



## An Old Corner of Bucks.

*By Ernest W. Dormer.*

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A WAY in a sweet corner of Buckinghamshire, where a peaceful old English picturesqueness seems to pervade the air, a well preserved village of bygone customs and extreme quaintness jogs its uninterrupted routine under the name of West Wycombe.

This modest little village is situated on the main road from London to Oxford and an old obelisk placed at the entrance to the village records on the four sides of its Tuscan abacus the following inscriptions :—"From the city miles XXX. ; from the University miles XXXII. ; from the County Town miles XV. 1752. Christian Year."

The modern builder has stayed his ruthless hand here, and indeed it would be high treason to do otherwise, for the rapidly disappearing delights of the antiquarian are here galore. The village can boast of but one street, and the scene as one enters it for the first time at any season reminds him strongly of the "good old days." Low ceiled, acute gabled little habitations with heavy twisted oaken framing and beams, whitewashed and timeworn, and uneven diamond latticed windows meet one at every turn. At night when no light can be seen save that from the windows of the village hostelry, or from the tiny chinks in the closed shutters of the houses of the law-abiding inhabitants ; when every step on the round smooth cobbled paths seems mightily increased in sound and the scraping notes of an old violin can be heard keeping time with some almost forgotten measure ; when the distant clatter of hoofs on the cobbles falls on the ear ; then—then is the time when the visitor easily imagines he is once more living in the days of bold Dick Turpin and his extemporised courtesies.

The Manor of West Wycombe was allotted to the Monks of Winchester for their support from a very early date, for we read in "Domesday," "Walchelin, Bishop of Winchester holds Wicumbe for which he is taxed at 19 hides." Archbishop Stigand held it in the reign of King Edward the Confessor. The Bishops of Winchester continued Lords of West Wycombe until 1550. John

Poynet in that year, after his promotion, surrendered the Manors of West Wycombe to King Edward VI. and received other estates in their place. The King then granted the Manors to the Duke of Somerset. This grant was however revoked by Queen Mary and the Manor restored to John White who succeeded Poynet to the Bishopric. He being a Catholic was deprived of the estates on the accession of Queen Elizabeth and they again reverted to the crown from whence they were granted to Sir Robert Dormer, Knight, anno regni, 45.

The noble family of Dormer, as appears from an ancient pedigree, came over originally from Normandy. In 1042 Thomas Dormer attended King Edward the Confessor on his return from France, and his son William Dormer came over afterwards with William the Conqueror. This William Dormer had also a son William, and of this stock came Sir William Dormer who was in the service of Edward III. in his wars against France, where he is termed Lord Dormer. The family were settled at Wycombe at a very early period, and appear by the Register of Winchester to have been tenants to the Bishops of Winchester. A descendant, William Dormer, married the daughter of a French Knight. By his will, dated September 12th, 1506, he directs his body to be buried in the chancel of West Wycombe Church before the image of St. Lawrence; bequeaths £40 to the poor, £40 to the Church to buy a cope and vestment, etc., and £40 to mend the highways.

His son Robert was Sheriff of the Counties of Bucks and Bedfordshire in the reign of Henry VIII., and received the honour of Knighthood in the same reign. At the dissolution of the Monasteries he was granted the Manor of Wenge, part of the possessions of the Abbey of St. Albans. By his will, dated June 20th, 1552, he bequeathed £40 to the poor of West Wycombe. His son and heir William, in the sixth year of the reign of Edward VI. was elected one of the Knights of the County of Buckinghamshire, and at the Coronation of Queen Mary was made a Knight of the Bath. One of his daughters, Jane, who was a maid of honour to Queen Mary, afterwards married the first Duke of Feria, in Spain.

Robert Dormer, the son of Sir William by his second wife, was the twenty-third lineal descendant of the first Thomas Dormer, and was knighted in 1591 and made a baronet by the title of Baron Dormer of Wenge, in 1615.

On the death of Lord Dormer in 1616, another Robert succeeded to the title and estates, and on August 2nd, 1628, in the

fourth year of the reign of Charles I., he was created Viscount Ascot and Earl of Carnarvon. He was a valiant loyalist and took up arms in defence of Charles I., and was one of those Lords who in 1642 subscribed a declaration of the King's in which he published that he had no intention of making war upon his Parliament, etc. Robert was slain in the Battle of Newbury on 20th September, 1648, on his return from routing a party of the enemy's horse, by one of the scattered troopers who ran him through the body with a sword, of which wound he died in an hour. His body was embalmed and buried at Wing on 3rd August, 1650. His son Charles, second Earl of Carnarvon, married twice, but the Civil War having much affected the property and fortunes of the family, his lordship sold his manor and estate of West Wycombe to Thomas Lewis, Esq., Alderman of London, on November 17th, 1670, who married Elizabeth, daughter of Francis Dashwood, Esq., Turkey Merchant, also an Alderman of London. In 1698, Thomas Lewis granted the manor to his brothers-in-law, Sir Samuel Dashwood and Francis Dashwood, and it soon afterwards became the property of the latter, who was created a Baron in 1707, and married four wives. He died in 1724 and was succeeded by his eldest son Francis, who became a Member of Parliament. On the death of John, Earl of Westmoreland, in 1762, he succeeded in right of his mother to the Barony of Le Despenser. He was in turn Keeper of the Grand Wardrobe, Chancellor of the Exchequer and joint Postmaster for many years. In 1788 the baronetage and Manor of West Wycombe descended to his half-brother Sir John Dashwood King, whose descendants still hold them.

The ancient Manor House, which stood near the village was built of brick, of no great size and familiar in parts to an old house in Towerbridge in this parish, the home of the Darrell family, which was bought of the last of the Darrells by Sir John Dashwood in 1794. West Wycombe Manor House was the home of the Dormers before they removed to Wing. The present mansion is a beautiful residence situated on a commanding eminence. It was built by Sir Francis Dashwood, first Baron, and subsequently enlarged and beautified by his son Lord de Despenser. It is a handsome erection in several styles, containing some splendid paintings. The great hall, measuring 52 feet by 22 feet is supported by four columns and the grand staircase is balustraded in mahogany and richly decorated.

Having traced the history of the Manor from early times, I will now ask the reader to accompany me through the ancient caves and visit the Church and Mausoleum.

Half way along the Village street we turn up to the right and pass beneath an arch under an old clock. The house at the side which has a room projecting to form the arch is a weather beaten structure worthy of notice. Its old twisted oaken beams still indicate exceeding strength and an ancient wooden turret with a weather vane crowns the old tiled roof. The greater part of the glass in the diamond windows is missing, allowing the elements to add to the destruction time has already commenced. It is called "the Loft" and the rooms are still used for vestry meetings, etc. At the left hand corner of the archway is the old kneeling stone also a manacle fastened to the stout wooden upright in which the delinquent's hands were fastened when undergoing the penalty of his misdeeds. Here also the stocks formerly stood, another means of olden punishment. Continuing, we pass through the archway and commence to climb a narrow and rather steep incline of chalk, passing cottages on the left with gardens crowded with scent laden flowers. With the help of good staffs and frequent refreshments, the entrance to the caves is reached. It is of a commanding nature and is formed of flint with pinnacles of the same material, the doorway being built in the side of the hill. A row of railings complete the outside. Some large rounded stones are conspicuous objects at the entrance to the caves. The keys of the gate are missing so until the parish Clerk is forthcoming we cannot explore the depths. Fortunately a few minutes brings him to the spot and we enter. Each with a candle which we ignite as we go in, we proceed in Indian file down a decline into the bowels of the earth. The passages are tortuous and delightfully cool in summer, presenting an arrestive contrast to the scorching sun without. Care must be taken to keep our clothes from the chalk or when we emerge we shall present a somewhat unusual appearance. After stumbling for about 150 yards we reach the first chamber, a lofty cavern with a cul de sac running from the side, but not of sufficient length for us to mistake our way on the return journey. Within this chamber we pause a few minutes. The aspect of the place is creepy, especially if by chance the candles are blown out. The tale goes that the caves were formed by order of one of the Dashwood family to supply work for the inhabitants of the village, the times being so bad. It is thought that they originally extended further under

ground than at present and that both the Church and West Wycombe House were originally connected by passages. It is said that within this and one other chamber a curious society under the pseudonym of the Monks of St. Francis held some of their secret meetings. The head-quarters of the Society was at Medmenham Abbey but one of the principal Members of the Order residing at Wycombe bethought himself of the caves when the ruins of the Old Abbey were not available or the safety and secrecy of the sect was at all imperilled. One writer says, "The Medmenham Club was a Society of wits and humourists who under the assumed title of the Monks of St. Francis, converted the ruins of the Abbey of Medmenham into a convivial retreat which became notorious on account of the Members being stigmatised by some of their contemporaries in a very offensive manner and lampooned in some publication of the day under the title of the 'Hell Fire Club'." Langley in his "History of the Desborough Hundred" mentions that over the door of the Abbey was inscribed the motto of the order of St. Francis, "Fay ce que voudras" and after alluding to the reports which had been circulated respecting this eccentric association adds that the only female domestic connected with these 'bon vivants' was then living, and that after many enquiries he believed all their transactions may as well be buried in oblivion.

Among the members were Charles Churchill, John Wilkes, Robert Lloyd, Francis le Despenser who acted as Chairman, Bubb Doddington Baron of Melcombe Regis, Sir John Dashwood King, Bart., Paul Whitehead, Dr. Benjamin Bates, Henry Lovebond Collins and Sir William Stanhope, K.C. They were mainly notorious literary men, influential and rich, and the writer is confident that the inability of Langley to give his gleanings of this noted Society to the world, but his desire to bury their proceedings in oblivion, goes to prove in a great measure the openly expressed opinion that their doings and sayings were of a most immoral and profane character.

In "Chrysal" or the Adventures of a Guinea, Johnson has given an account of the lawless ways of the "Hell Fire Club" which is said to have been highly exaggerated in consequence of his differences with certain members. The break up of this notorious band is supposed to have been due to the following incident. There was a vacancy in the Club for one member, and two Candidates, bound to secrecy, were invited to attend for inspection by the Members to decide which of the two should be initiated. One of them was

chosen and in celebration of the event the usual practices were performed. The devil was toasted and lauded and commanded to appear, and everything good blasphemed and cursed. In the middle of this orgie something came down the chimney very much like Satan himself, and the frenzied Members catching sight of the apparition were stricken with fear. Added to this their conviviality had been enhanced by frequent and deep potations. With as much courage as they could command they rushed helter skelter from the place, firmly believing they had seen the devil. It transpired some time after that the non-elected Member, out of spite, dressed up an effigy (some say it was a live baboon) and let it down the chimney to frighten the uproarious Members. How well his joke succeeded is apparent. From that night the Members as a Club never met again. Evidently the shock was so severe that their presence in these awe inspiring ruins, even in the company of each other, was an exploit which none had the courage to undertake.

We must remember we are in the cave while this diversion has been made. Our voices reverberate weirdly in this hall, and the lights waver as an onrush of cold air greets us as we proceed. By and bye we come to an obstruction—part of the roof has fallen in. This sometimes acts as a deterrent to visitors going in the caves, but the assurance of their safety is vouched by the writer. We soon get over the obstruction and venture forward once again, reaching the second Council Chamber which is similar to the first. 'Tis here that those who would care to leave a record of their visit to these subterranean regions may do so. By scraping a flat surface on the chalk and blackening it with the light of the candle, initials or name can be carved with a pen-knife to keep silent company with thousands of other names from all parts of the country. Taking this operation as performed we go on again and finally work our way back the same passage until a glimmer of light announces the exit not far away. Mention is made by some writer of the existence of a small black stream called the river Styx running through the centre of the cave, but of this we could see no trace. We are surprised to find ourselves tolerably free from traces of the whitening substance.

*(To be continued.)*