

SOME NOTES CONCERNING OLNEY.

The meaning of the name Olney is involved in much obscurity ; for though the latter syllable is, no doubt, the Anglo-Saxon *eye*, denoting the watery situation of the place, the former portion of the word is not so easily interpreted. The earliest form of the word on record is that which occurs in Doomsday Book, *Olnei*, so that the name has continued essentially unaltered for eight hundred years. In the English translation of Camden's *Britannia* (1610), the word is written *Oulney*, and this corrupt spelling was in common use until a few years since ; but the correct form has lately been restored. The meaning of the word may perhaps be hereafter ascertained by comparing it with other similar names which occur in England. There is, first, the celebrated Isle of *Alney*, near Gloucester, which the Saxons called *Oleneag*, and the old chronicler Robert of Gloucester, *Oleneye*.* Leland designates it "*Olney alias Alney*."† There was also a place in Warwickshire called *Olneye*, of which in Dugdale's time there was "no memorial left but a double moat bearing the name."‡ It may be conjectured that this was the site of a mansion belonging to the Olney family, originally of Bucks, a branch of which was perhaps transferred to Warwickshire through the patronage of the Beauchamps, Earls of Warwick, of whose extensive domains the Buckinghamshire Olney so long formed a part. There are then, at least two other places bearing names essentially the same, as it would seem, with that of the town which is the subject of the present paper ; but what its signification is, I have hitherto been unable to discover. I shall therefore leave this point to the investigation of those members of the Society who have paid special attention to the ancient languages and dialects of England, and proceed to offer a few remarks upon the early history of the town.

Passing over the British period, of which, so far as I am aware, there are no traces in this neighbourhood, I

* I. 307. In old English the letters *g* and *y* are frequently convertible.

† *Itin.* v. 2. ‡ *Hist. of Warw.* 128.

come to the Roman age, during which the district was included in the extensive province of Flavia Cæsariensis. It is clear that a site not far northward of the present town of Olney was a Roman station.* A field, now called Ash Furlong, which lies between the Lavendon and Warrington roads, is literally full of Roman pottery-ware, and here coins also have been found in considerable quantities. The coins extend at least from the reign of Nerva to that of Constantine, the earlier ones being mostly of silver, the later ones of brass. A few years ago a small bronze figure of Mercury, belonging, I imagine, to the class of *penates* or household gods, was discovered somewhere hereabouts. This interesting relic is now in the possession of Mr. Gershom Longland, of Olney.

Regarding the Saxon period, I have little to communicate. During that age the town received its present name (unless indeed the prefix be of earlier date); and, as the termination of that name apparently implies, was moved, perhaps by slow degrees, to its present site beside the river. According to a treaty made between our great Alfred and the Danish Guthrum, probably about 879, the boundary line which separated their territories ran up the Lea to its source, then straight to Bedford, and thence up the Ouse to Watling Street.† Olney, therefore, was just within the boundary of the Danish kingdom. Almost all that we know of the town in Saxon times is comprised in the brief entry contained in Domesday Book, a record which, not only as to Olney, but the whole county, has, I venture to submit, a special claim upon your most diligent investigation.

To trace the manor through the old Earls of Chester, the illustrious families of Albini, Bassett, and Beauchamp, and its other owners, is not my present purpose; but with your permission I will briefly mention one or two curious circumstances connected with the subject, which afford a strange contrast to the present condition of society.

It appears from the Hundred Rolls‡ that in the 4th year of King Edward I. (1275-6) the Countess of Arundel, to whom the manor then belonged, with ten

* A Paper on the Roman station at Olney, by Edward Pretty, Esq., late of Northampton, is printed in *The Archaeological Journal*, iii. 254.

† Dr. Guest, on "The four Roman ways." *Archæol. Journal*, xiv. 104. This appears to be the earliest mention of the Watling Street.

‡ *Rot. Hund.* (Rec. Comm.) i. 42.

armed men, seized the men of Master Nicholas de Bachingdenn, rector of the Church of Olney, (for it was then a rectory,) and imprisoned them, and forcibly took possession of three hundred measures of corn, two horses, two carts bound with iron, five cows, four sheep, two heifers, and ten swine, belonging to the rector—we need not be surprised that it is added “to his no small loss.” We can hardly suppose that the Countess was *personally* concerned in such an act of violence, though very likely she was a party to it. Whether the reverend agriculturist obtained any compensation for this lawless deed does not appear.

It is well known that the Crown had formerly a right of buying up provisions at a valuation, in preference to all other purchasers. This right of pre-emption, as it was called, was restrained in some degree by Magna Charta, and finally abolished on the Restoration. The fact which I am about to mention has relation to it. In Trinity term in the 10th year of King Edward II. (June, 1317,) Robert Legat and John Salcote (who had been apprehended by John de Foleville, bailiff to Robert Basset of Olney, and Simon de Horewold, bailiff to John de Grey of Horewold, *i. e.* Harrold,) were arraigned at Westminster upon a charge of having, with other persons unknown, by means of a forged commission with a counterfeit of the royal seal, taken from divers persons in the market* of the town of Olney, beasts to the number of sixty, as if for the use of the King. Although the forged commission was produced in court, the prisoners pleaded “Not guilty.” Somehow or other Legat was acquitted; but Salcote was convicted and sentenced to be hanged.† It is evident that at this period Olney must have had a considerable market for the sale of cattle.

That the Church of Olney was formerly situated at the north extremity of the present town, is a well attested fact. There is a spot, exactly such as in a hundred instances was chosen for a Church, lying at the junction of the roads to Warrington and Yardley, and tradition says it was “the old Church-yard”—a designation which, as I am informed, occurs in the deeds of “The Castle,” an adjoining public-house. Nor is this all. Human bones

* “in pleno mercato.” † *Placitorum Abbreviatio* (Rec. Comm.) 328.

have been discovered here in great quantities, and, at least on one occasion, taken to the present Church-yard, and there re-interred. Again, here is a spring of water which still bears the name of "Christen Well;" and it is moreover to be noticed that the present Church does not contain a fragment of an earlier building, as it most likely would have done had such a structure occupied its site. The ancient Church was probably destroyed five hundred years ago; but I can hardly imagine that its site was desecrated until the sacrilegious period which followed the Reformation.

The existing Church is dedicated by the name of St. Peter and St. Paul, and consists of a nave, with aisles divided therefrom by five arches on each side, a very spacious chancel, a western tower and spire, and a north porch (of modern date, but clearly occupying the site, and indeed incorporating some remains, of an ancient one) with a room above. The pile, considered as a whole, exhibits a fair type of a large English parish Church, differing, however, from the majority of such edifices in the position of the porch, which is here on the *north* side, and not as usual on the south. This is sufficiently accounted for by the fact that the town lies northward of the Church; but that there may have been also a southern porch is not unlikely. The most remarkable feature in the ground-plan of Olney Church, is that the chancel is not in a direct line with the nave, but inclines considerably to the north. This peculiarity, mystically referring to our Lord's bowing down His Head upon the Cross, occurs in very many Churches; but the divergence is seldom so great as to be conspicuous.*

From close and frequent inspection of the architectural features of this Church, I have little hesitation in assigning its erection to the second quarter of the XIVth century (1325-50). We have the authority of tradition for the statement (marvellous as it may seem), that the foundations were originally laid in the Lordship-close (a field adjoining the Church-yard to the west), but that they were constantly removed at night by unseen hands to the site which the Church now occupies, until the original inten-

* Litchfield Cathedral and St. Michael's Church, Coventry, are noted examples. In England the inclination is generally to the south.

tion was abandoned, and the building erected on the spot thus supernaturally indicated. A similar tradition prevails in several other places. Mr. Sternberg, in his interesting volume on *The Dialect and Folk Lore of Northamptonshire*, mentions occurrences of a like nature in that adjacent county.* The edifice of which I am now speaking, is therefore connected with the Northamptonshire group, not only by its lofty spire, but by the traditional circumstances of its erection.

Olney Church is entirely of the decorated, or middle pointed, style of architecture. I am not referring to those parts which have been rebuilt (the south aisle, a great part of the north aisle, and the porch, though these are *imitative* of the rest), but of the general structure. So closely, and in so many points does this Church resemble that of Emberton,† that I think there is much reason to ascribe them both to the same masterly designer,—one of those great though nameless architects of old, whose works, marred, disfigured, mutilated though they be, by plaster ceilings, hideous pews, cumbrous galleries, and abominable stoves and gas-pipes, still bear traces of an unearthly beauty which the grovelling and mercenary utilitarian builder of the present day can neither see nor imitate. It is related that on one occasion somebody said to our great landscape-painter, “Turner, I never saw such colours in nature as there are in your pictures”—the answer was—“Don’t you wish you could?” Thus it is with the true ecclesiologist; he sees what too many of our modern *pseudo* “Church restorers” cannot see, and discovers mines of architectural beauty even in the lowliest of our village fanes.

The portion of Olney Church which first strikes the eye of an observer is the massive graduated tower, with its noble and many-lighted spire. The pinnacles at the angles are somewhat stunted in their form; the result probably of decay, or unskilful restoration. Viewed during a fine sunset from Clifton-hill, the spire with its numerous openings presents an appearance not soon to be forgotten. Its most curious feature—one which, I must admit, detracts, in my opinion, from its gracefulness—is the bulging of its sides, technically called *entasis*.

* pp. 139, 195. † The tower of Emberton is not here alluded to; most of it is of later date by about a century.

Though, as I have already said, all the ancient portions of the Church are decorated, the nave had formerly a roof and a small clerestory of the perpendicular era. This roof, which, judging from some existing fragments, must have been a very fine one, was barbarously destroyed about the year 1800, for the sake of the lead, which was sold in order to defray the cost of some repairs, that, but for the grossest vandalism, would not have been required. The rood-loft, and nearly the whole of the screen, had vanished before the destruction of the carved roof; but the lower panels, with some traces of decorative colour, remained till about five years ago. Some old inhabitants recollect a small door-way northward of the chancel arch, beneath the tablet to John Thompson; and this, no doubt was the way leading to the rood-loft. When this loft existed, the peculiarity of the chancel-arch, which (like that at Emberton) dies into the side walls of the nave, was perhaps less observable.

The best windows in the Church are the side ones of the chancel. The two westernmost are brought lower than the others, and crossed near the bottom by a plain transom. The same feature occurs at Emberton. I need hardly say that the symbolical import, or practical use, of this arrangement, is a disputed question. Occurring, as it generally does, upon *one* side only of the chancel, it has been thought to signify the piercing of our Saviour's Heart at the time of His crucifixion; but this explanation seems hardly satisfactory, when, as in the chancels of Olney and Emberton, the peculiarity occurs on *both* sides.*

In the usual position we find three sedilia gradually rising eastward, and a piscina with a corresponding arch. Until a few years ago these were blocked. I must mention that the corbel-heads are not original; though this will be apparent on inspection. Opposite to the sedilia is an arched recess which served the purpose, during the continuance of the ancient rites, of the Easter Sepulchre. Possibly it may be the tomb of the present Church's unknown founder.†

The east window is singular in form, being very wide in proportion to its height, and terminating in the segment

* See *Ecclesiologist*, v. 189, where the above-mentioned explanation is defended even in the case of *two* "vulne windows" or "lychnoscopes."

† See Neale's *Hierologus*, 153.

of a circle, otherwise called a reversed catenarian arch. Whether this be the original shape of the window is very doubtful, for though the dripstone and corbels do not seem to have been disturbed, the form is so unusual, so far from harmonizing with the rest of the building, and so unlike the beautiful east window in the closely corresponding Church of Emberton, that I cannot help regarding it as an innovation, though not a recent one. The tracery is modern.*

There are two or three extracts from ancient wills which I introduce here, because they refer to the internal ornamentation of the Church.

In 1516,† Sir Thomas Digby, Knt., willed to be buried before the image of the Trinity in St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in Olney.

In 1520, Richard Cook, alias Squier, gave to a pair of organs here, £6. 6s. 8d.

In 1535, Sir John Threlkeld, vicar of Olney, bequeathed two books of parchment, a candlestick, two altar-cloths, and two towels to this Church.

In the Church-yard there was formerly a cross. I am informed by an inhabitant of Olney that he remembers its base, a short distance from the north-west angle of the tower.

A chantry was founded here by Ralph, the last Lord Bassett of Drayton, whose will, made in Jan. 1390, contains the following passage:—"I will that four chauntries be founded, to pray for my soul for ever, in the following places: two at Bethlem without Bishopsgate, *one in the Chapel of our Lady in the Church-yard at Olney*, and one in the new chapel built by me at Colston Bassett in honour of St. Ivo, for which I give CCL."‡ Lord Bassett died on the 10th of May in the same year.

The Chapel of the Virgin is believed to have stood de-

* In Dr. Lipscombe's *History of Bucks* the window is totally misrepresented.

† Before this period John Mordon alias Andrew, rector of Emberton, gave, in his life time, to the Church of Olney a *Catholicon*, (no doubt the *Catholicon seu Summa Grammaticalis* of Jo. de Balbis), *Legenda Aurea*, (the well known work of Jac. de Voragine), and "portos," i. e. a Breviary; besides certain books and ornaments to other Churches. This appears from his monumental brass at Emberton, the curious inscription upon which has never yet been correctly printed. Some words in it, (apparently in *trai' frir'*) are indeed most puzzling.

‡ Nicolas, *Vetusta Testamenta*, 125.

tached from the Church, to the south-west. The chantry afterwards acquired the designation of the Earl of Warwick's chantry, unless indeed, that was a separate foundation. I believe the Earl was but as it were a *second* founder,* for we hear no more of Lord Bassett's chantry, and but one chantry priest is named in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of Henry VIII.

I shall now offer a few remarks concerning the mill, and the bridge at Olney.

It is clear that water-mills were in use amongst our Saxon ancestors. Whenever a mill is mentioned in Domesday Book, a *water*-mill is meant, and in many cases it remains (as at Olney) to the present day. In feudal times there existed not that class of millers who now stand between the growers and the bakers. The lord of every manor where there was a stream, usually (perhaps invariably) had his mill—a grist mill, receiving the corn of the tenants of the manor, and returning it ground; a certain customary portion being generally retained, under the name of toll, as a recompense for the grinding; though sometimes money payments were received instead. In some manors tenants were *obliged* to grind at the lord's mill; and there is one instance upon record in which a tenant was presented at the Court Leet, for refusing to do so.† “To bring grist to one's mill” is a proverbial phrase, which, we may well suppose, originated in this feudal custom. In early times, notwithstanding the much smaller population of this country, mills were far more numerous, though, it may be, generally smaller, than at present. In three adjacent parishes of Wiltshire, where at the time of the Conqueror's survey there were no fewer than seventeen mills, there are now but three,‡ a diminution ascribable to social changes and various other causes which need not now be specified. The situation of many an ancient mill which has disappeared, may still be probably surmised by what seems to be an unnatural deflection of the river. I may here remark that there was until a comparatively recent period a mill at Clifton Reynes. It is noticed by our poet Cowper in the 5th book of “The Task,” and its site is still apparent. The mill at Olney certainly existed before the Norman Conquest. It is described in Domesday Book

* 5 Edw. IV. 1465-6.

† At Woodford, Wilts. Duke, *Prolusiones Historicae*, 397. ‡ *Ib.* 398.

as "one mill of 40 shillings and 200 eels," such doubtless being the rent which it produced to the Bishop of Constance, who then was lord of Olney. Ranulph, Earl of Chester, one of his successors, is recorded to have given to God and the monks of St. Peter at Gloucester, 40 shillings a year charged on the mill at Olney.* From this period its history becomes obscure.

There can be no doubt that from a very early period Olney had its bridge. Amongst our ancestors the erection or maintenance of such a structure was deemed a work of charity, and truly it had *here* more than an ordinary claim to be so regarded. There is on the Patent Roll for the 8th year of King Edward III. (1334) an entry of a patent for the reparation of Olney bridge;† and it is stated in the Parish Register that the bridge was made in 1619. The structure

" ——— that with its wearisome but needful length
Bestrode the wintry flood,"

in Cowper's time, was removed about thirty years ago; but there still remains, at the northern extremity, one old arch with a dripstone; and the two adjoining arches, though semicircular, are of some antiquity. The bridge to which these belong is a distinct structure, crossing not the main river, but the mill-stream. How long this interesting relic of the past will be allowed to remain, I cannot say. Spoilers are abroad, and a new bridge of cast-iron—that most odious and unpicturesque of all materials—is ever and anon the theme of their remorseless deliberations.

There are within the town and parish a few ancient domestic edifices of some interest, and relics or traditions of many more. Olney Courts, a farm situated about a mile north-west of the town, is, I have little doubt, the site of the mansion of the old feudal lords. Olney Park, another farm in the same quarter, marks the situation of the land which Ralph Lord Bassett was licensed to empark in 1374.‡ A house on the west side of the town-street, now inhabited by Mr. John Aspray, though considerably damaged by the fire of 1854, still contains some wood carvings of the Tudor period; and the ground floor has a

* Dugdale, *Monasticon*, i. 118. ed. 1655.

† *Cal. Rot. Pat. in Turri Lond.* (Rec. Comm.) 119.

‡ *Ib.* 189 b. *Cal. Inquis. post Mortem* (Rec. Comm.) ii. 336.

ceiling divided crossways by massive moulded beams of oak. At their intersection was a boldly carved boss, which, though now detached, is carefully preserved. Another house, situated near the northern extremity of the town on the same side, contains some very curious stucco-work. In a room on the ground floor there is the figure of a man on horseback, with the following inscription:—ANNO 1624 M^R JOHN BRVNT ONE OF Y^E KINGS MES-SINGERS WAS AT THE COST OF THIS WORK. Other parts of the room are ornamented with a variety of allegorical devices. The Great House, as it was usually called, (the last that I shall mention), stood very near the Church, to the south-east. It was built by William Johnson, Esq., impropiator of the great tithes, who came to Olney in 1642, and died in 1669; and it continued for several generations to be the dwelling of his family. This substantial structure, with its many gables and square mullioned windows, gradually fell into decay, and ultimately disappeared, within the memory of the present generation.*

Some distance out of the town, at the junction of the roads to Warrington and Lavendon, there is an open space which was, I have little doubt, the place where the gallows of the ancient lords of Olney reared its awful form. I need hardly say that, amongst ancient feudal privileges, those of *furca et fossa* stand conspicuous. Dr. Lipscombe, the historian of our County, mentions the discovery of skeletons at the intersection of old trackways in other parts of Buckinghamshire,† where tradition says the gallows stood; and such spots have continued, until very recent times, to be appropriated—no doubt from their traditional association with the burial of felons—to the unhallowed sepulture of suicides. A *felo de se* was buried about 1790 at the spot to which I have referred.

The names borne, from time immemorial, by various localities within this parish, present a curious and interesting subject of enquiry; but as I must draw these observations to a close, I shall allude to only one or two. There is a narrow way leading from the Weston-road towards the Church-yard entrance through the Lordship close,

* There is some account of it, with a wood-cut, in the *Sunday at Home*, Oct. 29, 1867.

† In Chearsly parish.

and it is called Dead Lane. This I take to have been a lich-way, or funeral path, as well from a part of Olney town itself, as from Weston Underwood. I may remind this audience that until the time of Sir John Olney, who founded the present Church of Weston towards the end of the XIVth century, that place was merely a chapelry to Olney, without the right of sepulture. The southern end of Olney was known more than three hundred years ago by the name of "Brigge Street;" for it is recorded in 1546 that a cottage situated in the part so called had belonged to the Earl of Warwick's chantry.

I have thus, most imperfectly, laid before the Buckinghamshire Architectural and Archæological Society a few desultory notes concerning the early history of the town of Olney. They are extracted from a voluminous collection, the result of many years' research. Very much might have been added relative to the points to which I have alluded, and to many more which I have overpassed in silence. I trust the day is not far distant when the substance of the materials which have been collected, embracing the history of the town and district (including Warrington and Weston Underwood), from the earliest period of which anything is known to the present time, will be laid before the public. To this end I would respectfully request the communication of intelligence in any way relating to Olney and its neighbourhood. The sight of any documentary evidence, drawings, seals, or other relics of the past, will be especially acceptable; and whatever assistance may be rendered by any who are interested in the undertaking will be thankfully acknowledged.

WALTER PENNINGTON STORER.

Olney, June 23rd, 1860.