



Sandhurst, Berks.

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CHAPTER II.

EARLY HISTORY OF THE CHURCH.

If Sandhurst existed as a village in Saxon times we have no record of the fact. Nor does the name occur in Domesday Book. In the eleventh century Windsor became a royal residence, and the country for many miles round was given up to the King's hunting. For the protection of the beasts of the chase the inhabitants were subjected to a special and very severe code of laws, which must have made life in the Forest far from attractive. The first mention of the village is to be found in the Exchequer Rolls of the 21st year of Henry II. (1175), where the receipt of one mark for the "Villata de Sandhurst" is recorded. Forty-seven years later we have evidence of the existence of a chapel there, not the present church, though it stood on the same site, and was built with some of the same stones. At this time Sandhurst was a hamlet on the border of the large parish of Sonning, the Curate in charge of the chapel being subordinate to the Vicar of the Mother Church there. The parish included in its bounds, besides Sandhurst, the chapelries of Wokingham, Arborfield, Ruscombe and Hurst, corresponding very much to the present Rural Deanery of Sonning. That such a great tract of country should have been included in one parish shows how thinly populated the district must have been. It was situated originally in the diocese of Wiltshire, the Bishops of which had for many years a residence in Sonning village. The last of the Bishops of Wiltshire, Herman by name, was in the year 1058 appointed to the See of Sherborne, and ten years later the residence of the united bishoprics was transferred by William the Conqueror to Old Sarum. About the same time Bishop Herman made over the parishes of Sherborne

and Sonning to the Dean of Sarum, who henceforth exercised a peculiar jurisdiction in these places independent of the Diocesan. He held his Ecclesiastical Court yearly, and every third year made a Visitation at Sonning, when the Curates of the dependent chapelries had to attend, Churchwardens were sworn in, and parishioners of immoral life were presented. This custom was kept up until the year 1846.*

It is therefore to the records of Salisbury Cathedral that we must turn for the earliest account of our church. This is to be found in the Visitation Book of William de Wanda, Dean of Sarum in the year 1220. The following is a translation from the original Latin as transcribed by Mr. W. H. Rich Jones in the "Register of St. Osmund"† :—

"There is also a chapel at Sandhurst, new and beautiful, not yet dedicated. The patron Saint is St. Michael the Archangel. It has a font, but no burial ground. It belongs to the chapel of Wokingham, and John the Chaplain (*capellanus annuus*) who is there obtains all the tithes and emoluments through Master Hamon and renders him one mark. Pertaining to the same chapelry is half a virgate of land, a house in which the chaplain dwells, a moor in an alder grove,‡ and a barn; which were given to the chapelry to be held in continual service. The Chaplain obtains the holy oil from Reading.

It possesses the following books : An old missal, not annotated ; an old antiphon book, which is unserviceable, belonging to Wokingham ; no breviary ; a legendary from Advent to Septuagesima in thirteen folios, belonging to Wokingham ; a passable grail (*i.e.*, service book) ; and a very poor psalter.

The following are the church goods : A silver chalice gilded inside, a pair of corporals, a pair of vestments, a canvas chasuble, four napkins, a surplice, two linen altar cloths, one of them worked in colours, the other black and white, a third also old and worn out.

There is also here a large chest of vestments, the ornaments of which were burnt, and there is also a silken veil and a banner of red silk. Afterwards, search being made by the priest, six ells were found to make an alb, two napkins, two altar frontals, and a cloth to go behind the cross.

* See Pearson "Memorials of Sonning."

† Rolls Series.

‡ "cum una mora in alneto." "Mora" might conceivably be translated also "a habitation."

The rectorial tithes of Sonning and its chapelries were appropriated from the earliest times to the Cathedral Church of Salisbury. The tithes, and later the glebe also, were farmed by the Dean and Chapter to different individuals, not necessarily clergy, to whom were left the duty of providing a Curate to do the parochial work. This system continued for several years after the Reformation.

In a later reference to Wokingham in the same document it is stated that Hamon held the rectories of Wokingham and Sandhurst by the gift of Dean Richard, on the condition of his paying one mark yearly to the Dean, and providing two pounds of wax for the Mother Church at Sonning on St. Andrew's day. He appears to have sub-let the emoluments derived from these two rectories to Philip, who is described as "capellanus annuus" of Wokingham. The latter then disposed of the chapel of Sandhurst to John of Sherborne, from whom he received two marks.

Church prelates in those days were often too much occupied with affairs of State to devote much attention to their pastoral work, but William de Wanda, on this occasion at any rate, seems to have carried out his inspection thoroughly. Deficiencies and dilapidations were noted in the chapels, and evidence of considerable neglect was found. At Hurst the belfry had fallen down; at Arborfield, where there was a wooden church, cattle and pigs had found their way in, the latter having grubbed up part of the floor; and so on. Not content with this, however, he later proceeded, in spite of their indignant protests, to catechise the chaplains. John of Sherborne, though by no means the worst, can hardly be said to have come through the examination with credit.

"The Chaplain of Sandhurst states that he was ordained sub-deacon at Cirencester, and deacon at Winchester, by Bishop Godfride in Ireland . . . and he has now ministered in the aforesaid chapel for four years. Examined in the passage 'excita, etc.,' and 'te igitur' he could answer nothing. Tested in chanting in the service for Advent Sunday in the 'ad te levavi' he did not know how to sing it."

Philip was not examined "on account of his probity of life and good repute." The chaplain of Hurst refused to answer questions and was relieved of his post. The others all showed great ignorance of the meaning of quite simple passages in the church service. Their respective patrons were warned, and Vitalis, the Vicar of Sonning, who was responsible for the appointment of the Curate of Ruscombe, received a severe reprimand.

The political power of the Church at this period in England was very great. The English people owed a vast debt of gratitude to her as the champion not only of religious liberty but of the liberty of the whole nation against the tyranny of the Crown. Nevertheless, her influence over the spiritual life of the people had suffered a diminution. While it would be both unjust and absurd to take Sonning as a type of the English parish of the day, it seems to be a fact that too frequently benefices were conferred on men who, like the higher clergy, engaged in worldly affairs, leaving the care of their parishes to ill-paid, and therefore sometimes ill-educated persons. In the succeeding years much of the religious instruction which the people looked for in vain from the parochial clergy was supplied by the mendicant Friars who were now coming to England from the Continent. In the year previous to this Visitation the first party had landed at Dover, and had made their way to Oxford. Others followed, and ten years later a settlement of the Greyfriars was established at Reading, members of which, no doubt, as their custom was, went out to preach in the surrounding villages, and turned up from time to time at Sandhurst.

The Salisbury Visitation books supply a few more facts about the village church during the Middle Ages. In a list of church property and deficiencies in the parish of Sonning made in the year 1300 the following is the inventory of the Chapel of Sandhurst :—

“An adequate missal. A decent legendary. An antiphon book. A poor service book (gradale) and another old one. A manual, but it is not of the use of Sarum. No psalter. Three old chasubles. Two poor towels. A surplice. A frontal and a poor crismatory. A pyx for the Eucharist. No lantern veil. Two windows in the chancel are without glass. Three corporals. A thurible, an ordinal, and a vessel for the holy water are lacking. The chancel is badly roofed.”

In the year 1405 occurs the first mention of a churchyard, when a note is made that “the chapels of Sandhurst, Wokingham, Hurst and Ruscombe, are dependencies of the church of Sonning, and the inhabitants of the said hamlets receive in these chapels all the sacraments and burial.”

(To be continued).