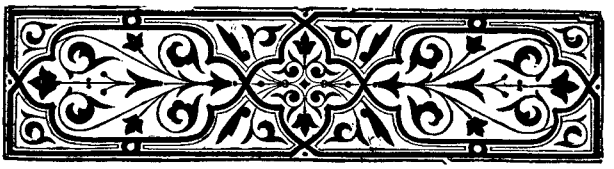

Early Christian Foundations in Berkshire.

Lecture by the Rev. A. D. Crake,

F.R. Hist. Soc.

A MEETING of the Society, presided over by Mr. S. S. STALLWOOD, was held on Monday, March 4th, in the large room of the Athenæum, Reading, for the purpose of hearing a Lecture by the Rev. A. D. CRAKE.

The SECRETARY reported that the new Lord Bishop of Oxford (Dr. STUBBS) had announced his willingness to become a patron of the Association; and the Rev. R. TOMLINSON, of Finchampstead, and Mr. A. BINNEY, of Wokingham, were elected subscribing Members.

The Rev. A. D. CRAKE then gave an interesting and valuable Lecture, of which we append a summary. He said that, rather than the title under which it had been announced, he should have preferred his address to have been named as dealing with "the beginnings of Christianity in this country," or, perhaps preferably, "the early Christian History of Wessex." He had to deal rather with probabilities than with certainties, there being so many myths afloat as to the introduction and early progress of Christianity in these Islands. There were many legends referring to times before the Anglo-Saxon invasion, one alleging that St. Paul himself preached in Britain, and another that Bran, father of Caractacus, was converted, with his daughter Claudius, her husband Pudens, and all his family, on their visit to Rome, and that Bran founded Chichester Cathedral. Then the Venerable Bede had a legend that Lucius was sometime King in Britain, and founded a mission. None of these legends, to his mind, had any historical authority.

But it was clear that in the time of Lucius the country about the Upper Thames was well wooded and fertile. There was a story that Constantine and Helena lived in the neighbourhood, and that the latter went to the Holy Land in search of the true Cross; and that she sent some nails to a small company of anchorites who lived in Berks. Abben, a supposed fugitive from Hengist and Horsa, was said to have founded Abingdon (called Abben's Dune after him), where the famous "Black Cross," studded with these nails, was long a most sacred relic. Abben, said to have been the first Abbot of Abingdon, was forced to retire to Ireland, where he died. He could not say there was no truth in this legend of Abben, but that was the opinion of such an authority as Canon Bright; while Lingard, Wilson the Martyrologist, and Bishop Challenor believed it. The fact that St. Helen (after whom one of the churches was named) lived at Abingdon, the fact of the "Black Cross," and the fact that the old *Liber Abingdonensis* contained the same story, claimed their attention; but, nevertheless, he was of opinion that the whole story was a myth. Berkshire might have had a share in the Early British Church, but no trace remained, except the legends and traditions to which he had referred. It was easy, however, to show what must have been—that Christianity came into this land after the persecutions at Vienne and Lyons, at the end of the first century, as was testified by Tertullian. No doubt it made its first appearance amongst the Romans and the Romanized Britons, but he did not think it made its way to any extent amongst the natives, or the educated classes. If it had been so, it was remarkable that at Calleva (Silchester), Brading, and other great Roman towns, which had not been destroyed before 420 or 430, only Pagan emblems were found. Still, there were British Bishops in those days; and there was one celebrated monk, Pelagius, who was the only British theologian who made his name known amongst the many, in the early Christian centuries, from Gaul, Spain, Africa, &c. Again, in the missionary enterprise of those centuries, there was no trace of British missionary enterprise: nor was there, in the Catechetical School, any trace of anything being done in Britain. That there was a British Church was, however, quite certain, for its Bishops appeared at the Councils of Nicea, Arles, and elsewhere. The conclusion he had come to was, that this British Church existed much in the same way as Christianity now existed in India, following the tracks of the Army, making a few native converts, but not organized, though it left a few buildings, such as St. Martin's

at Dover. Whatever the British Church might have been, it was swept absolutely out of existence by the great Anglo-Saxon invasion. The Saxon Conquest, which began under Cerdic in 495, at or near Southampton, must have been a very slow one; and the resistance offered was so stubborn that the Britons must have been destroyed altogether, or clean driven out of the country. This was proved by the fact that no Celtic names—except here and there a river—remained, and by other reasons, and by the fact that no mention whatever was made in the Saxon laws of British slaves or of a conquered people living among them. Nor was there any mention in ancient Welsh literature of any Celts being still "over the Border." The Lecturer sketched the history of the Saxon Conquest in support of his view, quoting the great fights at Chingford, in 501, when 5,000 Britons were slain; at Old Sarum, in 552, and at Badbury, in 560 (when the whole district south of the Berkshire Downs was finally conquered). In 571, under Cuthwulph, grandson of Cerdic (ancestor of our present Queen), the Saxons invaded "the land of the four towns," or the upper basin of the Thames, *viâ* the gorge or valley which the river made, probably fighting at Streatley or Wallingford. At last the invaders made their way along the Chilterns for the neighbourhood of Bedford, where they finally defeated the forces of the "four towns," *i.e.*, Benson, Eynsham, Aylesbury, and Lenborough. The Saxons "turned" the position in this manner, no doubt, because Letcombe, Blewbury, and Lowbury camps were filled by Britons; and the decisive battle must have been fought somewhere near Streatley. Then the invaders passed up the Lower Icknield Way, with the object of securing the rich district towards Buckingham, and another terrible battle was fought near Lenborough. That, briefly, was the history of Wessex. After this, Paganism must have overspread the country, and Berkshire must have worshipped Wodin and Thor. How was Christianity re-established? St. Augustine undoubtedly came to England in 596, but his mission did not extend to this neighbourhood. Birinus came subsequently, landing somewhere near Southampton, with a company of faithful monks, and arriving in Berkshire about 636. At the famous cairn, known as "Churn Knob," King Cynegils, who had with him Oswald, his son-in-law, and other princes, assembled to meet Birinus, who convinced his hearers. Shortly afterwards they were baptised, St. Oswald, who was a Northumbrian Christian prince, being their sponsor. That ceremony took place at Dorchester, and thus Christianity was

really established in Berkshire. It was true that Dorchester was just over the border, but it was the capital bishopric of Wessex. The Bishop of Dorchester once ruled over a Diocese stretching from Devonshire to the Humber and the Wash. Then came another change on the scene. Abingdon Abbey was really founded by Hean, the sub-King under Kentwin, and Hean became its first Abbot. A nunnery was founded at Kennington, which was afterwards removed to Wytham, and subsequently to Godstow. In the year 777, a tremendous battle was fought between Wessex and Mercia, at Benson, of which no notice is taken in any of the ordinary school-books; local tradition long preserved the memory of that fight, which changed the whole face of Northern Berkshire. He was now, however, getting into mediæval history, and so he would stop.

The CHAIRMAN said he was sure it would be a satisfaction to them all that Mr. CRAKE had left off at a place where he conld begin again, and he hoped that it would not be long before they listened to another such interesting lecture as they had heard that evening. The lecture was of great value in inducing all who heard it, or read it, to desire to know the history of their own district.

The Rev. J. M. GUILDING (Librarian) proposed, and the Rev. P. H. DITCHFIELD seconded, a vote of thanks to the Lecturer.

The Rev. A. D. CRAKE, in returning thanks, said he did not think there was a more interesting spot in England than Silchester, which he regarded as the English Pompeii. When they saw what had been done by a little excavation at the ancient Calleva, he felt that money ought to be raised to buy up the whole site within the walls, when they could get the foundations of the streets laid bare, and he had no doubt that many precious mementoes would be discovered. He explained, that while the Celtic Church was, up to the period at which he had concluded his lecture, uninteresting, it afterwards, both in Ireland and Scotland, became a rival of Rome itself. Not only was all Ireland Christianized by it, but missionaries were sent out who converted the Picts and Scots, and others did as much to help in Christianizing England as the Italians themselves. They also converted Iceland, and had missionaries even in Switzerland and Spain. It was a Church which bade fair to be a counterbalancing power to the mighty Church of Rome, and which, if allowed to continue to exist, might have been a great power in preserving the purity of Christianity. No one had a greater respect than he (Mr. CRAKE) for the history of the Celtic Church from the period to which he had confined his remarks that evening to its unfortunate fall.