

Transactions
OF THE
Cambridgeshire and
. . . Huntingdonshire
Archæological Society

(FOUNDED A.D. 1900)

VOLUME III. PART III.

[ISSUED TO SUBSCRIBERS FOR 1909]

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By

PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY BY

G. H. TYNDALL, THE MINSTER PRESS

1909

PRICE (NON-MEMBERS) FIVE SHILLINGS

NOTES ON HUNTINGDON

I suppose the oldest relic of past times connected with Huntingdon is the road which runs through our High Street and is still at the north end of the town, known as Ermine Street; it was probably not one of the earliest Roman roads, but early enough to have known the tramp of the legions and the ruts of Roman chariot wheels. It is said that there were three ancient roads in the county: the *British* Ermine which entered from Cæsar's Camp near Sandy on the Bedfordshire border, and passed through Toseland to Godmanchester, where it joined the Roman Ermine Street which came from Cambridgeshire near Caxton and so by the two Papworths to Godmanchester; whilst the third the *via Devana* came from the Eastern Counties and entering Hunts. by Fen Stanton (the reputed home of Dick Turpin), proceeded to Godmanchester, then, as many suppose, the Roman Station of Durolipons, whence the three roads crossed the Ouse together by means of some bridge earlier than the present structure. The bridge which we use now was declared by Sir Gilbert Scott, whose attention I drew to it, to be quite one of the finest bridges in England, it has no remains of a chapel as you will see at Saint Ives, but in one of the spaces formed by the V shaped buttresses below, which were no doubt used as refuges by foot passengers, a cross-cut in the stone on both sides marks, I believe, the boundary between the two boroughs and probably also the site of the little chapel which occupied one of the larger of these refuges, in passing which the wayfarer crossed himself in acknowledgement of his gratitude for so ample a provision for safe conduct over the wide and often swollen stream. Two beautiful corbel-tables on the west side of two of the arches mark the early date of the structure, sometime in the Thirteenth Century if not before; for in the year 1280, Edward I by letters patent granted

that in aid of repairing their bridge of Huntingdon and for the advantage of the parts adjacent, the bailiffs and goodmen should take for the term of three years a toll on certain saleable goods coming into the town; and in his well-known hatred to the enemies of the Christian faith, he also granted them for the same object a toll from every Jew or Jewess passing over the said bridge, on horseback one penny or on foot one halfpenny.

In November, 1370, it is recorded that the then Archdeacon of Huntingdon, John de Swynlegh, addressed an order to all deans, rectors and vicars to collect alms for the rebuilding of the chapel of St. Thomas the Martyr upon the bridge at Huntingdon.

Huntingdon was called by the Saxons Huntandune that is Hunta's dune.¹ The name has undergone but little alteration since the Norman Conquest; you have it Huntedone in Domesday-book, and Hunterisdune on the common seal of the Borough, but all spellings have a distinct reference to the county, having being anciently a forest, and consequently dear to hunters, this is perpetuated on the seal by the representation of a sportsman, (some say Robin Hood, Earl of Huntingdon) with a bow slung by his side and a couple of dogs, a stag, and a bird perched on a tree.

There is no mention of Huntingdon in early British History. The Romans have left scarcely any traces of their occupation that have been discovered except a few pieces of glass and pottery. Whether the town was planted by Saxon families or seized by their warriors from the original Britons, when princes, priests, bards and people were driven to the West is unknown, but that it was a town long before it was occupied by the Danes is regarded as certain.

1. 'Dun' or 'dune' in Huntandune signified a sacred hill, implying a place of heathen worship. When Christianity was established the cross was generally set up on the site of the demolished 'dune.' This may perhaps explain why, though there is now no eminence, the Market Place has always been called the Market Hill. The base of the market cross, erected on the 'dune,' was discovered in 1870, by some workmen in the centre of the Market Hill. It was purchased by the Rev. R. V. French, L.L.D., then master of the Grammar School, who, on leaving, kindly presented it to me. It stands now in Castle Hill garden.

The Saxon Chronicle tells us that in the year A.D. 656, Wulfhere son of Penda, King of Mercia gave to Medhamsted (Peterborough) lands, &c., "and so forth thro' all the meres and fens that lye toward Huntingdon Port."

From the same source we learn that in A.D. 921, the Danes 'left Huntingdon and abandoned the work (castle?) and constructed a new one at Tempsford.' But Edward the Elder turned the Danes out of Tempsford, destroyed the Danish army, 'marching on to Huntingdon which he repaired and renewed where it was broken down.' Then it was that the Castle which occupied a large space on the north bank of the river near the bridge was extensively repaired or built anew. It seems not improbable that this Castle originated in a British fort, increasing in importance during the invasions of the Danes. Its form—still traceable by moat and earth-works—was due perhaps to the necessity of repelling an attack delivered by a force coming up the river in boats, and this may account for the decay of Durolipons, on the south side of the Ouse at Godmanchester and the rise of Huntingdon on the other. The ramparts extended for a considerable distance enclosing a yard which we seem to discover in the flat-central part, while the site of the Keep is suggested by the height, in my recollection crowned with a windmill, and now, by a plantation of trees.

The moat may be plainly made out in the depression which surrounds the ramparts and connects with the river at the South and East corners.

Camden in his "Britannia" tells us that in Stephen's time, Huntingdon was given by the King to David the Scot as an augmentation of his estate and he enlarged it with many new buildings and bulwarks. But in the time of Henry II, both because it was a place of refuge for seditious rebels and for that the Scots and the family of St. Lize had oftentimes raised quarrels and contentions about it, to cut off all occasions of strife, Henry to whom it was surrendered in person laid it even with the ground, "when as hee provoked with their unreasonable variance swore an oath that neither they of the St. Lizes nor the

Scottish men should quarrel any more for it." This was one way out of the difficulty, but we may regret the complete demolition of the Castle which probably took place shortly after its surrender on July 21, 1174.

Speed writing fully 400 years after this speaks of some ruined fragments of the Castle as still standing, and it is most likely that pieces of stone were used here and there in the foundation or repair of other buildings: not many years ago after the pulling down of the windmill which I have mentioned, we came upon a quantity of blocks of worked stone, with Thirteenth Century mouldings which had formed the base of the mill, and these with a head of a narrow window, long regarded as part of the ruin are preserved in my garden.

When Henry of Huntingdon, my learned predecessor (who was the second to hold the Archdeaconry after it was founded in 1078), wrote his curious history of England, he speaks of Huntingdon as a 'castrum or walled town, excelling all the neighbouring towns both in pleasantness of its situation, exposure to the sun, the beauty of its buildings and nearness to the Fens with abundance of wild fowl and animals of chase.'

There have been misguided people in modern days who have failed to appreciate the last advantage, to whom the very name of the Fens has suggested ague and rheumatism rather than the chances of sport or the opportunities of nature study; all these however good and ill alike have nearly departed for the wild fowl are few, the birds and butterflies which delighted the naturalist disappeared with the draining of Whittlesey Mere in 1852; ague and its remedy, the chewing of opium, commonly called 'quietness' are gone too and if here and there you find the 'rheumatics,' that complaint is not peculiar to the Fens.

Huntingdonshire does not lay claim to be called a pretty county, but it has some charming bits of river scenery, and the view from the Castle Hill, particularly in the hay season, would be pretty anywhere. Camden, the old historian, only anticipated, though in high-flown language the praise of an artist of the Royal

Academy Club, who paid us a visit three years ago, when he wrote "From these Castle Hills whence there is a pretty prospect a great way off, a man may behold below a meadow which they call Portholme, a river island or meadow, environed round about with the river Ouse, the same very exceeding large, and of all others that the sunne ever shone upon most fresh and beautifull, whereof in the spring time this may truly be said, 'Ver pingit vario gemmantia prata colore.'"

'The pleasant spring flowers doe yeeld
Of divers colours in this field.'

I may add that the Portholme formerly used as a race course, contains nearly 300 acres and is said to be the largest meadow in England, exceeding the Rood Dee at Chester and Port Meadow at Oxford.

I must say a few words about the Churches in Huntingdon: these were at one time 15 in number, which points to the fact that the town was once of much larger extent than it is at present. These churches were dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin, the Holy Trinity, St. Edmund, St. Germain, St. Clement, St. Martin, St. Nicholas, St. Andrew, St. Lawrence, St. Botolph, St. Peter, St. George, St. John, St. Benedict and All Saints, besides two chapels or shrines, that of St. Thomas the Martyr, as I have said, upon the bridge, and St. Michael, of which we know no more than that it was in ruins in the year 1533.

Two reasons have been assigned for the decay of the town, one, urged by Sir Robert Cotton, ascribes it to some alteration in the course of the Ouse by which the navigation was greatly impaired; the other, probably the more correct one, connects it with the pestilence of 1348 and 1349.

Edward III, in his charter of 1364, says, 'considering that the said town of Huntingdon, as well by mortal pestilences as from various other adversities thereunto coming, is so impoverished and injured that the fourth part of the said town is not inhabited and the remaining few have scarcely where with to live, neither do lands or rents pertain to the said town from whence any profit can be rendered to us yearly, and so will be wholly

given up and deserted for the residence of men unless they shall find speedy succour,' wherefore the king granted cognizance of all pleas, assizes, the chattels of felons and fugitives and outlaws, also garnerage or garnerage, a fee for "foreigners" housing their corn, wheat, malt, and other merchandise.

The demolition of most of the churches has been ignorantly ascribed to Oliver Cromwell. This is altogether an unjust accusation, for Leland who flourished about A.D. 1530, sixty years before Oliver was born says that only four churches then existed, St. Mary's, St. John's, St. Benet's and All Saint's, though traces of the walls and yards of St. Botolph's, St. Martin's and St. Andrew's were still to be seen. Two of the churches were connected with the Priory of St. Neots: these were St. Clement's which stood near Orchard-Lane, and Trinity Church, to the site of which we have no clue; it is not noticed in the diocesan register after 1348.

Of the four mentioned above, two only, St. Mary's and All Saints' are still with us, St. John's¹ was pulled down about 1660, it stood in the churchyard which still bears its name; in it Oliver Cromwell and many of his family were baptized; the tombs of some of the Williams family are to be seen to this day. Many suppose this to be the same family as that of the Cromwells, who were frequently styled Cromwell alias Williams.

The order for the union of St. John's with All Saints' as well as of St. Benedict's with St. Mary's was issued by Charles II, and is dated April, 1668.

The tower of St Benedict's church was standing about 150 years ago, but was taken down to prevent the danger of its fall; the stones were probably sold and some may be seen worked into the hostelry of the Barley Mow, a corner house by the roadside in the parish of Hartford. St. George's church is thought to have given its name to George Street for traces of foundations and Mediæval stonework are to be seen in the yard of the George Hotel, by which the street runs.

1. In this Church were chantries to St. Mary and St. Margaret.—(Ed.)

I can do little more in this paper than glance at the two parish churches now standing; St. Mary's was the church of the Priory of Austin Canons, a religious house founded before the Conquest, but the Priory was subsequently removed to the north-east of the town where is our present cemetery. St. Mary's is an interesting church, its fine embattled western tower with the walls and roofs of the nave and aisles fell from some unknown cause in 1607, leaving the decorated arcade which stood.

Mr. Robert Law, the then Vicar, applied himself with praiseworthy zeal to rebuilding the shell, so to speak, and as he had laid the first stone so he lived to place the the last in 1620, just 13 years after the fall.

The church has been restored in modern days under the direction of the late Sir A. Blomfield, who rebuilt the east wall with its triplet of lancet windows.

The fine Early English doorway with its rich capitals of foliage to the shafts, and the toothed ornament in the arch should be especially noticed.

The Church of All Saints is a good example of Perpendicular, particularly in the south aisle which was probably an old chantry. The roofs are modern but they follow the exact pattern of the old, and many of the figures which decorate them are either originals or careful copies. The west window and the organ chamber are additions made by Sir Gilbert Scott, when he restored the church nearly 50 years ago.

The registers of St. John's parish were removed to All Saints' when the two parishes were united and in these may be seen several entries of the Cromwell family, notably the one which records Oliver's baptism in 1599, over which some ancient royalist has written 'England's plague for 5 years.' Two other entries one in 1621, the other in 1628, set forth that Oliver was rebuked on the first occasion and did penance on the second 'pro factis,' for his ill-doings. Then follow the initials of the incumbent, John Tomlinson. So far as I know these entries have not been noticed by any writers on Cromwell. Mr. Carlyle, to whom I once had the opportunity of

shewing the entries assured me that he had never seen the entries before and that he had taken his dates and facts of the early life of Oliver on trust from Mark Noble. Opposite to All Saints' church is the chapel or part of the chapel of St. John's Hospital, an institution founded in the Twelfth Century by David, Earl of Huntingdon and Prince of Scotland, the 'Sir Kenneth' of Walter Scott's 'Talisman,' then most likely the possessor of Huntingdon Castle. The style is late Norman and much enriched with characteristic ornamental mouldings. The west doorway was found at the restoration to be in excellent preservation, and with the exception of two or three new shafts is just as it was originally, though the entrance has been blocked by stonework; on the left is a small window round which runs a zig-zag moulding, above is a string-course of billet moulding forming the base of an arcade of 5 arches which has been partly restored, the second and fourth being pierced to form windows. The vesica-shaped opening as well as the belfry which complete the gable are both modern. On the north and south sides are fine arches suggesting the existence of aisles. The east end shows a transitional arch of much later date, possibly leading once to a chancel of which no traces now remain. The arch has been filled in with a stone wall in which a window in the Early-Perpendicular style has been inserted to give necessary light to the interior of the building.

Many Grammar Schools date from Queen Elizabeth's reign, when the old religious houses having been destroyed, their endowments were devoted to the purposes of education. Then it was that the Norman façade just described was enveloped in a coating of red brick and decorated with a gable of the Flemish style then common. The arches and columns on the north and south sides remain unconcealed telling of the early history of the fabric. The Headmaster's house with its picturesque collection of gables existed till about 30 years ago; it dated from 1561 and provided rather narrow quarters for the boarders as well as for the master's family.

In 1875, Mr. Dion Boucicault the well-known actor and dramatic author, became interested in the town in consequence of the death of his eldest son who was killed in a collision on the G.N.R. at Abbots Ripton and buried in the cemetery at Huntingdon. It was suggested to him that as a permanent memorial he should restore the Grammar School, then in a somewhat dilapidated state and becoming unsuitable for its purpose. This he decided to do and in the removal of portions of the Elizabethan brickwork the Norman doorway and the arcading above come to light. The base, however, was found to be so far below the level of the modern street that it became necessary to raise the whole building some three or four feet, this involved complete rebuilding. The operation was carried out with the utmost care, each stone being numbered and put in its corresponding position though the entire fabric was placed on a higher foundation. The Elizabethan shell thus disappeared, and the Norman chapel of the Hospital was restored as far as possible to its original beauty. For many years it had been used as the chief school-room, there young Oliver Cromwell at his father's request made personal acquaintance with the rod of Dr. Beard¹ the Head-master; on its benches sat Samuel Pepys and from time to time many local worthies including the well-known scientist the late Sir Michael Foster. But the present age requiring better school accommodation, an excellent group of class-rooms, equipped in the most up-to-date fashion has been erected between the present master's house and the playing fields where a successful experiment of County education is in full operation and in the Norman room you may see boys and girls studying together, where Cromwell and Pepys and the rest of them laboured to repeat 'as in presenti,' and translated their bit of Vergil or Cicero.

The house in which Cromwell was born is no longer standing, the one bearing his name at the north end of the town having been built about 120 years ago. Till

1. In my possession is an engraving of Dr. Beard holding in his hand a very formidable birch rod.

that date it is said that the room in which Oliver was born was to be seen. It is said that some of the roof timbers of the old house were worked up in this; as you look at it you may recall the story of the monkey, which either here or at his uncle's, took the infant Protector in his arms while the nurse had gone to supper and ran up with him to the top of the house, whence, if he had not been cleverly enticed to resign his charge, the baby might have been dropped and the history of England would have then read very differently.

Opposite Cromwell House is Ferrar House, so called from having been the abode of Mr. Hugh Ferrar a connection of the Ferrars of Little Gidding; reminding us of that wonderful 'Protestant Nunnery' as it is was called, founded by Nicholas Ferrar, so famous in the early part of the Seventeenth Century, twice visited by King Charles I, and of late years made attractive by Mr. Shorthouse in his well-known story 'John Inglesant.'

Another house at the east end of the High Street, opposite St. Mary's Vicarage, with narrow windows and a gable which speaks of the Eighteenth Century is Cowper House, there resided the Unwin family with whom the poet Cowper lodged during the three years he spent at Huntingdon before he removed to Olney. The quiet retired life which he led, the constant walks on the banks of the Ouse of which we are reminded in that pretty little poem of the "Dog and the Water-lily," were of much benefit to his health. The spaniel 'Beau,' his companion, given to him by the two beautiful Miss Gunnings of Hemingford, one of whom afterwards became Countess of Coventry and the other Duchess of Hamilton, of whom Horace Walpole told the story that she was carried off by the Duke from a ball and married at half-past-twelve at night with the ring of a bed curtain in May Fair Chapel; which clandestine wedding was the immediate cause of the Marriage Act.

There is only space for a very brief mention of the Religious Houses of Huntingdon.

I. There was the CONVENT OF HINCHINGBROOKE. This consisted of nuns of the Benedictine order who are

said to have been removed thither from Eltisley in Cambridgeshire by William the Conqueror. At the dissolution of the monasteries the site was granted to Sir Richard William alias Cromwell, whose son Sir Henry erected a great portion of the present house. It continued in the Cromwell family till 1627, when it was sold to Sir Sydney Montagu, the father of Edward, first Earl of Sandwich.

2. HUNTINGDON PRIORY, a religious house of the Austin Canons, which was founded before the Conquest. It was dedicated to St. Mary, and stood near St. Mary's Church, the church being probably connected with the Priory.

3. A house of AUGUSTINE FRIARS was founded in the parish of St. John, in the reign of Edward I about 1285. This occupied the site of Cromwell House, and came into the possession of the Cromwells at the dissolution of the monasteries. A water course in brick and tiles extending from a spring towards the Friary was discovered in the early part of last century, and was no doubt that for which a patent was obtained in 1364, for conducting water subterraneously to their house.

4. ST. MARGARET'S HOSPITAL was founded in the reign of Henry II, at the north end of Huntingdon for a master and several leprous and infirm people. It was dedicated to St. Margaret, one of its benefactors was Malcolm, King of Scotland, who died 1165.

5. ST. JOHN'S HOSPITAL was founded in the reign of Henry II, by David, Earl of Huntingdon, the Sir Kenneth of Sir Walter Scott's 'Talisman.' A portion of the Chapel has been already referred to as part of the Grammar School.

I must not close without a mention of the Town Hall which occupies the south side of the Market Hill, erected in 1745, on the site of the old court house. In 1817 additions were made to it, and it was much improved, but I remember when in the piazzas or covered passages which extend right round, since enclosed, there were stalls for eggs and butter, and shambles for butchers, before they were removed to the new market in Prince's

Street. It is but an ugly building in itself, but the panelled Assembly room with its glass chandeliers is a good specimen of the public Ball room of the time and the walls are adorned with some really good pictures. There are full length portraits of George II, and his consort Caroline of Anspach by Shackleton, George III, with Queen Charlotte by Allan Ramsey, Sir Frederick Pollock, Lord Chief Baron of the Exchequer once M.P. for Huntingdon by Pickersgill, General Peel also M.P. for the borough by Sir Francis Grant, Sir Lionel Walden who founded a charity school here, by Sir Godfrey Kneller, and last but certainly not least a fine portrait of the 4th Earl of Sandwich who represented Great Britain at the Congress of Breda, and Aix-la-Chapelle, was Secretary of State and First Lord of the Admiralty. Few men it is said, ever filled that office with more ability, and under his direction the naval forces were kept on such a footing as to meet our then numerous foes and to ensure victory over French, Spaniards and Dutch. Lord Sandwich was remarkable for his industry in business and it is said that he invented 'Sandwiches' as a rapid and convenient means of satisfying hunger without interruption to work. It was he and old Lord Spencer who were referred to in the well-know witty epigram :

“Two noble Earls, whom if I quote
Some folks might call me sinner,
The one invented half-a-coat
The other half a dinner.”

Abridged from a paper written by the Ven. F. G. Vesey, L.L.D.,
Archdeacon of Huntingdon.



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