



## Some Notes on the Parish of Ruscombe, Berks.

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**R**USCOMBE Parish is bounded on the north by Wargrave, on the east by Waltham St. Lawrence, and on the south and west by Hurst and Twyford. In every case the boundary line is purely arbitrary and is not marked by any natural objects. The London and Bath road crosses the northern part, but has not and never had any connection with the history of the parish. The main road along which most of the houses were built is that which runs from Windsor and Waltham to Twyford and Sonning. This is probably an ancient Saxon highway. The northern part of the parish is on chalk, the centre is a low hill of clay capped by a thin deposit of gravel, while in the south-east corner is the alluvial tract known as Ruscombe Lake. In olden days this was in winter time a veritable sheet of water famous for its fish, such as pike, perch, and eels, which were a considerable source of profit to the inhabitants. Since 1820, when the Bray Cut was made, the "Lake" has been drained, enclosed and cultivated. The little river Broadwater flows across it and through Stanlake Park, where it forms an ornamental sheet of water, into the Loddon at Twyford. The principal buildings now standing are, first, the church, dedicated to St. James, and consisting of chancel, nave, south porch, and square embattled western tower. The chancel, which is of flint, is much the oldest part of the building. It is of plain transition Norman style, and was probably built towards the end of the 12th century. At the east end are two small obtusely pointed lancet windows filled with modern stained glass. There were two similar ones on each side of the chancel, but one of those on the north has been removed to make way for an organ chamber, and one on the south has been replaced by a modern double window.

On the outside of the chancel wall at the south-west corner are the remains of what appears to have been a priests' doorway. The outer order of the arch is formed of bricks, which, from their shape and considering the age of the flint-work in which they are embedded, are probably Roman in origin, and must have been obtained from the ruins of some Roman building in the neighbourhood. This is not unlikely, as plentiful traces of Roman occupation have been found near by in Waltham parish, and in Ruscombe itself coins and pottery of that age are not uncommon. The nave and tower are of brick, and were erected in the years 1638-39 in place of an older building of flint and chalk, then pulled down. On the tower is a pierced vane, a facsimile of the original one which was blown down during a storm in 1852. It contains the date of the building, 1639, and the letters C.R., being, of course, the Royal monogram of the period. With reference to this, I have been told that some years ago a local antiquary was showing a stranger the various objects of interest in the place, and, pointing to the tower and enlarging on the excellence of its architecture, said: "The parishioners are very proud of this tower, seeing that it was built by a very famous architect whose initials are on the vane, C.R., Christopher Ren!"

Inside the church on the side walls or splays of the eastern lancet windows are wall paintings, now very much faded, supposed to represent SS. Peter and Paul and SS. Stephen and James. There is no chancel arch, its place being taken by a large oak beam, on the plaster wall over which are written the Ten Commandments in letters at least as old as the rebuilding of the nave. The pulpit, with sounding-board, is of carved oak of Jacobean date and style. In the belfry is preserved a very ancient chest mentioned in the churchwardens' book of 1670 as "a chest with three lockes (wherein divers of the church goods are kept), two keyes of the chest-lockes being kept by the two churchwardens for ye time being and ye other by ye Minister or Curate." There were three bells, all of which hung in the old steeple, according to the list of 1670. One of these, having long been cracked, was sold in 1880, and the proceeds applied towards the restoration of the church in that year. Of the others one has the inscription "Blessed be the name of the lorde, Joseph Carter 1589." Joseph Carter was, of course, the famous bell-founder of Reading. The other bell is more ancient, and is inscribed "Sancte Clete Or." The bell was probably cast at the Wokingham foundry in the 15th century. The registers, which are in excellent condition, are preserved in an iron chest in the vestry. The marriages com-

mence in 1559, the burials in 1569, and the baptisms in 1574. There is also an old book containing extracts from the churchwardens' accounts, and similar documents from 1600 onwards, copied in 1670 from the original, and continued year by year for a few years more. In the churchyard is an ancient yew tree.

Next to the church the most interesting building now standing is Northbury farmhouse, a brick and timber building at present used as two cottages. This was the original manor house of Northbury, one of the two manors into which the parish used to be divided. Stanlake House, partly in Hurst parish, is an Elizabethan mansion of some interest. There are also a few ancient brick and timber cottages still left to give us some idea of Ruscombe in the olden time.

Ruscombe is peculiarly rich in relics of the palæolithic or older stone age, the flint implements from the gravel in my collection alone numbering some hundreds. A few specimens of the neolithic period have also been found, but none of these have any necessary connection with the after history of the parish, as is the case sometimes in other parishes. Roman remains I have already alluded to. Of the Saxons, besides the roads, I can find no definite trace.

Ruscombe is not mentioned in Domesday, but its history commences at a date but very little later. The first notice of the place which I can find in any written history occurs in the foundation charter of the cathedral of Old Sarum in 1091, where, among the original endowments of the cathedral, are mentioned "the church of Sunning with the tithes and other property thereto belonging and ten hides of land in Rothescamp." If we take the hide at 120 acres we have almost exactly the area of Ruscombe. As to the name, originally it was not "combe" at all, but camp, from campus, an open unenclosed field, which as pronounced by the French Normans soon became corrupted into combe Rothescamp—Ruscombe. What Rothescamp or Rotis meant I cannot tell. The charter says 10 hides of land in Rothescamp, so that it was the name of a field much larger than the 10 hides. Possibly it meant a part of forest land belonging to Windsor Forest.

Sunning had been the property of the Bishops of Sarum or Sheraton or Sonning from a very early period, and the manor reached to the left bank of the Loddon; but when the grant of the 10 hides of land in Rothescamp was made, probably by William the Norman, the land on the right bank for a short distance from the river had already been taken up by the manors of Hurst and Wargrave, who

had each sent out an arm along the river bank until they met near where Twyford now stands. Riverside frontages were valuable even in those days. So that the nearest land available was that we know as the parish of Ruscombe. This will account for its having been an outlying appendage of Sonning from the first, and not an integral part of the manor. This does not exclude the possibility of there having been a small irregular settlement of forest dwellers here earlier ; but of this we have no evidence.

To provide endowments for the canons or prebendaries of the cathedral the Bishop appears to have made of Ruscombe two manors or sub-manors, known as Ruscombe Southbury and Ruscombe Northbury. The latter was from an early date attached to the stall of Combe and Harnham in Salisbury Cathedral, while the title of the former remains to this day. There is still a prebendary of Ruscombe Southbury at Salisbury. Such, I suggest, was the secular origin of Ruscombe parish. As to the church, it was certainly a mission or daughter church of Sunning, probably what was known as a "field chapel." When it was first established I am unable to say. It may have been the seat of a mission to the foresters long before the Conquest, or it may not have been built until the tenants of the manor had settled there. The first notice of the church appears in the account of a visitation at Sunning by the Dean of Salisbury in 1220. Sunning, with its daughter churches of Hurst, Arborfield, Ruscombe, etc., was within the peculiar jurisdiction of the Dean, who there performed many of the functions of the Bishop. The notice says : " There is a chapel at Rothescamp dedicated to St. James which the vicar of Sunning holds with his vicarage." Then we have an interesting account of the belongings of the said chapel, the ornaments, the vestments, the service books, and so on. The chaplain's house and the chancel of the church are said to be in a very ruinous condition, the roofs especially being very bad. Doubtless they were of thatch, which needs constant repair, and some of the walls may have been only wood and plaster. When we remember the state of the country at the time, there is nothing to be surprised at in this state of affairs. The fact that not many years had elapsed since England had been for two years under the Papal interdict is quite sufficient to account for it. One thing this account shows, that is, that there had been a church here for some considerable time at least.

*(To be continued.)*