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SAXON CHURCH OF ST. LAWRENCE, BRADFORD ON AVON.¹

By E. CHISHOLM BATTEN, M.A.

It is impossible to stand on this spot, sacred to the memories of St. Aldhelm and King Ina, without feeling thankful for the great work they accomplished for the English people twelve hundred years ago.

Aldhelm, Abbot and Bishop, was the wise counsellor of that successful warrior, ecclesiastical founder and provident legislator, Ina, king of the West Saxons, and the two did very much for the making of our England.

Ina was a near relative of Aldhelm, and we are told that the noble talents of Ina were stimulated by the counsels of Aldhelm whose precepts he listened to humbly, took in heartily, and followed thoroughly.

In 652 Cenwealh, Ina's uncle, won a great victory, here at Bradford, over the Celtic Britons, which success extended the West Saxon Kingdom to the Mendips. Ina became king of the West Saxons in 688, and rolled the tide of conquest over the whole of Somerset, founding the castle and town of Taunton as a border fortress and defence against the Celts of Devon and Cornwall.

Aldhelm was at Ina's accession abbot of Malmesbury; he had been so for nearly twenty years. The Venerable Bede (his cotemporary) tells us how his early time there was

¹ Read at Bradford, August 5th, 1887.

devoted to learning and authorship, and how students came there from Scotland and France to be his pupils.

We must remember that the wars between the West Saxons and the Celts, were not waged by the Saxons when as Pagans and Heathens, against Christians, but that both sides were Christians, the conquerors as well as the conquered; and that there was little displacement of the vanquished Celts, whose religious forms were rather of the Oriental than of the Western type.

Aldhelm combined with his learning and letters great zeal in church extension. He was the greatest church builder of his time. He built a large minster at Malmesbury, beside two other churches within the same precincts, and before Ina's accession he had founded a monastery at Frome.

Very shortly after Ina's accession, Aldhelm communicated to him his intention of going to Rome, to obtain a grant from the Pope of the largest privileges of a monastery for the abbey of Malmesbury, and its dependent house at Frome, to which proposal not only Ina, but Ethelred the King of the Mercians gave full countenance.

Aldhelm obtained at Rome a bull or charter of privileges from Pope Sergius, exempting the Monasteries of Malmesbury and Frome from episcopal jurisdiction and secular services, and conferring on the monks the privilege of electing their abbot.

On Aldhelm's return from Rome, after a long absence, his progress through the West Saxon Kingdom was, as it were, a triumph. Ina and Ethelred joined in welcoming his return; Aldhelm gave Ina a magnificent altar which he had brought from Rome and Ina placed it in the church he had then lately built at Bruton.

After his return from Rome, Aldhelm founded a monastery, here at Bradford. It was probably not founded before that time, as Bradford is not named in the charter of privileges of Pope Sergius, who was Pope from 687 to 701.

When Ina divided the Bishopric of Wessex into two in 705, and founded the Bishopric of Sherborne, he insisted on Aldhelm becoming the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Sherborne.

The first mention of the Monastery of Bradford is in the

episcopal letter of Aldhelm which he wrote in 705, stating that he had desired, on becoming bishop, to resign the position of Abbot in his Monasteries of Malmesbury, Frome and *Bradford*; but his monks insisted on his remaining their head, which he consented to do; King Ina was an attesting witness to this letter.

William of Malmesbury after mentioning this episcopal letter of St. Aldhelm in which the Monastery of Bradford is named, adds the now well-known sentence "et est ad hunc diem eo loci Ecclesiola quam ad nomen beatissimi Laurentii fecisse prædicatur," which may be translated "And there is to this day in that place a little church which he (Aldhelm) is asserted to have made to the Honour of the most Blessed Laurence."

The question which is to be submitted to your Society to-day is, Does the building before us only occupy the site of the church built by Aldhelm, or is it the actual church itself?

Mr. Jones, the late vicar of Bradford, tells us that in August, 1857, at the meeting of the Wiltshire Archaeological Society here, attention was first drawn to this remarkable building, though he admits, few seemed willing to believe in its authenticity as a relic of the tenth century.

This statement is in a tract published by the Committee of Trustees for its Preservation and Restoration in 1872. In this is given the opinion of Mr. Freeman as follows:—"From the character of the building I should be inclined to place it early in the last of the three Ante-Norman periods which I tried to make out in my History of Architecture. There is certainly in this building nothing that can be described as Norman,"—and the opinion of the late Mr. Parker as follows:—"The church was built as it seems to me, in the time of Bishop Ethelwold, between 970 and 975, or possibly then built of wood only, and rebuilt of stone about 1025, not later.

The foundation for this opinion of Mr. Parker's was the great similarity between the sculptured angels to be seen on the east wall of the chancel, and figures of angels found in the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold, who held the See of Winchester from A.D. 963 to 984; and it was confirmed in the opinion of Mr. Jones, by the fact

that in the year A.D. 1001, King Ethelred bestowed the monastery (Cænobium) with the adjacent vill of Bradford on the Abbess of Shaftesbury. The specific object of the gift is declared to be to provide the nuns a refuge from the attacks of the Danes, and a hiding-place for the relics of the blessed martyr, St. Edward, and the rest of the saints.

In 1874, in his paper on Ine, printed in the xxth volume of the transactions of the Somersetshire Archaeological Society, Mr. Freeman, who had in the meantime most carefully examined the buildings, says (pt. ii. p. 27)—“As Abbot of Malmesbury, Ealdhelm had been one of the greatest builders of his time. The realm of Ine was adorned with a number of churches, the work of his saintly kinsman. Of these one happily remains to us, the church, reared by Ealdhelm on the scene of his uncle Cenwealh’s victory, the lately rescued Church of Saint Lawrence at Bradford-on-Avon. There it stands telling its tale that the English of the seventh and eighth centuries were not savages, unable to put stone and mortar together, and recalling in its peculiar style the work of Honorius—it might be more respectful to say the works of Stilicho—over the remodelled gates of Rome.”

From 1874 the appeals to the public (which have been liberally responded to) utter no uncertain sound as to the date, and say that this most interesting relic was standing in William of Malmesbury’s days, and was built by St. Aldhelm.

Why not? Why is this opinion so dear to the town of Bradford, so pleasant to those who, in Wessex, reverence the names of Ina and Aldhelm, not correct?

Aldhelm certainly built the great church at Malmesbury of stone; and the church he built at Wareham was also of stone. The Venerable Bede records the building of stone churches at Wearmouth and Jarrow, in the county of Northumberland about 680. The year after the Monastery of Wearmouth had been built, Bishop Benedict crossed the sea into Gaul, and no sooner asked than obtained, and carried back with him masons to build him a stone church in the Roman manner, which he had always admired.

We have seen that Aldhelm founded the Monastery of

Bradford after his return from Rome, and before his episcopal letter of 705. He was fully employed in the building of his bishop's church at Sherborne after that date, and it is most probable that this Church of St. Lawrence here was built before 705. May he not coming fresh from Rome have brought with him, if necessary, masons capable of building, and built our Saxon Church of stone in the Roman style of masonry, although to conciliate the Celtic Christians, the place was adapted to the Eastern rather than the Roman ritual.

Nor is this all ; no one would, I suppose, insist on the Church, as it now stands, with its peculiar ornamentation, being exclusively the work of Aldhelm. Certainly the angels in the east wall of the chancel might well have been added after the Nuns of Shaftesbury owned the Church, and much of the external ornamentation must have been done after the erection of the walls, and might as reasonably be considered as done in the tenth and beginning of the eleventh century, with the style of which period it accords, than at the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth.

The newly discovered Saxon Church at Deerhurst seems to be of the date 1053, and its masonry exhibits a use of building stone, of no great length or thickness, irregular as to size and bedded in very copious mortar, somewhat in contrast to the masonry of our Bradford Saxon Church. But in one respect the plan of Deerhurst Saxon Church is decidedly different from that of Bradford, and this is in the size of the opening between the nave and the chancel. This in Bradford is not wider than three feet ; the width at Deerhurst is six feet six inches. The difference is just what might be expected between buildings of the eighth and of the eleventh century. The wall between the chancel and the nave was gradually excavated by the English architects, as the Eastern Church character of the separation between the sanctuary and the worshippers became fainter and fainter.

The Institute will not fail to observe that the two new buttresses, on the south side of the nave, are placed by way of precaution, in lieu of the support afforded by a cottage just pulled down. The removal of this building has disclosed a doorway into the nave on the south-side

corresponding to the doorway opposite on the north-side, which leads into what has been called the porch. This southern doorway is six feet six inches from the floor to the impost, and from the lower side of the impost to the head of the arch two feet three inches, in all eight feet nine inches, with a width of two feet ten inches.

It is a subject of much interest, and on which great difference of opinion exists, whether these new buttresses should not be raised, and a southern limb built to correspond with the north building hitherto called the north porch. The pitch and size of the roof of a southern building are sufficiently indicated on the south wall of the nave, and the foundation walls of such a building have been distinctly traced. The buttresses are built on the side foundation walls and the area corresponds with that of the north porch.

But to copy the north porch is to assume that this copy would represent the state of the southern limb when it was pulled down to erect the cottage, whilst to carry up the walls and gable in any other form is to venture to say how they were fashioned eight centuries ago.