But I have already spoken at too great a length, and on matters which must necessarily be dull to all those who may not be specially interested in the production of our County History. The views that I have put forward are suggestions merely, the results of my experience during a few months' work at this undertaking; but I hope that in the discussion which will follow, we shall hear the views of those, who from long experience and local knowledge are better fitted to advise the Society on this matter.

Fifield in Benson, Oxon.

By J. E. Field, M.A., Vicar of Benson.

The Manor of Fifield in the Parish of Bensington or Benson retained the privileges of a separate hamlet until recent years, when they were relinquished by the late owner, Mr. Robert Aldworth Newton, and it has since been rated as an integral part of the Parish. But it is no part of the Hundred known in Domesday as the Hundred of Bensington and in later times as the Hundred of Ewelme. Fifield forms one of the isolated portions of the Hundred of Dorchester, though separated by a distance of three miles from the nearest limit of that Hundred. This is significant; for it seems to indicate that the hamlet belonged to the bishopric of Dorchester. When the King of Wessex, Cynegils, in 635, gave Dorchester to St. Berin the Bishop for his Episcopal See (as Bede tells us), it is probable that he bestowed at the same time the lands which we find to be in possession of the bishopric at a later date and which became the Hundred of Dorchester. Fifield is part of those lands; and since Bensington was a royal vill to which the King came from time to time with his court, we may infer that it was thought desirable that at such times the Bishop also should have a house in the town.

The name undoubtedly implies *Five Hides;* and taking the hide to be something under 100 acres this agrees with the extent of the Manor. In a document of 1588, presently to be noticed, it is called "Fyfehyde, otherwise Fyshide, otherwise Fyfeilde." Similarly Fyfield in Essex "is otherwise written in records Fifhide, Fyfhide, Fishide, Fyshide, which name is plainly derived from Fif, five, and hyde, a quantity of land in the Saxons' way of reckoning" (Morant's *History of Essex*, 1768, I. 133), and in a document of 9 Edward II.

this was still *Fyfhid*, but in an inquisition of 10 Henry VIII. it had become *Fivefield*. Still more interesting is the gradual growth of the name at Fyfield in Berkshire. In a charter of King Edwy of the year 956, preserved in the Abingdon Chronicle, we get the original form: "the place to which the country-folk long since gave the name At Five Hides" (*in illo loco ubi jamdudum ruricolæ illius terræ nomen indiderunt Æt Fif hidum*); and "these are the land-boundaries of the thirteen hides that belong to Five hides" (*this sind thara xiii. hide landgemæra the to Fif hidum gebyriath*). But in a charter of King Edgar in 968 it has become singular: "The place which is called by its usual name At Fithide" (*loco qui celebri Æt Fifhidan nuncupatur vocabulo*); and "these are the land-boundaries of the twenty-five hides to Fifhide" (*this sind thara xxv. hida landgemæra to Fifhydan*). Then in Domesday, "Henry [de Fereres] holds Fivehide" (*Henricus tenet Fivehide*).

The modern manor-house of Fifield in Benson has at first sight little appearance of being an object of interest. It has a long frontage in classical style, with three tiers of windows, surmounted by a plain parapet, and having a portico with Doric pillars over the entrance in the middle. The upper story was added when the house was remodelled by Mr. Newton some sixty or seventy years ago. Previously, when a farmer named Bonner was its owner and occupier, the old farm-house with its long low massive front must have been very striking. And in its modernised form the house proves on close inspection to be of a very remarkable character. It stands east and west, fronting the north; its plan being a narrow parallelogram of sufficient length to be divided into a spacious entrance-hall with dining-room and drawing-room on either side and a small additional room beyond the latter at the east end. The walls are very massive, about four feet in thickness, with the exception of the modern upper story and the eastern portion of the south side where kitchens have been thrown out. High in the west wall is the head of a fine geometrical window, consisting of two lights with a circle, the heads of the lights being doubly cusped on each side; and there is a good hood-moulding over it. It is evidently a relic of the close of the thirteenth century which has been allowed to remain as an external ornament, though it has been built up inside and all the lower part of the window is destroyed. The building therefore cannot be of later date than this; but it may perhaps be earlier. Under the little room at the east end of the house is a cellar with walls of old flint-work (the western wall being like the others and thus showing that it retains its original dimensions), lighted by a small window on the south, a similar one being

blocked on the north. It is now covered only by the wooden floor of the room, and there seem to be no traces of any former vaulting: but can it have been a crypt beneath a raised altar platform? It is approached by wooden stairs in the south-east corner, and against these stairs on the east is a recess which was closed up until recent years; and on being opened it was found to contain a chimney-shelf on which were an antique wine-glass and some tobacco-pipes of old form. Was this recess the entrance to the crypt, and was it made into a sort of back room with a fireplace, behind the kitchen, when the building was used as a dwelling-house? for what is now the drawing-room was in the old farm-house the kitchen. Another curious relic was a small recess in the northern part of the west wall (now in the dining-room), in which was a painting of the evil one, so hideous that the owner decided to destroy it. It is sufficiently evident that the building was a chapel; and the next field some yards west of it still bears the name of Chapel Close. A few years ago bricks were ploughed up in this close, when the plough was driven deeper than usual, showing that there had been buildings on the spot; but the existing farm-buildings are nearer to the house. Another feature of interest is a considerable brook which rises a mile further east at Ewelme and has been diverted to a course several yards above its natural fall at the point where it enters the limits of Fifield, so that it passes in front of the house, supplying an ornamental fountain, and is carried on in a straight course through the orchard and gardens, instead of flowing beside the roadway below. It does not appear that this is the work of recent times, and it is highly improbable that it could be done while the manor was merely occupied as a farm. It must therefore be reckoned among the vestiges which show that the place was of greater importance in older times. And here it is worth recording also that in the field a short distance west of Chapel Close, where an ancient pathway, now destroyed, passed along the ridge on the south of the brook and perhaps formed the chief approach to Fifield in very early days, three third-brass coins, of Constans, Constantius II., and Claudius Gothicus, were found in 1891; and near the line of the same pathway, half a mile further west, a Nuremberg token was also found about the same year.

It is strange that nothing should be known about the older history of a manor which bears so many marks of interest. The local tradition says that it was a nunnery. Thus in Allnutt's *Rambles in the Neighbourhood of Wallingford*, 1873 (p. 27), there is a description of the house "which it is said was formerly a nunnery"; and the late Mr. Hedges in his *Short History of Wallingford*, 1893 (p. 164), speaks of "Fifield House, formerly a nunnery." Murray's *Handbook*

for Berks, Bucks, and Oxfordshire, 1860, calls it merely "a very ancient manor-house." Gardner's *History, Gazetteer and Directory of the County of Oxford*, 1852, describes it more fully as "a very ancient manor-house which has been lately modernized and is supposed to have been formerly a strong fortress or a religious establishment." In the *Imperial Gazetteer* we read, under Bensington, "A very ancient manor-house is in the hamlet of Fifield. A Maison Dieu was founded in the time of Henry VI. by William de la Pole, duke of Suffolk, and given to the University of Oxford." If this statement could be borne out, we should naturally take it in connection with the tradition of the nunnery and infer that when Suffolk founded at Ewelme the hospital for men, which still exists, he founded also one for women at Fifield. But there seems to be no authority for the story, and we can only suppose that the passage of the *Gazetteer* was written in connection with Ewelme and inserted accidentally under Fifield. And even if it were true, there would still remain the questions how Suffolk obtained the property, and what it had previously been; for, as we have already seen, the actual building was two centuries old in his days.

No record, however, seems to have come down to us. All that we know may be summed up in these few facts: that being in the Hundred of Dorchester it belonged in all probability to the Saxon bishopric; that a large and handsome chapel was built as early as the thirteenth century; that local tradition calls it a nunnery; that it was sufficiently important to divert a brook through its private enclosure; and that eventually, and presumably from the time of the dissolution of religious houses, it became an ordinary farm.

Fifield is not mentioned in the older parish registers of Benson. But in the 22nd of Elizabeth, George Dynham, gentleman, and Francis Ffollyat, gentleman, paid a fine of 800 silver marks to John Dynham, esquire, and Katherine his wife, presumably on succession, for "the manor of Fyfehyde, otherwise Fyshide, otherwise Fyfeilde, with appurtenances," together with other properties in Benson, Shyllingford, Roke, Ewelme, Warborowe, and Berewycke (Pearman's *Bensington*, pp. 131-2). And at a survey of the royal manor of Bensington made by a commission of James I. in 1606, "the farmer of Fifielde" claimed rights of common with the tenants of Benson on certain common-lands and heaths in the parish (Ibid. p. 125.)

In recent times the hamlet of Fifield at one end of Benson village bore the same relation to the parish that the hamlet of Crowmarsh Battle bore at the other end; and Crowmarsh Battle was a manor which William the Conqueror had bestowed upon Battle Abbey.

All the evidences have seemed to indicate that Fifield also was an appendage of some great religious establishment.

The Dorchester bishopric was transferred to Lincoln in 1092; and in 1140 Bishop Alexander founded the Augustinian Abbey at Dorchester, endowing it with some of the possessions of the bishopric; soon after which the Empress Maud bestowed upon it the church and tithes of Benson, her gift being afterwards confirmed by Kings Henry II., Richard I., and John (*Rot. Chartarum*, Vol. I, pt. 1, p. 142). There can be no doubt that Fifield did not become a possession of the Abbey, or we must have known the fact: and therefore we must conclude that it continued to belong to the bishopric. Now we know that in or about the year 1220 the bishop of Lincoln had a sluice at Benson, for which he paid a yearly rent of two shillings to the King; for Engelard de Cygony, one of King John's foreign mercenaries, to whom the royal manor of Bensington had been assigned, writes to the justiciary, Hubert de Burgh, complaining that the Bishop has excommunicated some of the men of the manor and causes daily injury to him and them, intending without doubt to rob the King of his rights in regard to a sluice *(occasione cujusdam exclusæ quam idem [dominus Lincolniensis episcopus] tenet de domino rege per servitium duorum solidorum per annum;* Royal Letters, Henry III., Vol. 1., p. 160, *Rolls Series*, 27.) Whatever this sluice may have been, it could hardly have had any value to the bishop unless it were in connection with some other property in the place. Such property must, almost certainly, have been the manor of Fifield. We may presume that the sluice was upon the brook to regulate the flow of the water; in which case it may well have been at the boundary of Fifield. Or if the sluice was on the river and connected in some way with wharfage, it must have been where the mill and the lock remain at the present day; and from this point the old track-way already mentioned led in a direct line to Fifield. The facts, therefore, fit together if Fifield belonged to the bishopric of Lincoln.

Perhaps the building was erected to serve as a parish Church, with the intention that Fifield should become a separate parish. It is, in fact, similar in outline to the very early neighbouring church of Swyncombe, with no external distinction between nave and chancel; only that Swyncombe has an eastern apse; and possibly Fifield also had. But as this never became a parish Church, what purpose did it serve? There is nothing but the current tradition of a Nunnery to help us to an answer. The place may well have served some such purpose as this tradition implies, in connection with the bishopric. If it had been made over to a convent, it would

share the fate of other religious houses at the dissolution. Or if it had continued to be the property of the bishopric, the foundation of a new See for Oxfordshire in 1542 may have served as an occasion for seizing this manor and bestowing it upon a private owner.

Reviews.

"THREE CENTURIES OF NORTH OXFORDSHIRE," by Mrs. Sturge Henderson. We have studied this charming book with the greatest pleasure, and congratulate Mrs. Sturge Henderson upon her delightful historical sketch of a district very little known which abounds in interest for the antiquary and lover of nature. The history of Oxfordshire has been so much overshadowed by that of its great capital, that little has been written about the old towns and villages within the borders of the county. This book does much for the northern part of Oxfordshire, concerning which Mrs. Henderson writes so gracefully and so well. She tells stories of the grand old manor-houses, than which none in England are finer or more full of historical interest. She tells of the annals of Chastleton, Cornwell and Shipton, and other beautiful old houses, and calls back from their graves the old courtiers and warriors and squires who lived in them. We follow her to Wychwood Forest and see the wealth of wild flowers which flourish there. We keep company with James I. when he comes to Burford, and with Charles I. and his Queen at Enstone, with Lord Falkland the Blameless and his Lady, and linger with her in the walled garden at Great Tew, that haunt of ancient peace, and hear the sad story of her woes which ends in the song-like triumphant echo of her voice in our ears, "I have had my portion from the first, no woman more." The Civil Wars loom large in these pages. The battles of Chalgrave Field and Edgehill, the headquarters of the King at Oxford, the store of ammunition in the cloisters at New College, the drilling on Port Meadow, the marching of the Parliamentary army through portions of the county, which made the life of the villages full of incident—these and much more in the book help us to realise the condition of the country in that fateful time. But it is the sketches of the lives of the villagers that this volume has its chief charm. The old world beliefs and superstitions of the 17th and 18th centuries are duly chronicled. The curious seventeenth century "receipts and secrets in Physick and