THE MANOR AND ABBEY OF MEDMENHAM.

BY THE REV. C. LOWNDES, F.R.A.S.

Medmenham Abbey, with its physical advantages of water, wood, and rich lands and pastures, though uninteresting as a ruin, is beautifully situated on the northern bank of the river Thames. Those members who visited it on the occasion of the Society's annual excursion in the summer of 1870, when this paper was prepared, will have little difficulty in placing themselves in thought on this romantic spot, and in picturing to themselves the settlement there of its former inhabitants, and their slow and gradual progress in the arts, which enabled them to construct coracles, canoes, and boats for the navigation of that river which has been so intimately connected with the history of our country. The broad lagoon in this part of the rich valley of the Thames seems to indicate the flow of a much larger body of water, in former years, than that which, at the present day, is confined in its narrow bed. The river, indeed, proved very advantageous to the varied settlers on its banks, for by means of it an intercourse was constantly kept up amongst them, and thus, by an interchange of ideas and opinions, a great advancement in civilization took place. In running its peaceful course, it now marks the southern boundary of our County. Serene and beautiful as this part of the country is, it has been subject in former years to much strife and contention. It has been possessed at different periods by the early British, the Roman, the Anglo-Saxon, the Danes, and the Normans. Passing over its successive occupation by the three former people, we come to the time of the Danes, who have left behind them more traces than their predecessors of their settlement, in the names of "Toft," "Thorp," "By," "Fleet," which designate many villages on the banks of this King of English rivers. The younger sons of the Danish noble families, who lived by plunder and rapine, both by sea and land, extended their piratical and

marauding excursions to the sea coasts, the great estuaries and navigable rivers in England, where they at first settled, and secured to themselves a ready passage to and from those seas which they were accustomed to sweep. Marching into the interior they took possession of the country north of the Thames, under the name of Danelagh, a territory under the laws and regimen of the Danes. They threw up strong fortifications at well-chosen points in their line of march to the great discomfiture of their enemies. They were, however, strongly and successfully opposed by Alfred, his son Edward, and his grandson Athelstan.

When Alfred, A.D. 893, drove Hastings, the great Danish chief, out of his kingdom, "great multitudes of his followers," as Hume informs us, "seized and fortified Shobury at the mouth of the Thames; and having left a garrison there, they marched along the river till they came to Boddington in the county of Gloucester." It is probable that on this occasion the encampment at Danesfield, called the "Danes' Ditches," and the "Horseshoe entrenchment," on the hill immediately above the ruins of the abbey, was formed, the situation being so peculiarly inviting. The entrenchment is of the form of a horseshoe, and may be easily traced. Langley, in his "History of the Hundred of Desborough," mentions that "some warlike instruments were found in making a walk round the rampart, though he had not seen them;" but Mr. Scott Murray, the present owner of Danesfield, informs me that he is not aware of anything having been discovered. Alfred afterwards made a treaty with the Danes, politic to himself, as giving inhabitants to a thinly-populated district, and providing defenders against further incursions; and advantageous to the Danes, as securing a settlement for them, and providing for their conversion to Christianity, which was one of the chief objects of Alfred's stipulations. This settlement was defined by Alfred himself, in these words: "Let the bounds of our dominion stretch to the river Thames, and from thence to the waters of Lea, even unto the head of the same water, and thence straight into Bedford, and finally going along by the river Ouse, let them end at Watling Street." After this, the Danes soon threw aside their former ferocious and lawless habits, and followed the peaceful

and industrious pursuits of their neighbours. Their union with the inhabitants increased with great rapidity, and by the time of the Norman Conquest a real national unity was established amongst them.

Soon after the Conquest the manor of Medmenham was given to Hugh de Bolebec, one of the Norman barons who came over with William the Conqueror. In the Domesday Survey (translated from the original Latin) we learn—

"That Medmenham was in Dustenberg (or Desborough) Hundred. Hugh de Bolebec held this manor, taxed at x hides. There were x carucates; in the demesne, four hides; and there were 2 carucates, and x villeins with 8 bordars, having 8 carucates. There were 4 servants, a fishery for 1000 eels; pasture for all the plough teams; wood for 40 hogs; worth 100 shillings; in the reign of the Confessor, £8. Welstan, a thane of that monarch, held the same, and could sell it." "Hugh de Bolbec also held Brock in Medmenham at a hyde. There was 1 plough-land; a plough with a villein; and 2 copyholders. It was valued at x shillings. Odo, a tenant of Brictric, held the same, and could sell it."

Hugh de Bolebec had issue two sons, Hugh and Walter. The elder son Hugh founded the Abbey of Wooburne in Bedfordshire in May, A.D. 1145, and gave the manor of Medmenham to found a cell to it. But this cell was not built until after Walter the younger son, on the death of his brother, had succeeded to the Barony. Extracts from Hearne's "Liber Niger Scaccarii," copied at length in Langley's "History of the Desborough Hundred," and from Dugd. "Monast.," vol. v. p. 684, copied in Lipscombe's "History of Buckinghamshire," which are not necessary to be repeated here, prove that Hugh de Bolebec, and not Walter, as has been asserted, was the true founder of Medmenham, or Mednam, Abbey. A charter of King John, in the second year of his reign, January 3, 1201, confirmed the gift; and in 1204 some of the Cistercian monks of Woburn came and settled here. The Chronicle of Stanley,* a Cistercian Abbey in Wiltshire, states that the attempt to colonize Medmenham was a failure, and the monks returned to Woburne the same year, when the abbot of that place was in consequence

* MS. Digby xi. in Bodl. Libr. Oxon.:—A.D. 1204: Exivit hoc anno conventus de Wburne ad villam quæ vocatur Medmeham super tamisiam. Eodem anno revocatus est conventus de Medmeham et abbas de Wburne depositus est propter eandem causam.

deposed. Two very old lists of Cistercian houses, and the annals of Park Louth, another abbey of the same order, concur in dating the second and in this case successful colonization of Medmenham in A.D. 1212. These monks were called Cistercian, from Cisteaux, in the bishopric of Chalons in France. They were remarkable for the strictness of their rules. Cardinal de Vitri says: "They neither wore skins nor shirts, nor ever eat flesh, except in sickness; and abstained from fish, eggs, milk, and cheese; they lay upon straw beds in tunics and cowls; they rose at midnight to prayers; they spent the day in labour, reading, and prayer; and in all their exercises observed a continual silence. They wore a white cassock with a narrow scapulary, and over that a black gown when they went abroad, but when they went to church a white one."

The names of very few abbots are recorded; one of the earliest has lately been discovered by Walter de Grey Birch, Esq., amongst some charters in the British Museum, a copy of which he has been kind enough to send for insertion here :—

BRITISH MUSEUM.—CAMPBELL CHARTER, X. 8.

"Omnibus et singulis tenentibus nostris de Dernedene, Dominæ. . . Priosissæ de Merlawe, Johanni filio Roberti filii Walteri de Cyppenham, Thomæ Lambert de Bekeneffeld, Simoni Saluage de eadem, Martino filio Rogeri Chapmani de eadem, Waltero Boyvile de eadem, Roberto alte Hethe de eadem, Ricardo alte Holeweye Juniori, Adæ Schrapie de Burnham, et Roberto Thomas de Derne, *Galfridus*, permissione divina, *Abbas de Medmenham* et ejusdem loci conventus salutem in domino sempiternam. Noveritis nos tradidisse, concessisse, et confirmasse domino Radulfo de Wedon̄ militi omnes terras et tenementa nostra cum redditibus et serviciis omnium tenencium nostrorum, et cum omnibus aliis pertinenciis in Dernedene. Quare vobis supplicamus et per presentes assignamus, quod omnimodo prædicto Radulfo et heredibus, assignatis, seu executoribus suis, de omnibus redditibus et servitiis cuilibet vestrum singillatim contingentibus juxta tenorem indenturæ inter nos inde confectæ sitis intendentes et respondentes. In cujus rei testimonium sigillum nostrum commune præsentibus est appentum. Datum apud Bekeneffeld die dominica in festo Sanctæ Osithæ virginis, Anno regni regis Edwardi filii regis Edwardi duodecimo [Sunday, St. Osith's Day, 7 October, A.D. 1318.]

Roger occurs in A.D. 1256; Peter, on the 11th of September, A.D. 1295; John de Medmenham, in A.D. 1308; Henry, in A.D. 1416; Richard, in A.D. 1521; John Talbot, in A.D. 1536. In this Abbey in all probability was reared John de Medmeham, or Medmenham, who was elected*

* Patent Rolls, 45 Hen. III., m. 7.

SEAL OF JOHN DE MEDMENHAM, ABBOT OF CHERTSEY, A.D. 1261—1272, FROM THE ORIGINAL IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM. ADDITIONAL CHARTERS, 5546-7.

To face p. 61.

Abbot of Chertsey, co. Surrey, on the 18th of July, A.D. 1261, and died in A.D. 1272.

The seal of John de Medmeham, which is given on the opposite Plate, from the original impression in the British Museum, is illustrative of the best period of the art of the seal-engraver in the middle ages. On the obverse the Abbot is represented in embroidered and fringed ecclesiastical vestments, holding in his right hand a staff with the crook towards himself, indicative of jurisdiction over his own abbey, and a closed book in the left hand. His head is uncovered, and he stands upon a richly-foliated corbel beneath a trefoiled Gothic canopy, carved in imitation of the Abbey Church. The legend, in Lombardic capitals, is as follows:—

. . . . . OHAN . . . DEI GRA . . . . . TESEYE.

Sigillum Johannis Dei Gratia Abbatis Certeseye.

On the reverse is a spirited delineation of the Martyrdom of St. Peter, the Patron Saint of the Abbey, with the legend, in similar characters, thus:—

SOLVE IVBTE DEO CVLPAR, PETRE CATENAS.

Solve jubente Deo culparum, Petre, Catenas.

This reverse or counterseal is also used upon the common seal of the Abbey.

The Abbey of Medmenham was dedicated to the Virgin Mary; and its seal was "the effigies of the Blessed Virgin crowned, sitting on a splendid throne, in her bosom the divine Infant. The only impression remaining is that of John 1308, which is a neat oval seal, with the inscription at the edge, "S. Fris. Johis. Mendham" (*Sigillum Fratris Johannis Mendham*). In the beginning of the sixteenth century it was annexed to the Abbey of Bristleham, or Bisham, on the opposite side of the river in the county of Berks. On the suppression of the monasteries in the time of Henry VIII., the Commissioners returned that this "monastery was of the order of St. Bernard (who became a Cistercian monk A.D. 1114), the clear value £20 6*s.* 2*d.*; monks there two; and both desyren to go to houses of religion; servants none; bells, etc., etc., worth £2 6*s.* 8*d.*; the house wholly in ruin; the value of the moveable goods £1 3*s.* 8*d.*; woods none; debts none."

Browne Willis gives an account of the state of the abbey in 1718. "The abbey-house seems, most part of it, to have been built since the dissolution, as doth the chapel at the end of one of the wings. There is no painted glass or arms remaining in it. In the chapel, which is a low-tiled building, paved with ordinary brick, lie some marble carvings, being representations of our Saviour. These arms are in the chapel; argent a cross gules, being the arms of St. George at Windsor. They can give very little or no account of the Abbey, and no more is remembered to be standing than what now remains, which is part of the north aisle." The above coat of arms is in allusion to the fact that the Abbot of Medmenham was, *ex officio*, Epistolar of the Order of the Garter at Windsor, and it was his duty to read the Epistle in the morning service of St. George's day, when the sovereign celebrated the annual feast.

In his "Mitred Abbeys," vol. ii., p. 29, Willis says, "Here remains still standing the walls of the north isle of the Abbey Church; 'tis in length 16 yards, and in breadth 4; it seems by this to have been a neat, stately building, well wrought with ashlar work; the windows high and spatious. It probably consisted of a body and 2 side isles and chancell, and had a tower at the west-end. The house that is now called the Abbey House seems to have been patched up after the dissolution."

Langley, in his "History of the Hundred of Desborough," published A.D. 1797, remarks that "The chapel no longer remains, and only one pillar is standing of the north aisle." He also adds, "The figure of the Virgin, seated on a throne, and holding the Infant Saviour in her arms, carved in marble, still remains, and is placed in a niche of the tower."

The appearance of the abbey at the present day bears out this description which is given of it in the last century. The alterations and additions have been so many and great, that there is really nothing left to interest the architect or the antiquary.

Soon after the Reformation and the suppression of Bisham Abbey, the lands belonging to the monastery of Medmenham were granted to Robert Moore and others. The family of Duffield succeeded very soon afterwards; for James Duffield, who resided at the abbey, presented to

the living in 1563, and possessed the estate till 1779, when the site of the abbey was purchased by John Martin, Esq., Chief Justice of Chester, and was sold by his widow together with Danesfield, in 1786, to Robert Scott, Esq., of Crailing, co. Roxburg, who bequeathed it to his widow, Emma Assheton Smith for life, and at her death to her nephew Charles Scott Murray, whose son is the present possessor. During the last century the abbey was tenanted by an association of men of wit and fashion, under the title of the Monks of St. Francis, whose habit they assumed. Over the door is inscribed their motto, "*Fay ce que voudras,*" which the old lady who was in the habit of showing the ruins translated "Do what you like, but don't divulge!" This association was also called the "Hell Fire Club" or "The Monks of Medmenham." It was an association of similar iniquity to the Mohawk or Mohock Club, which was abolished by the order of the Privy Council in 1721. A pamphlet was published entitled "The Hell Fire Club, kept by a Society of Blasphemers," a satyre inscribed to the Right Hon. Thomas Baron Maiderfield, Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain, with the king's order in council for suppressing immorality and profaneness. It condemned in general terms the diabolical profaneness, immorality, and debauchery of its meetings. There were three of these suspicious associations in London, to which upwards of forty persons of quality of both sexes belonged.

The association which assumed the name of "Hell Fire Club" comprised Sir Francis Dashwood, afterwards Lord le Despencer, John Wilkes, Paul Whitehead, and other kindred spirits. Paul Whitehead was the secretary, and was one of the select few for whose use it is believed the "Essay on Woman" was written, as is supposed, by John Wilkes. Their orgies were celebrated at Medmenham Abbey, which they converted into a convivial retreat, and hence their designation, "the Monks of Medmenham Abbey." The manners and habits of these *modern* monks were the very opposite to those of the former monks of this old abbey. One night the profligate party were overwhelmed with terror at the apparition of a huge ape, hideously attired, which had been lowered down through the window. They believed that the fiend himself had appeared amongst them, and

their meetings were then finally broken up. Of their sayings and doings, impious orgies and rites, it is needless here to speak. The club could only have been formed at a time when libertinism and impiety were carried to lengths now happily unknown.

Johnstone, in his novel ("Chrysal; or, the Adventures of a Guinea"), has probably furnished the longest, but somewhat fictitious, account of this Club. Some other particulars of this mysterious fraternity may be found in Capt. Thompson's "Life of Paul Whitehead," edit. 1729, pp. 33—39; the "Town and County Magazine, i., p. 122; and "Churchill's Poems," edit. Tooke, 1854, iii., pp. 168, 185, 275. It is not surprising that a Club which had excited so much notoriety, and provoked so much satire, should have rendered itself an object of literary curiosity.