto perpetua*,” and of



the desire of so many consecutive generations that their noble church and its services should last while the world itself lasted.

The great and good monarch of Wessex in the 8th century could not but be gratified if he were permitted to see his foundation at Wells, 200 years older than the bishoprick, maintained and flourishing, after the flight of ten centuries. Nor would *he* be disappointed if he were to behold the last restoration, which, by the liberality of his Somersætiens, has just been completed. If, standing at the new entrance gate,<sup>13</sup> he should behold Bishop Jocelyn's noble front, with its storied sculptures, and shafted canopies, supported by elegant pillars of Kilkenny-Purbeck, rising up from its levelled carpet of green, freed from all vulgar incumbrances, with a grandeur it never knew before, or certainly has not known for 400 years!

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EXTRACT FROM THE ACCOUNT OF THE PRELATES  
BY THE "CANON OF WELLS."

Plegmund; the most excellent learned man of his time, was borne in the kingdom of Mercia. In his youth he first dedicated himselfe to a solitarie life, and lived an eremite in the Island of Chester, which of him (as it should seem) was wont to be called Plegmundsham. He was taken thence to teach Alfred, that was afterward king of England. Being chosen archbishop, he travailed to Rome, in person, and was there consecrate. Soone after his returne, to requite belike the curtesie he had found there, he tooke great paines in collec-

(13). Near Brown's Gate.

ting the almes of al men wel disposed thro' the land, which the King sent together with much treasure of his owne by Athelmus Bishop of Winchester, appointing a certaine portion of the same to be conveied unto Jerusalem. Marianus then Pope, a little before had gratified the King divers waies. He had granted immunitie of tribute unto the Saxons schoole at Rome, and sent sundrie presents unto him, namely, among other things a piece of the crosse upon which our Saviour was thought to have suffered death. By this contribution his kindnesse was sufficiently requited. The most remarkable action of this Archbishop is, that the yeare 905, he consecrated seven bishops in One day. By reason of continuall warres, all the province of the West-Saxons had been without any bishop for seven yeares, which Formosus the Pope *imputing unto the negligences of the King*, sent out an *excommunication against him*. He therefore caused Plegmund the Archbishop to call a convocation, wherein it was ordered that the country of the Gewisses,<sup>14</sup> which till that time had but two bishops (one at Winchester, another at Shirburne) should hereafter have five; viz., besides the Sees afore-named, Welles in Sommersetshire, Crediton in Devonshire, and *St. Petrock's in Cornwall*. Unto Winchester was appointed Frithstan, to Shirburne Wolfstan, to Criditon Cendulfe, and to Saint Petrock's Athelstane. . . . . Plegmund sat archbishop 26 yeares, and dying ann. 915, was buried in his owne church.

"Athelm that had been Abbot of Glastonburie and was appointed the *first Bishop of Wells* was chosen to succeed Plegmund in Canterburie. William of Malmesbury saith that this archbishop laid the first foundation of the Abbey of Malmesburie, but it seemeth to be more ancient than so. He sat nine years. Died anno 924, and was buried with his predecessors."

Of the appointment of Athelm or Aldhelm to the see of Wells, the Canon of Wells thus speaks (pa. 289):—

"It happened then (the yeare 905) that Plegmund Archbishop of Canterbury, by the commandment of the King, consecrated seven bishops in one day, whereof three were

(14). Gewisi—the West-Saxons.

appointed to sees newly erected; among the rest Aldhelm,<sup>18</sup> abbot of Glastonbury, was ordained Bishop of Wels, and Somersetshire allotted unto him for his diocese. He sat there ten years, and after the death of Plegmund was removed to Canterbury.

2. Wifelnus who saw Aldhelm both here and at Canterbury. He lived here nine yeares and there fourteen; a man (saith Poly. Virg.) famous as well for vertue as learning.

3. Elfeth.

4. Wifhelm.

5. Brithelm.

6. Kenewardus or *waldus*.

7. Sigar.

8. Alwyn, Adelwyn, Ealfwyn.

9. Burwold. His tombe is to be seene with his name engraved, upon the south side of the quier at Wells.

(15). Thus the Canon of Wells calls Athelm Aldhelm.

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