



# The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Archæological Journal.

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## Gossip of an Antiquary.

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All the world has been singing the praises of King Alfred, worthiest of Kings and noblest of heroes. As I said before in these notes we Berkshire folk should be sharing in paying homage to the Scholar King and bravest of warriors. Will not someone sound the clarion, and bid us to the court of Alfred, there to offer our meed of honourable service, and raise a tribute to the memory of Berkshire's greatest son? Winchester has done well to greatly honour him, and why should Berkshire lag behind? Berkshire was the King's early home; his great achievements were done on Berkshire soil; and he lived longer in our county than ever he did at Winchester.

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In the meantime a considerable "Alfred" literature has been poured from the press, and Professor Earle's volume on the *Alfred Jewel* will hardly be surpassed in interest. Mr. Frederick Harrison in the interesting address which he delivered recently at Harvard College on "The Writings of King Alfred," thus referred to two other contributions from the Clarendon Press to "Alfred" literature:—"Quite lately Mr. Sedgefield, of Melbourne and Cambridge Universities, has published two books on Alfred's version of Boethius; the first a critical edition of the Anglo-Saxon text from the manuscript with a glossary, the second a version in modern English prose, and an alliterative version of the metres. Both the

text and the modern rendering by Mr. Sedgfield are an immense improvement, both in accuracy, scholarship, and elegance, on the earlier editions, whether of the old or new versions. It is only now that the real power of Alfred's work can be fully understood."

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"The function of the Alfred Jewel," Prof. Earle writes, "can hardly be other than personal decoration, and the place in which it might be erected is the helmet of the warrior. I imagine then that a hollow bead ran round the King's helmet, along the rim next the forehead, and that over the very centre of the brow there was a round orifice in the upper slope of the bead, fitted to receive the ivory stem of the Jewel, and that when fixed in this position it would have minor jewels similarly fixed on either side, but that this one would be the central piece and the richest jewel in the crown or coronet. For this magnificent Jewel would have the effect of converting the helmet into a crown, transforming the most vital piece of defensive armour into the chief of royal insignia for public occasions of state. That the rudiment of the crown was derived from the helmet, at least among our people, seems to be indicated by the Anglo-Saxon word that preceded "crown," namely, *CYNE-HELM*, which means Regal Helmet. . . . There is a feature in the Alfred Jewel which appears to support the theory propounded. I mean the Boar's Head, which is so wrought into the composition of the piece as to represent a subordinate, or even a servile, relation to the saintly Figure which is seen through the window of crystal."

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"The Figure in this Jewel was . . . taken from an Irish symbolical drawing of Christ triumphant and reigning over his Church, and it was adapted by the King in a sense which his experience had made real and concrete and practical. . . . King Alfred in early youth was tied by every thread of religious conviction and political interest and personal sentiment to the See of Rome, and he meant this Jewel to enshrine the frontispiece of his profession and the ensign of his creed, ecclesiastical, political, and personal." . . . At the back of this enamel there is a gold plate, the surface being engraved with a symbolical device. It "represents the inward disposition of the heart, the root and fount of personal religion. The enamelled Figure is of the nature of a public profession, and as such is openly displayed to view; the engraved plate is reserved, out of sight, facing the wall." The

author concludes that the Jewel must have belonged to Alfred of Wessex, made by his order after his design, based on his own position, and that the Jewel was a production of his youth, of the period after his return from Rome, and before he assumed a share in public affairs by the side of his brother Æthelred.

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How beautiful are the words of direct and homely wisdom which Alfred wrote ; they are old yet ever new. At this time we are minded to quote his beautiful expansion of Boethius's quatrain :

Felix, qui potuit boni  
Fontem visere lucidam ;  
Felix qui potuit gravis  
Terræ solvere vincula.

Alfred's Anglo-Saxon rendering is thus modernised by Mr. Conybeare in his little book on " Alfred and the Chroniclers," published last year :—

Lo ! of all upon earth  
Is the happiest he  
Who hath heart to behold  
That clearest of waters  
That wellet in heaven  
With light from the Highest :  
Who eke from himself  
All swartness, all mist,  
All the murk of his mood  
To scatter hath might.  
With God and His grace  
By tales of old time  
Thy thought will we teach,  
Till thou readest aright  
The highway to heaven,  
That loved native land,  
Own home of our souls.

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It is pleasant to think that Jane Austen's memory will be all the greener for the celebrations at Winchester. When King Alfred was seen lifting his cross-hilted sword in the Broadway, and the enunciatory cannon smoke had curled round St. Giles's Hill, many be-thought themselves that they must not leave Winchester without looking at the flat grave-stone in the north aisle of the Cathedral

nave. In a sense not too remote for the occasion, it may be said that Alfred made Jane Austen possible. To settle English life on the best and surest foundations was his work ; to depict that life centuries later in its most sheltered and civilised aspects was hers. And his city was her city.

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To find time for reading is a difficult matter in this busy age. When the Czar visited France the authorities at Compiègne thought it necessary to provide him "something to read." So they bought 3,000 books, all of which were conveyed to the palace for the Czar's recreation during his brief and crowded visit. I have no doubt that the scent of their Russian bindings would not be wholly lost on His Majesty ; more it seems rash to hope for, though one could wish him a quiet hour with Montaigne.

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The *Athenæum* states that Dr. Hurry, of Reading, is engaged on a work on Reading Abbey which will furnish a historical sketch of the Abbey from its foundation to the Dissolution. It will deal with the struggle between the Abbot and the Guild Merchant, give an account of the endowments and privileges, the library and plate belonging to the Abbey. The work will be embellished with many illustrations and plans, facsimiles of seals, coins, and MSS. Among the latter will be found one of the song, "Sumer is icumen in," which was first written down in Reading Abbey.

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## Proceedings of Societies.

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CONGRESS OF ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETIES.—The annual Congress was held at Burlington House, on July 10th, when the Secretary attended to represent the Berks Society. The following subjects were discussed :—Proposals for a complete list of earthworks in Britain ; the preparation of schedules of objects of particular Antiquarian interest for the use of County Councils ; suggestions for a return to mediæval blazon, and the evils of Ivy.