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Stanton Harcourt and its Manor.

By Walter Money, F.S.A.

IT is an interesting coincidence that there should be a direct connecting link between the manor of Stanton Harcourt and that of the manor of Benham-Valence, by Newbury, now so well known as the property of the youthful Sir Richard Sutton, both manors having as their owners the important baronial family of De Camville, lords of Middleton, now the seat of Lord Jersey. Stanton having been granted by Adeliza, Queen of Henry 1, to her kinswoman Millicent de Camville, whose daughter Isabel married Robert de Harcourt, while the manor of Benham-Valence, which has of late years been ignorantly associated with Beenham, near Reading, was given by Richard 1, in 1189, to Richard de Camville, the founder of Combe Abbey in Warwickshire, the seat of Lord Craven, and here we have another coincidence in the fact that the de Camville's manor of Benham-Valence after many alienations was purchased by the Cravens in the 17th century. Considering the many changes which have taken place in the ownership of landed property from time to time it is a remarkable fact that the ancient and honourable family of Harcourt have held Stanton Harcourt for over 750 years, although the family seat is now elsewhere.

The magnificent old manor house of Stanton was probably built about 1450, and ceased to be the residence of the Harcourts on the

death of Sir Philip Harcourt, knt., in 1688. His widow sold the furniture, and early in the 18th century the family removed to their new house at Nuneham Courtenay, which was building at the same time as Blenheim. The old house stood for many years dismantled, and fell gradually to decay. At last, in 1770, it was taken down, though the great kitchen, and a tower, containing a chapel and other rooms, was spared. The embattled tower is 54ft. 6in. in height, with a stair turret at the south-west angle, rising 2ft. 9ins. above it. The great detached kitchen is on the lordly scale of Glastonbury, Christchurch and Durham, about 30ft. square, with a turret at one angle, and an octagonal pointed roof, is best described by Dr. Plot, the historian of Oxfordshire :—"It is so strangely unusual that, by way of riddle, one may truly call it either a kitchen within a chimney or a kitchen without one ; for below it is nothing but a large square, and octagonal above, ascending like a tower, the fires being made against the walls, and the smoke climbing up them without any tunnels or disturbance to the cooks, which being stopped by a large conical roof at the top, goes out at loop holes on every side, according as the wind sets, the loop-holes at the side next the wind being shut with folding doors the adverse side open." The walls are 3ft. thick, and the height to the roof 39ft., which rises 25ft. higher. The roof is surmounted by a griffin 8ft. high, supporting a vane. Pope, in his letter to the Duke of Buckingham, likens the kitchen to the forge of Vulcan, the cave of Polyphemus, and the temple of Moloch. He also graphically describes the aged and desolate appearance of the house in his time, and concludes by affirming that "its very rats are grey, and praying that the roof may not fall upon them, as they are too infirm to seek other lodgings." He also describes one of the little rooms in the tower as walled up ; "for the ghost of Lady Frances is supposed to walk here, and some prying maids of the family report that they have seen a lady in a fardingale through the keyhole ; but the matter is hushed up, and the servants are forbidden to talk of it."

The tower, good perpendicular of Edward IV, called Pope's Tower, is in the garden, and contains the domestic chapel, with three rooms above it, the uppermost of which is called Pope's Study, having been occupied by the poet during his residence here in 1716-18. The pane of red glass upon which he wrote the following inscription was taken out of its casement in this chamber, and is now preserved as a valuable relic at Nuneham :—"In the year 1718 Alexander Pope finish'd here the fifth volume of Homer."

While he resided here Gay was staying with the Harcourts at Cokethorpe, and frequently visited him. An interesting letter of his graphically describes the death of two lovers who were here struck dead by lightning in 1718.

Stanton Harcourt has a charming old house in the village belonging to All Souls' College, locally known as the Pest House, but which was used as a resort for the members of the College at the time of any epidemic occurring at Oxford, and which in the 17th century was occupied by the Huntingdon family, to one of whom there is a monument in the chancel (1693). A remarkably interesting collection of armour and portions of military equipment of the Civil War period was inspected by some of the party. Here is also a curious collection of ladies' hats of the Cromwellian period, and other items of considerable rarity, of which time did not permit of a proper inspection.

This fine old property, which has been held by the Harcourt family 750 years, embraces a series of fishponds. The visitors ascended the tower, and inspected the quaint and separate building which in former times served the purposes of a kitchen. It was described as being unique, and more remarkable than the famous kitchen at Glastonbury Abbey. The party next assembled at the Church close by, which Mr. Keyser said was one of the most beautiful country churches in Oxfordshire. It contained a certain amount of Norman work, including two very fine doorways. The noble chancel and transepts were of the early English period of architecture—13th century. The antiquarians were, by special permission allowed to enter the Harcourt Chapel and inspect the grand old tombs and effigies which are so well and carefully preserved there. The most interesting of these were the recumbent figures of several members of the family, including one in knight's armour, by his side being his wife, who was represented as wearing on her arm the badge of the ancient Order of the Garter, this being one of only three instances known of the Order of the Garter being conferred upon a woman. Of the remaining two cases, one exists at Ewelme, near Wallingford. There is also a fine full length marble statue of Field Marshal Earl Harcourt, who was born in 1743, and died in 1830, and a beautiful memorial to George Simon Harcourt, described as "Earl, Viscount, and Baron," born 1736. Mr. Keyser considered that the Harcourt Chapel was probably built in the reign of Edward IV. The Church screen, of decorated style, no doubt dated from the 14th century. It appears to have been the custom

in former times to affix memorial tablets on the outside walls of many parish churches, and among those outside Stanton Harcourt Church was one which was specially noticed on account of the tragic event which led to its erection. The inscription on the tablet, written by Pope, runs as follows :—

“Near this place lie the bodies of

JOHN HEWET AND SARAH DREW,

an industrious young man, and a virtuous maiden of this parish, contracted in marriage, who being with many others at harvest work, were both in an instant, killed by lightning on the last day of July, 1718,

Think not by rigorous judgment seized
A pair so faithful could expire :
Victims so pure, Heaven saw well pleas'd
And snatched them in celestial fire.
Live well and fear no sudden fate
When God calls virtue to the grave :
Alike 'tis justice soon or late
Mercy alike to kill or save.
Virtue unmoved can bear the call,
And face the flash that melts the ball.”

The fact may not have occurred to the notice of many persons, although it is curious and interesting, that this spot is not only associated with the name of Alexander Pope, but also with that of our great poet, John Milton.

Professor Masson, in his *Life of Milton*, shows that John Milton, his father, a scrivener, in London, 1603, was son of Richard Milton, of Stanton St. John, Oxon, living 1577, son of Henry Milton, of the same place, who died 1558. He also remarks that it has been found impossible to connect the name with any place called Milton in Oxon or Berks. The name of Milton was, however, only an abbreviation, of which we have many other examples ; and Middleton (the original of Milton) was the baronial estate of the Norman family of De Camville, whose arms, a double-headed spread eagle, were borne by the poet as his paternal coat, confirmed by Segar the herald *temp.* Charles I. He was therefore, on the evidence of name and arms, one of the De Camvilles of Stanton Harcourt and Middleton, Oxon, also of Benham-Valence, in the parish of Speen, Berks.