

The Benedictine Priory of Broomhall, Berks

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SOME NEW FACTS RELATING TO ITS HISTORY AND SUPPRESSION.

That so little is known about this small and obscure nunnery is not entirely the fault of previous writers on the subject for two good and sufficient reasons.

It is upon record that many of the early charters of the House were burned in 1462, but the destruction was not so complete as the *Inspeximus*¹ would lead anyone to suppose, for there are a large number of 13th and 14th century charters among the muniments of the House at St. John's College, Cambridge. It is also unfortunate that the report on these documents made for the Hist. Mss. Com. some years ago is very loose, inaccurate, and incomplete, so that no satisfactory history of the House can be written until they have been carefully examined and digested.

About ten or twelve years since the Master of the College most courteously gave me access to them, but my time was very limited, and I was only collecting information concerning the Egham and Thorpe endowments of the priory, so mine was but a cursory search. I made, however, a few notes of matters which seemed to throw light on the general history of the house, particularly those which dealt with the story of its dissolution or transfer. That I have not made use of them before is due to the fact that I fully expected that some more competent antiquary would have taken up the matter ere this; but as nothing appears to have been done I offer my information for what it is worth.

Beside the stately mitred house of St. Peter, at Chertsey, the little priory of St. Margaret at Broomhall was a very poor and insignificant foundation. Beyond three spiritualities and some good land in Egham and Thorpe, their endowments con-

¹ Pat. 2 Edw. IV, pt. iii, m. 16.

sisted mainly of barren heath and waste in Berks and Surrey, eked out by a corrody of food and drink grudgingly supplied by Chertsey Abbey. Not without reason did the sisters use the conventional phrase when they described themselves as 'the poor nonnes of Broomhall.' Naturally the community was a small one, probably never exceeding half a dozen, at the time of the dissolution there were but three, including the prioress.

The name of the founder and the date of foundation are alike unknown. A 16th century petition describes it as of royal foundation, but this may be only a compliment put in to catch the eye and ear of Henry VIII to whom it was addressed. Tradition ascribed it to Edward, the Black Prince, but we know that it was in existence at least a century and a half earlier.

In the Chertsey Foundation Charter,² among the boundaries of Egham, we have mention of 'the Menechene Rude,' *i.e.* the nuns' clearing. This would, of course, take us back to the 7th century, for there is little doubt from its position that the land indicated was that of Broomhall; but unfortunately the charter bears unmistakable marks of being a 13th or possibly a 14th century concoction. The earliest form of the name is 'Bromehale,' but early in the 13th century the present form of the name appears, an extra 'o' having crept in, and 'hale,' a nook of land, had as usual become 'hall.'

So far there does not appear to be any reference to the existence of the house which takes us behind the reference cited in the V.C.H. of Berks, which records the gift of the church of Sunningwell, by John, in 1200.³ The earliest Egham charter is undated, but is about fifty years later. It records a gift by Gilbert, son of Richard de la Barr, of Chertsey, to Juliana, prioress of Broomhall, of rents arising from land in Egham, and a tenement there which Simon de Rutherwyke⁴ had.⁵ Now the name of this Juliana does not appear in any of the lists of prioresses that I have seen, and as the gift was confirmed later on to Agnes, who at present heads the list, it is clear that Juliana preceded her. The witnesses are all local men who flourished in the middle and toward the end of the

² Cott. Ms. Vitel. A. xiii, f. 20.

³ Rot. Chart. 1, John, m. 11.

⁴ Probably father of John, the famous abbot of Chertsey in the 14th century.

⁵ All charters to which no notes are appended are at St. John's.

13th century, and as Agnes is mentioned in 1268, the charter may be approximately dated 1250. My reason for not putting it earlier is that the confirmation took place after 1270, and several of the witnesses are those of the original grant.

The confirmation is also undated, but as it contains a reference to proceedings at Guildford in 1271, and as Agnes is the grantee, it is evidently between the date and 1281, when she was succeeded by Margery de Wycombe. In the confirmation the original grantor is described as Gilbert de la Knolle. He would appear to have left Chertsey⁶ and settled at 'le Knolle,' the modern Knowle Hill near Broomhall.

Two other undated grants to Agnes present no difficulty as the witnesses are practically the same as in the preceeding. In the first, Richard de Thorpe grants to Agnes the lands and tenements which John de Broomhall holds of him (the grantor), in the parish of Egham, near the bridge of Staines, in the 'Huche,' the modern Hythe. The second is a gift to Agnes by Robert de Scotho⁷ of a tenement at 'le Knolle.'

The next charter is dated 1305, and though not a grant to the priory was doubtless retained as evidence, as the property afterwards came to the house. It is of interest from the name of the grantor, Richard de Finchampstead. This also deals with a house of the Hythe, 'between the house of John atte More and the King's highway.' By 1319 the family of de la Knolle had migrated to Staines,⁸ for in that year land at 'le Knolle' was granted to Bromhall by John de la Knolle, of Staines. A fine seal of John is appended to this charter.

There are several other 14th century deeds, but they do not throw any further light on the history of the house, beyond being fresh or additional mentions of prioresses already known, until we come to 1374, when Richard II granted to the convent lands in Windsor, Sunninghill, and 'Tetenhurst.' Apparently this grant was never placed on the Patent or Close Rolls, perhaps it never took effect, for I do not find any further reference to it or the lands. On the other hand some reference to it may be found when the Berks deeds are examined, and if so the nuns probably lost them by granting a long and foolish

⁶ 'Le Barre' at Chertsey, mentioned in Cal. Ancient Deeds (P.R.O.), B. 902.

⁷ Another Chertsey family who held the manor of Beomond.

⁸ Knowle Green still survives in Staines.

lease, a matter to which I shall recur later. A grant of 1379 is of interest and value as it reveals the surname of Eleanor or Alianora, a prioress whose name appears in 1392. It is a lease by Alianora de Burton of the lands at the Hythe at a rental of 12/-. It is worth noting that four if not five of the prioresses bore the same patronymic, Berghton, Bourton, or Burton, and I should not be surprised if it turned out that they were members of the family that held the manor of Imworth in Egham during the latter part of the 14th century. Their name was de Berghton, though they were known as de Imworth, from their holding.

A small house like Broomhall was very likely to become a family preserve, and though prioresses were supposed to be elected, there is much evidence that influence was used to procure the appointment for relations and friends of influential persons. A prioress of Broomhall itself, probably Alice Burton, wrote asking that her 'sister and fellow nun, Clemence Medford,' might become Head of the neighbouring house of Ankerwyke,⁹ and Clemence was duly 'elected' in 1440. In the printed lists of prioresses of Broomhall the name of Alice Burton appears as early as 1437 and as late as 1462, the date of the *Inspeximus* already mentioned, therefore it is with a certain amount of doubt and hesitation that I bring forward my next note. As I read the document it records the admission of Agnes Burton as prioress by Richard, Bishop of Salisbury, on September 2nd, 1452. Now Richard Beauchamp did not become bishop until 1450, so the appointment cannot be that of Alice. Of course she may have resigned and been re-instated, Agnes filling the interim. Unfortunately there is no other trace of the latter, and the doubt must be left to be cleared up when the history of the house is more fully dealt with.

And now we come to one of those little incidents which are the joy of the antiquary, one of those finds which relieve the dry chronicles with a touch of life and action. I have mentioned the corrody payable to Broomhall by Chertsey. It was no great burden on the rich monastery, 'seven loaves called miches and seven galantes of covent ale.' After discharging the obligation from the 'tyme when the minde of noe man is

⁹ Harl MSS., 862/13.

to the contrarie,' the monks thought fit to dispute it. The matter was referred to the arbitration of Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, and on February 16th, 1489, he gave his decision in favour of the nuns. In connection with this business the monks were guilty of a very mean and shabby trick, whether before or after the arbitration is not clear. If before, and the incident was brought to the Cardinal's notice, we need not be surprised at his decision. In any case it came to light some twenty years later. During the interim the monks paid the corrody in one form or another and then made another attempt to get out of it.

Jane Rawlyns, the last prioress, had to fight the matter out afresh, and appealed to one of her predecessors to help substantiate her claim. This was Anne Thomas, who had resigned in 1498 to become head of the Cistercian house of Hartley Wintney, Hants. She deposed as follows:—

'The saying of Dame Anne Thomas some tyme prioresse of Broomhalle and now prioresse of Wyntoney. Whiche saith that on Issabell Bealle which was prioresse ther affore her and her predecessores tyme owte of mynde was seased of a corrodye or Almys yerely ons in the weke was payed of vij case of covent brede and vij galantes of covent ale Owte of the house or Abbaye of Charsey, fforther more the said dame Anne Thomas saith that ij monks of Charsey whoys names were Brampton and Berry came to the howse of Bromehalle and there desired the foresaid Issabell Beale which was prioresse ther to shew unto theyme the evidence whereby they claymed and had yt corrodye or Almys and she brought forthe a faire writing in parchment to theyme under the Covent seale of their pallace of Charsey and when they had seen it and redde it over they cast it in the fire and brent it, whereof the said prioresse was right sory and mucche displeased with theyme for the same, but not wt. standing she ynjoyed the said corrodie during her tyme.

And then next after her came the said Anne Thomas and was prioresse ther and she had yerely during her tyme which was xiv yerys every yere v quarters of whete payed by on Hatche, which was servant wt. the said Abbot of Charsey Whiche Hatche at thys tyme is on lyve. And then next after her the said dame Anne, as she saithe came on dame Elizabeth

Lakenore which was prioress ther and that she had and enjoyed the said whete during all her tyme.'

What was the result we do not know, but in any case Chertsey was finally relieved of the obligation some ten years later when the ladies of Broomhall had to go back to the world and live as best they could.

There are several indications that the house was in a very bad way financially at this period. A Terrier of 1489 shows that the Thorpe and Egham lands produced an income of £2 12s. yearly. Twelve years later the income had sunk to £2 1s. Land had also been lost to the priory by the granting of long and foolish leases, a common practice among religious Houses in their days of decadence. The lessees, their successors or assignees, held themselves out as freeholders, sold the lands and pocketed the proceeds. A long petition addressed to Henry VIII appears to be one of such cases. Potnall, the modern Portnall Park, had been granted to two Egham men by the Priory. Edward IV purchased from them and imparked the land. Apparently the nuns did not think it worth while to try and get it back from Henry VII, but when his son had declared himself a Defender of the Faith they considered they had a better chance. It is in this petition that the statement occurs of the house being of royal foundation. As Henry granted Potnall to Wm. Fitzwilliam in 1528, 'paying a red rose to the sheriff of Surrey,' and it afterwards passed to his heirs, it is clear that the petition was not granted.

(To be continued).

Accidentally omitted in the account of the Excursion to the Banbury district last year.

Between Broughton and Brailles a brief halt was made at Swalcliffe, where the Vicar, the Rev. E. G. Norris, was in waiting to receive the party. The very fine church, which contains Saxon work in the nave, and excellent examples of all the succeeding styles, was described by the President. When Archdeacon of Lincoln, the great William of Wykeham was appointed Rector, though he does not appear to have carried out the duties. Some late Decorated work in the north aisle is said to have been designed by him. He purchased the advowson and certain lands in the Parish, and gave them as part of the endowment of New College Oxford. An old house with some portions, close to the church, seems to have been occupied as a country residence by the Warden and Fellows of New College, and a magnificent tithe barn of late fourteenth century date still remains. Unfortunately, time did not permit of a visit to these interesting buildings. A paper on the parish and church, read by the President before the Royal Archaeological Institute, has been printed in the *Archæological Journal*, Vol. LXI, p. 85.