

ART. III.—*S. Catherine's Chapel, Eskdale : a reason for its Dedication.* By REV. THOMAS LEES, M.A., F.S.A.

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THE chapelry of Eskdale is a portion of the enormous parish of S. Bees. The chapel itself is dedicated to Catherine, V.M.: and Jefferson ("Allerdale above Derwent" p. 422), tells us that "a fair is holden here, on the north side of the chapel-yard, on the 5th of December, O.S." (*i.e.* November 25th of our present way of reckoning), "being the Feast of St. Catherine, virgin and martyr, to whom the chapel is dedicated.

The name of S. Catherine does not appear in the oldest English Calendars, but we find it in the Roman, French, Spanish, German, Greek, Scottish, and Sarum English use. None of our most ancient English churches are dedicated to her. In fact her legend is not earlier than the 8th century, and was not introduced into western Christendom till after the Crusades in the 11th century. Her *cultus* then became rapidly popular, and we have some 50 churches in England bearing her name, and a vast number of chantry chapels and altars. Now in choosing a patron for his new chapel here, the founder may have been influenced by what was, at that time, a popular fashion; but the object of this paper is to show that he was probably moved by a deeper and more solemn motive than this.

S. Catherine's Day, A.D. 1120, was marked by a dreadful calamity which befel the royal family of England, and many noble houses of England and Normandy. This was the wreck of the "White Ship," in which perished Prince William the Etheling, son of Henry I, and many of his courtiers. Ordericus Vitalis describes the catastrophe in such

such a feeling and vigorous style, that I trust you will pardon me for a somewhat lengthy quotation as rendered in English by his translator, Mr. Forrester. (Bohn's Antiquarian Library, Ordericus Vitalis, Vol. IV).

After telling us of the embarkation of Henry I, at Barfleur, on November 25th, Ordericus continues :—

“ In this voyage a sad disaster happened which caused much lamentation and innumerable tears to flow. Thomas, the son of Stephen, had obtained an audience of the king, and offering him a gold mark, said to him, “ Stephen, the son of Airard, was my father, and during his whole life he was in your father's service as a mariner. He it was who conveyed your father to England in his own ship, when he crossed the sea to make war on Harold.

He was employed by your father in services of this description as long as he lived, and gave him such satisfaction that he honoured him with liberal rewards, so that he lived in great credit and prosperity among those of his own class. My lord king, I ask you to employ me in the same service, having a vessel, called the *Blanche-Nef*, which is fitted out in the best manner, and perfectly adapted to receive a royal retinue.” The king replied :—“ I grant your request ; but I have already selected a ship which suits me, and I shall not change ; however, I entrust to you my sons, William and Richard, whom I love as myself, with many of the nobility of my realm.’

The mariners were in great glee at hearing this, and greeting the king's son with fair words, asked him to give them something to drink. The prince gave orders that they should have three muids. No sooner was the wine delivered to them than they had a great drinking bout, and pledging their comrades in full cups, indulged too much and became intoxicated. By the king's command many barons with their sons embarked in the *Blanche-Nef*, and there were in all, as far as I can learn, three hundred souls on board the ill-fated ship, but two monks of Tyron, Count Stephen, with two men-at-arms, William de Roumare, Rabel the chamberlain, Edward of Salisbury, and several others came on shore, having left the vessel upon observing that it was overcrowded with riotous and headstrong youths. The crew consisted of fifty experienced rowers, besides an armed marine force, who were very disorderly, and as soon as they got on board insolently took possession of the benches of the rowers, and being drunk forgot their station, and scarcely paid respect to any one. Alas ! How many among the company embarked, were without the slightest feeling of devotion towards God.

Qui

Qui maris immodicas moderatur, et aeris, iras!
Who rules the storm, and calms the raging sea.

They even drove away with contempt, amidst shouts of laughter, the priests who came to bless them, with the other ministers who carried the holy water; but they were speedily punished for their mockery. Besides the king's treasure and some casks of wine, there was no cargo in Thomas's ship, which was full of passengers; and they urged him to use his utmost endeavours to overtake the royal fleet which was already ploughing the waves. In his drunken folly, Thomas, confident in his seamanship and the skill of his crew, rashly boasted that he would soon leave behind all the ships that had started before them. At last, he gave the signal for departure; the sailors seized the oars without a moment's delay, and, unconscious of the fate which was imminently impending, joyously handled the ropes and sails, and made the ship rush through the water at a great rate. But as the drunken rowers exerted themselves to the utmost in pulling the oars, and the luckless pilot steered at random and got the ship out of its due course, the starboard bow of the *Blanche-Nef* struck violently on a huge rock, which is left dry every day when the tide is out, and covered by the waves at high water. Two planks having been shattered by the crash, the ship, alas! filled and went down. At this fearful moment, the passengers and crew raised cries of distress, but their mouths were soon stopped by the swelling waves, and all perished together, except two who seized hold of the yard from which the sail was set; they hung on to it the greater part of the night, in earnest hope that they would receive aid in some shape or other. One of these men was a butcher of Rouen, of the name of Berold; the other, a young man of gentle birth whose name was Geoffrey, the son of Gilbert de l' Aigle."

Wearied with this quotation you will naturally ask "what has all this to do with Eskdale and its little church?" This I hope to show you. After a heart-rending account of the circumstances of the wreck, Ordericus gives a list of the chief victims:—

"As we have already said, the king's sons William and Richard were amongst those who perished, with their sister Matilda, wife of Rotrou, count of Mortain. There were also Richard the young Earl of Chester, distinguished by his bravery and kindness of heart, with his wife Matilda, sister of Theobald, count Palatine. Othere, his brother, son of Hugh, Earl of Chester, and governor and tutor of the king's youngest son at the moment when the *Blanche-Nef* went down and the nobles were hopelessly buried in the waves, took, as it is reported

ported, the young prince in his arms, and sinking with him they were never seen again."

The rest of the list has no connection with our subject. The bodies of Earl Richard and several others were found some days after the shipwreck far from the spot where the vessel was lost. Finally Ordericus tells us

"Ranulph of Bayeux obtained the Earldom of Chester, with all the patrimony of Earl Richard, being the next heir as nephew of Matilda, Earl Hugh's sister."

It appears then that this Richard, Earl of Chester, and his brother Othere were cousins to Ranulph Meschines, 1st Earl of Carlisle; and at their death, he succeeded to the Earldom of Chester. Finding the Earldom of Carlisle to which Henry I had promoted him, too unwieldy and troublesome to manage alone, he had divided it into Baronies, one of which, that of Copeland (since called Egremont), of which the manor of Eskdale is a parcel, he retained in his own hands. He founded as we know the Benedictine Cell of Wetheral, and the abbey of Calder. Like his master Henry I, Ranulph found the need of the restraining influences of religion over his wayward, independent, Cumbrian vassals; and therefore provided for their instruction and spiritual needs such means as seemed best. One of these I take to have been the founding of this chapel in his manor of Eskdale; and it seems but in accordance with the feeling of the age that he should dedicate it to S. Catherine in pious memory of those two kinsmen who had perished on her day; and by whose decease he was enabled to exchange the barren wastes and mountains of Cumberland, for the fertile and wealthier lands of Chester.

This is but a supposition on my part; it is for you to judge if it be a reasonable one. May it not be that many of the numerous dedications to this Saint of churches, chantries, and altars, owe their foundation to those who desired thus to remember those dear ones who perished in the Blanche-Nef?

ART.