



Swallowfield and its Owners.

By Lady Russell.

(Continued from page 85.)

1256. This same year Sir John Le Despencer sent a petition to Pope Alexander IV., asking that he might build a Chapel and keep a Chaplain at his Manor of Swalefeld, pleading the dangers which he and his family had to encounter in going through the forest to Mass at the Parish Church of Shinfield, from robbers in summer and floods in winter.—*Rymer's Fœd.*, Vol. I., page 610.

Windsor Forest was formerly of much greater circuit than it is now; extending into Bucks and Surrey, and over the whole of the south-eastern part of Berks as far as Hungerford. The circuit, as described in Roques' map, appears to be about fifty-six miles, including the whole parish of Swallowfield. The forest was a refuge for robbers, and at this time one Adam de Gurdon, a notorious freebooter, was the special terror of the neighbourhood. He was born of gentle lineage, and was the King's Bailiff at Alton, Hants. Henry III. gave him by Charter "free chase of hares and foxes in and without the forest," but taking part with the rebel Barons, he was outlawed for treason and rebellion. He then appears to have taken to the road for his living, and to have gathered round him a number of men as fearless and desperate as himself and became a sort of Robin Hood. Many tales, savouring of romance, are told of him, one being that Prince Edward (afterwards Edward I.) whilst attending the Parliament at Winchester, heard of the fame of the outlaw, and, fired with the desire of measuring swords with so brave a man, sought him out in the Thicket, and challenged him to fight. In a pause of the encounter which followed, the Prince offered him his life and advancement if he would give up his arms.—

Nicholas Trivet, page 269. The offer having been accepted, we find Adam de Gurdon shortly after holding official employment. He ultimately became a great landowner, and from his second son is descended the present Mr. Gurdon, of Letton.

Another desperado whom we hear of at this time is mentioned as specially frequenting the Forest in the neighbourhood of Reading. A letter addressed by the King to the Sheriff of Berks says that "Richard Siward is lying in wait in Windsor Forest, cum multitudini armatorium," and orders the Sheriff to attempt his arrest.—*Rot. clause 18, Hen. III. memb. 25 in dorso.* And a further letter to the Sheriff of Gloucester orders the arrest of the same Richard Siward, for having surprised the Justiciar's baggage between Reading and Wallingford.

The state of the Forest being such as described, it is no wonder that Sir John Le Despencer should have been unwilling to 1256. traverse it with his family. The Pope granted his petition, and issued two Bulls from Anagnia, addressed to the Bishop of Salisbury, in whose Diocese Swallowfield was then situated, ordering him to visit the place, and if all was as represented, permit the Chapel to be built. Copies of these Bulls have been preserved.—*Rymer's Fædera, vol. 1 part 2.*

Armed thus with Papal authority, Sir John Le Despencer in 1256 built the Church of All Saints, which, restored in 1869-70, by Sir Charles Russell, now stands in Swallowfield Park. The style of architecture, however, of some parts of the edifice indicates a much earlier date. Thus the east end, which contained the three narrow lights that we see there now, and the "Bull's eye" above, with both the north and south doors, belong to the style prevalent at least a century earlier, and would give a date from 1120 to 1150. It seems, therefore, probable that the remains of a ruined Church of anterior date may have been used by Sir John in building the present Church. The architect employed in the restoration, Mr. Morris, of Reading, with excellent taste, has carefully preserved these earlier portions and brought them out as fine features. A window in the chancel is of the 15th century and of the "middle pointed" or decorated style. The timber belfry is a rare specimen of its kind, probably of the date of Sir John Le Despencer, as also the beams and older parts of the roof. The south porch is modern but has a good barge-board with "Perpendicular" mouldings; the pattern like "Decorated" work.—*T. H. Parker.* Originally there must have been two altars; a high altar screened off by a close screen

where the present one stands, and another in front of the screen, as indicated by the ancient piscina still existing in the wall.

During the restoration some remains, supposed to be those of Sir John Le Despencer, were discovered about half-way between the south door and the chancel screen, in a stone coffin, surmounted by a large cross. The skeleton was quite perfect, but the head was separate, and outside the coffin, which evidently had been previously disturbed, a quantity of cloves were found surrounding the body, and the remnant of a wooden dish, which had probably held salt, rested on the breast. The lid was carefully re-fixed and cemented, and the coffin was placed in its present position under the west window. The Church at Swallowfield could hardly have been built before as Sir John Le Despencer, as well as Roger de St. John, joined the Barons in the great Civil struggle against King Henry III.

They attended the celebrated Council summoned at Oxford 1258. in 1258, which by some historians has been called the "Mad Parliament," the monopoly of which title, however, it has been remarked, would be a grievous disparagement to some of its successors.—*Sir F. Palgrave.*

1262. At the end of the year 1262 the first hostilities commenced in Wales, and among the foremost partisans of the Barons we find Roger de Leybourne, of whom we shall hear later as the owner of Swallowfield.

1264. Sir John Le Despencer and his young son Adam, early in the year 1264, formed part of the force left by Simon de Montfort to hold Northampton, which was, however, taken by the following stratagem :—The garden of a Cluniac Monastery abutted on the walls of the town, and the Monks, many of whom were French and on the King's side, undermined the walls, putting wooden props as a temporary support. By this means the Royalists made an easy entrance, whilst a feigned assault was made on the other side of the town. Sir John and his son were taken prisoners and placed in the custody of Reginaldus Waterwill.—*Brady. Paris. Rishanger de Bellis. Ann Dunst 229.* But three months later, after the victory at Lewes, which made Simon de Montfort lord of England, they were released "by the King's writ to Roger de Mortimer," who was ordered to bring them, among other prisoners, to London, to be set at liberty.—*Brady. Rymer's Fœdera, vol. 1 page 20.* And

1265. early the following year Eleanor, Simon de Montfort's wife, sent from her demesne of Odiham Castle a present of wine to the lady of Swalfelde. We find this in the curious Household Roll

of this Royal lady, who was the daughter of King John, by his wife Isabella of Angoulême. The Roll still preserved in the British Museum, is believed to be the earliest known memorial of the domestic expenditure of an English subject. The entry is as follows : " Vinum ij. sext dimid missum, Domicne Swalfelde." The sextary of wine contained four English gallons.—*Fleta. Lib. 2 cap. ii.* Roger de St. John was one of the Council of nine appointed in 1265, after the battle of Lewes.

On the defeat and death of Simon de Montfort at Evesham in 1265, Roger de St. John also was killed, his estates were confiscated and "Swalufelde and one messuage and one carucate of land in Beaumys with woods and rents and all its appurts were granted to Roger de Leyburn."—*Rot. Pip. 10. RI. chap. 4.* And we find in a Charter Roll 49 Henry III. that "only a messuage in Beaumys remained the property of Sir John Le Despencer." The latter died in 1274, and by Inquisitions taken next year at Gertre, com Leicester, [*Esc. 3 Ed. I. no. 2.*] he was found to have died possessed of "the Manor of Beransby and the moiety of Wigan-de-la-Mare, and several other lands, as also the Hundred of Beaumaner," etc.

1274. Likewise, by another Inquisition dated the same year, taken at his house at Marteley, he is said to have died possessed of that Manor with the advowson of the Church which his father had by gift of King Henry III. In right of his first wife Joan, daughter of Robert de Lou, he also possessed Castle Carlton and Cavenby, co. Lincoln, but his wife dying childless, these Manors went at his death to her cousin, John de Merieth. By Anne, his second wife, Sir John had two sons, Adam, who died young, and William Le Despencer, styled "of Belton." The latter resided at Defford and died in 1328. From him are said to be descended Earl Spencer, the Earl of Westmoreland and the Duke of Marlborough, but of this the proof appears to be incomplete. The name of Spencer still survives at Spencer's Wood in this immediate neighbourhood.

At a recent meeting of the Numismatic Society, Mr. W. R. Davies, of Wallingford, exhibited a selection of British, Roman, and English Coins, discovered chiefly in the neighbourhood of Wallingford, among which the most important was an Aurius of Epillus—*obv.*, Victory within a wreath ; *rev.*, Horseman holding a *carnix* over his shoulder ; *inscrip.*, EPPI. F. COM.