The History of Wantage.

A Lecture delivered by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, M.A., F.S.A., at Wantage, on September 27th, 1899.

I HAVE to thank you most heartily on behalf of our Berks Archæological Society for the welcome which you have given us to your ancient town. One of the great objects which our Society has in view is to stir up some antiquarian zeal and enthusiasm in the towns and villages which we visit, and to strive to interest the inhabitants in the past history of the place where they live. We believe that a man's interest in his native town should not be limited to the knowledge of the amount of rates and taxes which he is called upon to pay; but that he should learn to roam at will in the "city of memories" which every town becomes when at every turn and corner we meet with something that reminds us of the past and recalls the pleasing associations of old town life. It is not a difficult task to arouse some historical interest in the annals of this old town. It enjoys a world-wide reputation as the birthplace and early home of Alfred, our great national hero, law-maker, poet, sage, scholar and King. Indeed it is fitting that just now all lovers of history, all hero-worshippers and all whose hearts are swayed by patriotism, should gather together at the birthplace of Alfred, when the millenary of the great and good King is so fast approaching. The respect for the memory of our national heroes has great practical utility, and inspires us to follow their noble examples. The other day when workmen were busily engaged in decorating Nelson's column in Trafalgar-square, preparing for the celebration of Trafalgar Day, someone asked what they were doing. "Why," said a voice in the crowd, "they are taking him down. We shall be wanting him soon." You are aware that it is proposed to hold a great national commemoration of the great King to whom this kingdom owes so much in many ways. King Alfred died in October, 901 A.D., and consequently the thousandth anniversary of his death will occur in October, 1901. The traditions which have gathered round his name are those of religion, learning, defence, seamanship, law and culture, and it is hoped that all who use our mother tongue will join

without distinction of creed, race, nation, or party, in honouring the memory of "The Darling of the English." I have a faint notion that we ought to do something in Berkshire to forward this commemoration. Lord Wantage, our chairman, has anticipated this national appreciation of Alfred by erecting the noble statue which adorns your Market-place,—a magnificent monument of the great King, and also of the munificence of the donor, but still I trust that something else may yet be done in Berkshire in order to observe this national commemoration. Alfred had far more to do with Berkshire than ever he had with Winchester, though his dust lies there.

Here he was born (as Asser states in his "Annals" of the reign of Alfred the Great). These are his words: "In the year of our Lord's Incarnation 849 was born Alfred, King of the Anglo-Saxons, at the royal village of Wanating, in Berkshire, which county has its name from the wood of Berroc, where the box-tree grows most abundantly." Here his early life was spent, as the chronicler says: "He was loved by his father and mother, and even by all the people, above all his brothers, and was educated at the Court of the King. As he advanced through the years of infancy and youth his form appeared more comely than that of his brothers; in look, in speech, and in manners he was more graceful than they. His noble nature implanted in him from his cradle a love of wisdom above all things; but with shame be it spoken, by the unworthy neglect of his parents and nurses, he remained illiterate even till he was 12 years old or more: but he listened with serious attention to the Saxon poems which he had often heard recited, and easily retained them in his docile memory." Here, too, on the neighbouring downs he loved to hunt. Asser says: "He was a zealous practiser of hunting in all branches, and hunted with great assiduity and success; for skill and good fortune in this art, as in all others, are among the gifts of God, as we also have often witnessed." Evidently the good Bishop was himself a keen sportsman, and perhaps was the original prototype of the hunting parson. Here his stepmother inspired his love for Saxon poetry, showing him a book of poems which she offered to the royal children—to whomsoever should soonest learn to repeat the verses. This task the future King accomplished, and thus gained the reward. Here, too, on the neighbouring downs, he fought the Danes, and saved his country by a great deliverance. It was in the year 871 when the Pagan army "of hateful memory" (as the chronicler states) left the East Angles, and entering the kingdom of the West

Saxons came to the royal city called Reading. Then was fought the battle of Englefield, or Anglesfield, when the Danes were conquered; but only for a time. A long and fierce fight followed nigh the gates of Reading, wherein the Pagans gained the victory and Ethelwulf was among the slain. Then followed the famous battle of Ascendune, which turned the tide of victory and taught the Danes a lesson, and stayed their onward, plundering march, and although they caused much subsequent trouble, and many other stern battles had to be fought, they learnt at Ascendune that their arms are not invincible, and that Englishmen could defend themselves, their hearths and homes, against their foes, and could hold their own against the overwhelming swarms of ruthless barbarians.

I am not going to enter upon the discussion as to the exact site of this famous battle, about which antiquaries have fought as fiercely as did the Saxon and Danish hosts, or assert without fear of contradiction that the White Horse above Uffington was carved in memory of the mighty conflict; but it is certainly probable that near here it took place, and we can imagine the troops of the Saxon warriors, with their long hair, their shields and spears, assembling here at Wantage, and marching out to meet their dreaded foe.

Have we any traces of the home of Alfred which time has spared after a lapse of a thousand years? Yes. We must look for the site of the old Palace of the Saxon kings in the High Garden, where there is a close which bears the name of "Court Close" and Pallett's More, which has been supposed to be a corruption of Palace More. There, too, is what is known as King Alfred's Bath, and tradition associates this spot as the site of the Palace of the Saxon Kings. We must not imagine it to have been a very lordly dwelling, resplendent with barbaric gold and gems, a gorgeous home of luxury and magnificence. Palaces in Saxon times were not very grand houses. Alfred's home would consist of an irregular group of low buildings, almost all of one story, constructed of stone or mud foundations, the upper part of the walls being made of wood. In the centre of the group was the hall, with door opening into the court. On one side stood the chapel; on the other side a kitchen and numerous other rooms, with lean-to roofs; a tower for purposes of defence in case of attack; stables and barns were scattered about outside the house, and with the cattle and horses lived the grooms and herdsmen, while villans and cottiers dwelt in the humble, low, shed-like buildings which clustered round the Saxon noble's dwelling. An illustration of such a house appears in an ancient illumination

preserved in Harleian MSS. Such was doubtless the style of the unpretending habitation or Palace of Alfred.

The site of this dwelling is certainly associated with Roman Wantage. Mr. Salmon supposes that Wantage was the Roman station called Glevum in the Itineraries; but this opinion is entirely unsupported. Roman coins, however, have been dug up on this spot. Mr. Wise saw a brass of the Emperor Valens dug up, with the words "Securitas Reipublicæ" on the reverse. A Roman road ran through the town, called the Portway, which still forms the road from Wallingford, and continues through Childrey and Uffington to Wiltshire. Alfred bequeathed his royal manor of Wantage to his wife, Ealswith, the daughter of Ethelred Earl of Mercia, who died in 904. It then reverted to the Crown, and continued to be a royal demense until the Conquest. Here a code of laws was drawn up by Ethelred II. and his Council in 990. And now we come to that precious record for historians, the Domesday Survey, and try to discover what Norman Wantage was like. There we read that the King (William I.) holds Wantage (Wanetinz) in demesne, King Edward (Edward Confessor) held it. Then and now there were three hides (a hide was 120 acres) which was free from taxes. There were 21 ploughlands (a ploughland was as much as one plough with oxen could plough in a year), 30 villans, 40 cottiers, and 5 serfs. It was valued at £61, formerly in Saxon times at £55. And then the record states that in his royal manor one Petrus Episcopus had two parts of his Church together with four hides belonging to it. Then I read "nunquam geldabant"—they never paid,—which alarmed me for the credit of the Bishop. Did he never pay his legal dues? That was a sad reflection on Bishop Peter. However, I discover that by a delightful arrangement (which I wish was in force now) this ecclesiastical property had no taxes to pay at all. Think of that, my heavily-rated brethren—there was no need then for a Clerical Tithe Relief Act. However, King William had his revenge, for he took the lands into his own hands, because they seem to have belonged to the Bishop in his private capacity, and not as attached to his Bishopric; the reason could hardly be termed sufficient. Bishop Peter was Bishop of Lichfield, being consecrated to that See in 1075. Another ecclesiastic, one William the Deacon, held lands of the King, which did not pay taxes, and doubtless officiated in the little Chapel which once stood in the churchyard, the beautiful Norman door of which is preserved in the buildings of King Alfred's School.

In the time of Henry III. the manor was held of the King by Walter, Earl of Pembroke, who died in 1245, and of him it was held by Fulke Fitzwarine, by the service of one knight's foe. Thus the family became connected with Wantage, which did so much for the town, and probably reared that stately Church, which is its chief glory. This Fulke Fitzwarine was descended from a Norman baron, one Guarine de Meer, who came over with the Conqueror, and was appointed by him Warden of the Marshes of Wales and Sheriff of Shropshire. Fulke was a brave soldier and was drowned in a river at the battle of Lewes, in 1264, fighting for the King. His posterity long continued to possess the manor, and from the 23rd year of Edward I. were summoned as Barons to Parliament. At length the good stock came to an end in the male line, and Elizabeth, the sister and heir of the Fulke Fitzwarine, who died in 1421, brought the barony in marriage to Sir Richard Hankford, whose daughter and heir Thomasine married Sir William Bouchier, who was summoned to Parliament as Lord Fitzwarine in 1449. His grandson, John Lord Fitzwarine, was created Earl of Bath in 1537. Sir Christopher Wrey, Bart. by marriage obtained a share of the barony, whose son, Sir Bouchier Wrey, sold it to the Doyleys of Oxfordshire. Then it passed through various hands, amongst others Mr. Giles, Mr. Samuel Worthington, and Mr. Bunn. There has been no manorial house in the town for many years, but the Fitzwarines had a seat here. A Charter of Market was granted by Henry III. to the Fitzwarines, a good old loyal family, and favourites of the King.

Your Church has already been admirably described by our President, who is a great authority on ecclesiastical architecture, and he has left me very little to add. I have already told you of your earliest rectors, Peter the Bishop and William the Deacon. Perhaps it was the difficulties of Henry II. with another Bishop, one Thomas à Becket, which forced him to give the Rectory and advowson to the famous monastery of Bec, in Normandy. This giving of livings and monasteries to aliens was part of the rotten system by which so many foreign monks and priests fattened on our English lands, and left us ignorant, and poverty-stricken. However, alien priories were abolished by the wise act of Henry V., and the advowson and Rectory lapsed to the Crown. The King gave it to John, Duke of Bedford, Regent of France, who died in 1436, made it over to Henry VI., and he gave it, with much wisdom and right feeling, to the Dean and Canons of Windsor, to whose wise selections in recent years Wantage

people are indebted for the able services of the present Vicar and his revered predecessor, Canon Butler.

You have no Mayor and Corporation to regulate your affairs, but you have a curious body which is rather peculiar. You are aware that certain lands were given in the reigns of Henry VI and VII by Lords Fitzwarine of the Bouchier stock for certain charitable purposes. In the reign of good Queen Bess, in 1597, a famous Act was made for the proper governing of this charity, whereby twelve Governors were appointed, who were constituted a body corporate, having a common seal, and directed to administer the charity for the relief of the poor, the repair of the roads, and the support of a Grammar School. Six Governors were chosen by the principal inhabitants and six by the gentry of the neighbourhood. Amongst those who were first appointed I notice the well-known good old Berkshire names of Sir Edward Fettyplace of Childrey, John Dolman of Childrey, Sir Francis Moore of Fawley, and Thomas Aldworth. Nor must I omit one who deserves to rank second to Alfred as Wantage's greatest son. In a house near the Church, where in my time at Wantage the assistant clergy lived, was born Joseph Butler, afterwards Bishop of Durham. He was the son of a dissenting tradesmen, and destined for the Presbyterian ministry. But his genius was needed elsewhere. He changed his views, entered Oriel College in 1714, and there laid the foundation of that learning which enabled him to crush and defeat the attacks of the Theists and Atheists of the last century by that important work "The Analogy of Religion." He was Bishop of Bristol in 1738, and translated to Durham in 1750.

With the mention of this great name I must conclude my brief record of your town, which we are proud to visit to-day. I have told you of the Fitzwarines, the Bouchiers, and Wreys, and other illustrious names; but Wantage has one honour more in that it gives its name to the title of our distinguished Chairman to-day, whose achievements as a soldier, a statesman, agriculturist, and squire, reflect honour on the town which is, I feel sure, proud to have given its name to the First Baron Wantage.