History of Oxfordshire.

By J. Meade Falkner.

Mr. Elliot Stock has added another volume to his series of County Histories, and he has entrusted "Oxfordshire" to the hands of Mr. Falkner, the Editor of Murray's Handbook of that county. The author has an intimate personal knowledge of the towns and villages which he describes, and moreover tells his story in a clear and entertaining style. It would be a difficult task to write a dull book about Oxfordshire, replete as it is with the associations of every interesting period of English history; moreover, there is the University with its absorbingly interesting annals which have furnished Mr. Falkner with the subject for many a stirring page. We read again of the much debated early foundations of the University, the endless struggle between it and the town, mediæval Oxford, the dissolution of the monasteries, the troubles of the Reformation, the burning of the Bishops, the visits of Queen Bess, the romantic period of the Civil war when Oxford was Charles' citadel and the county a favourite skirmishing ground. But Mr. Falkner has not confined himself to the city and University of Oxford, he has shown how totally mistaken were those University men who used at one time to declare that there was nothing worth seeing near Oxford. A few undergraduates who loved long rambles into the country in the Summer Term knew better. But to the great body of residents the picturesque scenery and the places of historic interest to be found within a dozen miles of the City were, at all events till recently, as famaliar as Surrey and Middlesex are to the majority of Londoners. The county, to begin with, presents a charming mixture of hill, wood, and water, which are the three great elements of the picturesque; and as some of the greatest events of English history are connected with this district, we have not far to go without stumbling upon old manor houses, ruined castles, and haunted forests, whose attractions will bear comparison with those of all but the most favoured among the English counties. Of course, the chief river glory of Oxfordshire is the Thames. But the Cherwell, the Tame, the Windrush, and the Evenlode all flow through more or less

beautiful surroundings, under wooded banks, or through meadows of exceptional verdure. The two last-mentioned rivers, though comparatively little known, present many points of interest both to the painter and the poet. On the banks of the Windrush lie the ruins of "Minster Lovel," which, together with the church, the grove, and the old pointed bridge, "form one of the most beautiful groups of Oxfordshire scenery." It was to Minster Lovel, according to tradition, that Francis, Lord Lovel, retreated after the Battle of Stoke, where he had fought for the most interesting impostor on record—believing him really to represent the House of York—and was hidden by a faithful servant in a vault of the old house for many months, till, on her sudden death, the secret of the chamber was lost, and her old master was left to die of hunger. In 1708, when a new chimney was being constructed at Minster Lovel, a large vault, so runs the story, was discovered under ground, in which was the entire skeleton of a man, with pens, paper, and a book before him. This was supposed by the family to be the missing Lord Lovel. The old houses or their ruins, together with the ghosts that haunted them, which are to be seen or heard of within the boundaries of the county are numberless. Amongst them are Swinbrook, Burford, Rycote, Stanton Harcourt, where Pope wrote a portion of his "Homer," and his well-known letter about the two lovers who were killed by lightning while sitting on a haycock. The old house at Woodstock is gone; Cumnor Hall, with "many an oak that grew thereby," is almost forgotten. Oxford men, as they eat their fried eels in the little inn by Godstow Bridge, may still look out from their windows on the ruins of Godstow Priory, the reputed burial place of Fair Rosamond. But only a few grey stones remain. The house of Deddington, where Charles I. slept after the battle of Cropredy, is still standing; and within an easy ride of Oxford is Boarstall Tower, a square, moated building, all that remains of an ancient castle which held out bravely for the King during the Civil War.

Oxfordshire is dotted all over with battlefields. At Edgehill, on the borders of Warwickshire, the Civil War began. And when Oxford became the headquarters of the Royalists, Prince Rupert was the scourge of the surrounding neighbourhood. The long, narrow bridge which crosses the Tame at Chislehampton was the scene of a hot fight between the Cavaliers and a party of Roundheads who were pursuing, but at this point were beaten back. A little beyond Chislehampton we come to a more famous spot. Two or three

miles from the little town of Watlington, on a wide level plain, only recently enclosed, the traveller will see a small column, which tells him that there fell John Hampden, "fighting for the free monarchy and ancient liberties of England." This is Chalgrove field; and here on June 18, 1643, Hampden came down from the adjoining Chilterns to cut off Prince Rupert's retreat to Oxford. It was almost exclusively a cavalry action, in which the Royalists were victorious; though how it might have ended had not Hampden received his death-wound early in the fight is another question. As it was, the Prince returned to Oxford with a great booty and two hundred prisoners. He had surprised a part of the Army under Essex, which lay scattered about the country villages, and was on his way back when Hampden resolved to intercept him. Another battle was fought at a place we have already mentioned, Cropredy Bridge, on the Cherwell, which lasted all day. Here Charles defeated Sir William Waller so severely, says Clarendon, as to break his army. Many relics of the battle continue to be found there, and a short time ago a silver whistle and some silver ornaments were dug up, which Mr. Falkner is uncharitable enough to account for as Macaulay accounts for similar trinkets found on Naseby field. Broughton Castle and Banbury Castle were important Parliamentary strongholds, and both were taken by the King after the Battle of Edgehill. The little garrison at Boarstall was under the command of Sir William Campion, and the place was one of the last in England to surrender to the Parliament. It was given up on the 10th of June, 1646, nearly a year after the Battle of Naseby; and Antony Wood's schoolboys, we are told, had a holiday to go and see the ceremony. Oxford itself followed ten days afterwards, and this has been called the concluding of the Civil War.

There seems to have been a large extent of unenclosed land in Oxfordshire in the Seventeenth Century, which, of course, was very convenient to fight upon. But the high price of grain in the Great War brought a good deal of grass land under the plough, and caused much of the wood in which Oxfordshire was rich to be grubbed up. There are still some beautiful woods in the neighbourhood of Oxford, Bagley Wood and Stow Wood in particular. But it seems probable that at one time the whole of the land from the south side of Shotover to Otmoor was more or less covered with timber. Readers of Matthew Arnold will remember the scholar gypsy returning by the ferry at Bablock-hithe, "from distant Wychwood Bowers;" and Wychwood Forest also is now no more. To gallop

about the forest on a fine day in June, and dine at the little inn at Witney afterwards, was a favourite amusement with undergraduates while the forest and its "green retreats" still stood; and perhaps these lines may recall it to the memory of some staid and sober sexagenarians. As Hampden, though a Buckinghamshire man, will always be associated with Oxfordshire, so also will the corresponding hero of the Royal cause, Lord Falkland, whose Oxfordshire house was Great Tew. He was also for a time the owner of Burford, which just before the Civil War he sold to Speaker Lenthall. It is said that Lenthall, repenting of the share he had taken in the King's execution, when on his death-bed, sent for the Rector of Witney to come over and confess him. Even if the story is a myth, the mere fact that such a tradition should exist would seem to show that the system of confession was still recognised by the English Church at the end of the Seventeenth Century. A history of Oxfordshire does not seem complete without reference to the University. But University annals have been given to the world so freely of late years that we need not draw upon them here. In connection with the Civil War, it is more interesting to note how long the cause of the Stuarts continued to find supporters at Oxford. In 1745 it was thought necessary to quarter a troop of Dragoons there; and Scott, in "Redgauntlet," makes a Doctor of Divinity from Oxford attend the Jacobite meeting on the Solway, which must have been about 1764 or 1765, and pronounce a blessing on the King *de jure* as he left the shores of Britain for the last time. What is more, the Venerable Dr. Routh, President of Magdalen for nearly sixty years, who only died in the second half of the present century, remembered well when the Fellows of Magdalen in the Common Room drank to the King over the Water. Oxford and Oxfordshire are still in a manner redolent of the White Rose, though a generation has risen up at the University since Routh's time to whom all that kind of thing is foolishness. But however mistaken the Stuart cause may have been, its romance is undeniable, and to linger over it in company with Mr. Falkner for a few hours is a pleasant recreation.