

Canonsleigh Abbey,

IN THE PARISH OF BURLESCOMBE, DEVON.

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(*Vicar of Burlescombe.*)

THE Manor of Leigh was bestowed on Walter de Claville at the Conquest. The descendant from Walter, William de Claville, in the twelfth century founded a Convent for a Prior and Canons of the Rule of Saint Augustine, on a pleasant site within this manor. And the religious house was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist.

It appears that the endowment was inadequate, the lands annexed being for the most part of indifferent quality, consisting of woods, coppices, moors, and commons of pasture.

To the rich Priory of Plympton in this county of Devon, the fraternity were much indebted for their support. At length disputes arose respecting the election of the Prior of Canonsleigh. The Prior of Plympton attempted to nominate one of the canons of that house to the office when vacant; and in consequence of a refusal withheld his patronage.

These disputes were happily composed, by agreement to elect a prior for Canonsleigh from Plympton Abbey, in case no suitable member of the former convent was appointed to that dignity. And it was also agreed that the Prior of Plympton should fill the office of Visitor, to adjust whatever differences might arise from time to time at Canonsleigh; but the right of appeal to the Bishop of Exeter against his decisions was reserved. This deed of agreement is dated in the summer of the year of our Lord 1219.

The next record respecting this convent was about the year 1284, when it appears to have been surrendered to Maud, the noble Countess of Gloucester and Hertford, who, on the 16th day of August, in the year of our Lord 1285, made a donation of the sum of £400, to enlarge and improve the buildings, and replaced the canons by a Society of *Religious Women*. In all probability this alteration was effected through the powerful influence of Isabella de Fortibus, Countess of Albemarle and of Devon, who was her cousin german. She prevailed on the Abbey of Plympton St. Mary to incorporate the canons of Leigh, now reduced to a few in number on account of their poverty, with themselves, and rewarded them with some valuable consideration, such as the Rectory of Exminster, the Manor of Cullompton, etc.

This noble Isabella died in 1292, the 20th of Edward I. She was possessed of the manor and royalty of Tiverton, where she sometimes resided, and was renowned for her liberal benefactions to monastic houses.

The new society of Female Religionists at Canonsleigh added to the names of the Virgin Mary and St. John, to whom the convent had been dedicated, the name of Saint Etheldreda, or Audrey, an abbess of Ely in the seventh century, who was revered for her strict observance of the vow of perpetual chastity. The premature death of the noble patroness, Maud de Clare, was a sore calamity to this renewed convent. They lost their promised endowments; their treasury was much impoverished on account of the extensive improvements and buildings; and their condition was deplorable. At length they were relieved by the munificence of Bishops Walter de Stapeldon and Grandisson, of Exeter, and other benefactors. Through the intercession of Bishop Stapeldon, they consented to endow the vicarage; and nominated a perpetual Vicar of the Church of Burlescombe, but appointed their own chaplain to the cure of souls within the district around the Church of St. Theobald's, which had been erected on the manor of Leigh.

In the spring of the year 1539, this convent was surrendered into the hands of Henry VIII. Its desolation then commenced, and the greatest portion of the splendid edifice was razed. The Porter's Lodge and the eastern wing, supposed to have been the kitchen and scullery, are the only visible remains to remind us of "olden times." This wing has been for ages roofless, and an aged tree now thrives on the rubbish within its walls.



SOUTH-EAST TOWER.

The names of two priors only are known—

- (1) Henry de Crewmake,* admitted by Bishop Bronescombe 1260.
- (2) William de Honiton,† admitted by Bishop Quivill 1283.

Copied from Rev. Geo. Oliver's "Historical Collections."

* This name is given as 'Trewvincke' in the Register of Bishop Bronescombe (Hingeston Randolph), pp. 41, 122. [Ed.]

† This is 'Ronetone' in Quivel's Register (*Op. cit.*), p. 339. Ronetone is the Domesday name of Runnington, and is more probable than Honiton, even if the MS. were doubtful.—[Ed.]

THE FOLLOWING ARE NAMES OF ABBESSES.†

Margaret Aunger, died in the summer of	-	-	1345
Juliana Lamprey, her successor, 18th October	-	-	1345
Lucy Warre, died October 11th	-	-	1410
Mary Beauchamp, her successor, on 3rd December	-	-	1410
She died 6th December	-	-	1449
Jane Arundell, buried in Cornwall, successor	-	-	1450
Elizabeth Fowell, the last Abbess, surrendered her convent, 16th February	-	-	1538

This erection is by far the most ancient in the parish of Burlescombe, and is rapidly falling into decay. It was an entrance to the abbey. The west front is now a boundary to the farm yard. The gateways have been walled up for ages. Only the upper part of the large gateway is open, and is approached by stone steps. Underneath there is a beautiful flattened arch, richly ornamented after the Early English style of architecture.

This arch is truly an object worthy the attention of the curious, it being in a very perfect state. It is studded with quatrefoils, oak leaves, and other devices, and coloured. The hooks on which the folding gates were suspended still remain in the massive columns. The eastern front is a boundary to the stable yard, and on the ground within the two gateways are stands for the carriages belonging to the occupiers of the late mansion house.

In the turret is a winding staircase of freestone, which leads to a chamber having an ancient chimney and hearth at the south end. This chamber has now a floor of lime and ashes. Tradition asserts that it was used for making the malt required for the abbey purposes. But most likely it was a cell for the priest, or a schoolroom and a chapel for the convenience of the laity occupied about the abbey.

† A complete list is given in "Canonsleigh," Transactions Devon Association, vol. xxiv., 1892.