Benson, or Bensington.

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BENSINGTON first appears in history in 571. Under that year the Saxon Chronicle relates of Cuthwulf, who was the third King of the West-Saxons, that he "fought with the Bretwalas at Bedcanford and took four towns, Lygeanbirg and Ægelesbirg, Bensingtun and Egonesham." We infer that going on from Bedford the victors passed round the north-west front of the Chilterns, taking (as Mr. Parker suggests in his *Early History of Oxford*, p. 82) either Limbury near Luton or Lenborough near Buckingham, and then taking Aylesbury; after which they captured Bensington, as the key to the Celtic stronghold of the hills within the curve of the Thames; and then, proceeding westward and taking Eynsham, they became masters of all the open district north of the river.

When the Chronicle was compiled, the village within the western end of the bank had come to be known as Bensington. It is to be interpreted, doubtless, as the town of the Bensingas; and these, we may presume, were the tribe who settled here from the time of the Saxon conquest. May we infer that the Middlers or Midmen were a British race who had thrown up this bank for their defence, and had their home at Medmenham at its eastern end, and occupied the district between this bank and the inner bank which separated them from a purer Celtic race living beyond their southern boundary; —that they were Midmen, not merely by position, but because they had become half Saxonised by contact with the Bensingas who had been intruded within their boundary at its western end; and while Medmenham at the eastern end of the bank was still recognised as the home of this Middle race, the tun of the Bensingas at the western end of the bank became eventually the royal town of the conquering race? Certainly the general aspect of the district and the evidence of the names would point to the conclusion that between the two dykes there lived a people intermediate between the

Saxon and the Briton; and the facts of history seem to admit that such a conclusion is not impossible.

The Bensingas, who gave their name to the village, must by analogy be interpreted as the sons of Bens. Perhaps other places in which this name appears may serve as a clue to trace the tribe from its original haunts. At least we may conjecture that possibly their primitive "home" may be Bensheim, near Heidelberg, and that in their descent of the Rhine they left their name also upon the height of Bensberg, near Mulheim, as another of their settlements. And if a portion of the tribe followed Cuthwulf into Wessex, it may be another portion of the same tribe who made their "home" on the south bank of the Tyne at Bensham, in the parish of Gateshead; and it is interesting to notice also that one Benesing appears as a Danish chieftain of Northumbria who fell in the invasion of King Edward in 911, as related by the Saxon Chronicle. The name of Bensington appears in the abbreviated form, Benson, at least as early as the sixteenth century.

We know nothing of the name which this village bore before it fell into Saxon hands. But it is worth observing that several of the adjacent place-names retain an element of the Celtic language, with a Saxon prefix or suffix, as the *dwr* in Dorchester and the *cwm* in Holcombe, Swyncombe, and Huntercombe. And probably the name of the district which lies next to Benson village on the south —Crowmarsh, or, in its ancient form, Craumares,—is of similar character. To quote Mr. Reade's notes once more, he argues that while "*Mares* is unquestionably the antecedent of Marsh," the previous syllable "can hardly be the corruption of *craw*, Saxon for crow or rook, marsh-lands being unsuited to the habits of those birds," but it is probably "*craun*, dead or defeated"; and there is good reason to think that the event from which the Marsh took its name was the defeat of the Catuvellauni in which their chieftain Togidumnus fell, shortly after the first defeat of his brother Caractacus a little higher up the river, at the beginning of the campaign of Aulus Plautius in the year 45. We may compare also the names of other places where the same word *crow* appears; as, for example, the lofty beacon-hill of Crowborough, which crowns the Weald of Sussex; or, nearer home, Crowthorne in Berkshire, where the Roman road known as the Devil's Highway passes between the British earthwork of Finchampstead to the so-called Cæsar's Camp near Easthampstead; spots in which we might expect a reminiscence of the Celtic nomenclature to survive. And Crowmarsh con-

sists of three distinct parts; first, Preston Crowmarsh, which is an integral portion of Benson; secondly, Crowmarsh Battle, which was given by William the Conqueror to Battle Abbey but still remains in the parish of Benson with the privileges of a separate hamlet; thirdly, Long Crowmarsh, which was given by the Conqueror to Walter Giffard and became a separate parish, having been previously, like Crowmarsh Battle, a part of the royal Manor of Bensington. We may reasonably hazard a conjecture that although Crowmarsh had become under the Saxon dominion a part of the parish and manor of Bensington, the town of Bensington had originally been a settlement planted beside Crowmarsh; in other words, the name of Crowmarsh may well represent the older appellation of the whole place, in the same way that the name of Dorchester represents the Roman-British Durocina.

A few words may be added to show how the main thoroughfare of the village appears to have assumed its present form. The original highway from west to east, along the line of the Medlersbank, has already been described, if its course can be rightly conjectured from existing evidence. It was crossed at right angles by three other highways. First, there is the primitive track, still unaltered, above the river bank. Secondly, there is the road from London and Henley, crossing the upper part of the village beside the Crown Inn, and following a direct course by the Hale Farm and by the old bridle-road of Foul-slough way which was destroyed at the enclosure, thus passing forward down Newington Hill and up the east bank of the Thame stream. Midway between this track and the river-bank way there was evidently a third, which looks as if it was the principal cross-street in old times, entering by the Lion-yard and passing in front of the Castle Inn and in front of the British School to Littleworth; still showing a continuation northward in a field-way towards Warborough, and a continuation southward in the path across Moor-lands towards Long Crowmarsh. But the whole configuration of the village appears to have been altered by the construction of a Roman road, passing through Benson diagonally, from Dorchester towards London: for it will be more conveniently traced if we reverse the position we have been taking, and look at it from north to south. This road diverged, as it does still, from the river-bank way at the extreme north-west corner of Benson, and appears to have followed a direct south-westerly course to the opposite extremity. Passing the National School and the Three Horse Shoes, we must picture a wide track upon which the

White Hart Inn has encroached on one side and the houses south of Castle Square have encroached on the other side, and which the buildings of the old Red Lion south of the street have blocked entirely, and thus the street is bent backwards and forwards into a series of angles. But the road no doubt descended in a direct line behind the Red Lion to the crossing of the brook by the old Mill, where according to common tradition the coaches used formerly to pass; and thence it ascended where the narrow lane called Mill Hill still marks its course and the "Dark Lane" continued to mark it before the enclosure; and thus it converged with the London Road at the spot where a detached group of cottages still marks the point of junction. In later times we must suppose that the coach-road was diverted from its direct course behind the Red Lion and brought at a sharp angle in front of it; and again in comparatively recent times it was found convenient for the coaches to pass above instead of below the Mill-pond, taking the angle by the Crown Inn and using the entire length of the High Street. Probably at some early period, and perhaps in consequence of the oblique course of the Roman road altering the general plan of the village, the main thoroughfare from west to east had been brought along the southern front of the central line of buildings, to form the present High Street and Brook Street, so that the primitive thoroughfare along their northern front, the course of the Medlers-bank, became gradually disused and finally lost.