

ART. X.—*An almost forgotten Religious House of S. Cumberland. Seaton Priory otherwise Lekeley.* By MARY C. FAIR.

THE date of foundation of this Benedictine Priory is not definitely known, but circumstantial evidence suggests it to have been between 1185 and 1210. The Valor Eccles. of Henry VIII does not state the Founder, but Henry VIII's Comperta, that scurrilous "Black Book," states "Fundator Henricus de Kirkby" which must be in error for Henry FitzArthur of Millom who died about 1210 as there is no Henry de Kirkby in evidence at this period. In the Register of Holme Cultram is the following entry (before 1210: p. 31, Charter No. 83) "Henry FitzArthur with the advice and consent of Godit his wife and his heirs, grants to Henry FitzWilliam and Gunhilda his wife daughter of Henry FitzArthur Lekeley with all appurtenances except the land in Lekeley given to the nuns in Lekeley."

In Charter No. 84 William de Milnum son of Henry FitzArthur confirms No. 83, and about 1285 there is further confirmation by John de Hodilston of Millom.

The Nunnery was a Benedictine foundation dedicated to St. Mary, and little is known of its history beyond what is collected in V.C.H. Cumberland ii 192-4. The community seems to have had great difficulty in making ends meet for in the Register of Archbishop Gray of York is the entry (Surt. Soc. 56 p. 18, 1227), of a grant of the Church of St. Michael of Yirrtton (Irtton), with the assent of William Archdeacon of Richmond to the Prioress and Nuns and Convent of Lekeley in consideration of their poverty, and further in 1357 Henry Duke

of Lancaster (later King Henry IV), because the Priory of Seaton was so poor it could not maintain the Prioress and her Nuns, grants to them in aid the Hospital of St. Leonard at Lancaster with power to appoint the Chantry Priest to officiate in the said Hospital.

Concerning the Prioresses and their Nuns we have all too few records. Just before the Dissolution (*Valor Eccles.*) Joan Seton was Prioress 1535, and Joan Cope-land in 1538, while Denton, Christian name unknown, is recorded only on a tombstone now at Hyton. The sole entry concerning the Priory in the Register of The Archdeaconry of Richmond (16th July, 1441) gives us another Prioress:

“ Commissio ad examinand. electionem prioresse de Seton alias Lekeley per mortem d'ne Marjorie Butler.” (Yorks. Arch. Journ. xxv, p. 225, n. 461). Elizabeth Croft is recorded for 1459, and the *Comperta* gives us one nun, Susanna Ribton.

At the Dissolution the net valuation of the Priory was £12. 12s. 6d.

After the Dissolution Henry VIII in 1542 granted the Priory to Sir Hugh Askew (Yeoman of The Cellar to Queen Katherine), who built himself a mansion there, no doubt dismantling a great part of the conventual buildings to do so. But there are still remains of considerable interest. At the north-east angle of the present dwelling house (now a farm-house), stands the east wall of the Priory chapel with a small fragment of the south wall adjoining. The East window has three narrow lancet lights, each with separate hood-moulding above, which may be dated about the end of the 12th century. In the adjoining fragment of south wall are some remains of freestone ogee moulding built in among rubble masonry, suggesting a sedilia, and there are traces of a built-up doorway.

South-west of the church would be the domestic and business premises of the Community. The chapter house,

where the business of the Foundation was transacted and a daily reading given. There would be the Day-room of the nuns with dormitories above, adjoining a kitchen and refectory and the lodging of the Prioress. Bakery, Travellers' Lodging, and Infirmary were usually detached from the main domestic block. All traces of Cloisters, if they ever existed, have completely vanished.

Sir Hugh Askew's Tudor mansion is still imposing though much of it is hardly used to-day, a stately and solid building of red freestone. Its south frontage is 81 feet long with wings facing north at east and west ends, the stone of that rich and mellow hue it takes as it ages. There are certain indications which suggest that portions of the Priory domestic buildings were incorporated in the 16th century building; there are for instance massive and cavernous fireplaces which look older than Tudor times with massive external chimney bases. And on the south side is a beautiful example of a pinnacle chimney much resembling that at Yanwath (these *Trans.* N.S. xxii, 436) which is dated to the 14th century. Chimneys of this graceful form are rare and this one may be original or perhaps copied from an original when the house was renovated though this seems very unlikely, and not in keeping with Cumberland taste in chimney architecture. In any case it merits further study.

Much of the freestone moulding of the old windows has so decayed it has had to be replaced by modern casements; there is a bay window on the ground floor at the west end of the south frontage, but this suggests to me more an addition during Victorian renovations than a Tudor original.

Inside there is some good panelling, though a good deal of it has now unfortunately disappeared, and a fine example of a typical Tudor gallery and staircase with panelled balustrade, probably put in by Sir Hugh as open stair-rails did not come in till the 17th century.

The situation of the old place is beautiful, north of Bootle, invisible from the busy high road, in a wooded hollow beside a stream under the hill. Old legends still linger about its vicinity; winding through the woods, up the hillside to the ancient church of Corney, is a path known as The Nuns' Walk by which it is said the nuns made their way to the church on the ridge of the hill above their secluded convent. And there is a pool of the stream known as the Nuns (or Virgins') Pool where traditionally some of the poor ladies were drowned and perchance their ghosts still walk. So far as is known the Scottish raiders who wrought such destruction at Calder Abbey did not molest Seaton Priory.

During the 18th and early 19th centuries there are dark legends of the old house being a celebrated rendezvous of a band of local smugglers in those enterprising days when Free Trade with the Isle of Man and Scotland and Holland and France was brisk and lucrative for the district. And then it became a farm and so is to-day.

(I have to thank Major R. E. Porter, agent of the estate, for permission to visit the Priory, also the tenants Mr. and Mrs. Mason for their courteous reception and aid and Mr. J. C. Dickinson for suggestions and emendations. The Hon. Marjorie Cross, The Hon. Katherine Cross, and Miss E. J. Markham were of the party and provided many of the details of the buildings incorporated in this article which they noted during our inspection in a biting wind. Mrs. A. Bennett, a local resident kindly informed me of the local traditions still extant about the neighbourhood).