The Bishops' Manor Place at Holme Park, Sonning.

By Ernest W. Dormer, F.R.Hist.S.

IN September last was submitted to auction the freehold estate known as Holme Park, Sonning, and the site of the Bishops' Manor House—or as it is sometimes called the Bishops' Palace—was sold for building purposes. At the time of writing these notes, an endeavour is being made to retain this historic and pleasant spot as an open space. It is a commanding mound on the rising ground between the lock and the old brick bridge, with glorious views of the Thames and the verdant meads about it. Rising from the plain are the misty blue distances of the Chiltern hills—little changed in outline since the day when first the story of the Cross was carried to this forest clearing. Much has been written, both of Sonning and the ecclesiastical overlords who held dominion here, but inasmuch as a violent change appears to be imminent in this ancient village, a repetition of some of the facts appertaining to the particular site referred to above may be considered not inappropriate.

In the year 705, the unwieldy diocese of Wessex was subdivided by the constitution of two sees, one of which was fixed at Winchester and the other at Sherborne in Dorset. It is now generally accepted that the County of Berkshire was left in Winchester, although some authorities are of opinion that it formed part of Sherborne. In 909 there was a second subdivision, and the two sees were made into five by the addition of Ramsbury, Wells and Crediton. Berkshire and Wiltshire formed the see of Ramsbury. Florence of Worcester, who lived in the reign of Henry I, speaks throughout his history of the see of Ramsbury; but in the list of bishops which he gives he styles them *Episcopi Sunnungenses*, that is, Bishops of Sonning. Upon this statement Sonning has based a claim to the dignity of having been an episcopal see. Against this are the ancient charters, which expressly term them Bishops of Ramsbury. The situation

is further complicated by the fact that in the 10th century there was a certain bishop named Cynsige who was styled " Bishop of Berkshire." Dr. Stubbs, in his Constitutional History, says: " The see of Ramsbury had no cathedral and was moved about in Wiltshire and Berkshire, sometimes resting at Sonning. . . . It may have existed in the same way before the time of Alfred and been a kind of suffragan see to Winchester." The true explanation, therefore, would seem to be that for these counties there were subordinate bishops to whom were confided the care and oversight of parts of the widely scattered area which constituted a see in those early days. But a significant fact emerges from Dr. Stubbs' assertion, if it be a true solution of the problem. If, before the time of King Alfred a see " sometimes rested at Sonning," there would probably, almost certainly, have been a residence for the subordinate bishop. There is, therefore, little hazard in believing that a manor house stood at Sonning before the 9th century. Of one thing we are certain, however, and that is that for one hundred and fifty years before the Norman invasion, the Bishops of Ramsbury or their deputies must have come at intervals to their Manor Place by the Thames and held their services and ordinations in the Saxon church of which only one doubtful fragment now remains.

The first bishop of the newly constituted see of Ramsbury was Æthelstan, and among the others was Odo, who fought three times on the field of battle after he was consecrated; truly a warrior bishop. There is a tradition that he saved the life of King Æthelstan at the battle of Bruanburh in 937, when the king and his brother Edmund were fighting against a combined force of Danes, Scots and Welsh. Two other bishops of Ramsbury, Sigeric and Elfric, eventually attained to the primacy. The last bishop of Ramsbury was Hereman, who united the sees of Ramsbury and Sherborne in 1058 and removed the bishopric to Old Sarum in 1075. Upon a bronze plaque in Sonning church you will see the names of the bishops of Ramsbury styled bishops of Sonning, a pardonable association in view of the conflicting history of the see. The diocese of Sarum, formed, as we have seen, in 1075, comprised the counties of Wilts, Berks and Dorset. The

bishops of Old Sarum, whose cathedral was set upon a high wind-swept hill—a fortress rather than a city, as the old chroniclers say—were six in number, and in 1219 the first bishop of New Sarum, Richard Poore, commenced to build the stately cathedral which in part remains with us to-day. It is with the see of Salisbury that Sonning is most intimately concerned, for it remained in that diocese until well into the 19th century, and most of the eventful happenings in the Thames-side village fall within this lengthy period. The bishops, however, ceased their active association with the affairs of Sonning in the reign of Elizabeth, when they exchanged the manor with the Queen for other lands nearer their cathedral city. Sonning thus came to the Crown. There were 32 bishops of New Sarum, commencing with Richard Poore and ending with Edmund Gheast, in whose episcopate the exchange of manors was effected.

I do not propose to give details of all these eminent ecclesiastics, for it cannot truthfully be said that Sonning was a very familiar place to many of them. The practice of appointing suffragans was fairly wide-spread long before the reign of Henry VIII, when legal sanction was given to it. There are, however, two bishops more intimately concerned with the village, so that a few words about them may be allowed. The first is Bishop Scammell, who, in 1284, was consecrated bishop of the see in the parish church. This was an almost unheard of departure from the usual practice, and the chapter of Canterbury, the metropolitan cathedral, protested against this invasion of their rights and privileges; but notwithstanding this the event was solemnised at Sonning. It was probably the most magnificent scene in all its long history, and although we do not certainly know, there is every reason to think the great Abbot of Reading came by river to the stately ceremony. This is probably one of the very few instances on record where a bishop has been consecrated in a parish church, and Sonning should be very proud of the distinction. It should be added that Walter Scammell was a Dean of Sarum before he was translated, and would have been familiar with the village from his occasional residence at one of the predecessors of the Old Deanery House.

But from another angle the most interesting among the long line of ecclesiastics is Bishop Metford, who reigned in the see from 1396 to 1407, for it was during his episcopate that the affairs of Sonning dovetail with the larger chronicles of the nation. Richard Metford was translated from Chichester to Sarum, and at his enthronisation, Richard II, the Duke of Gloucester and the Earl of Derby were present. The bishop is known to have spent a considerable part of his time in the Manor Place, and this from the following circumstance. In 1399,

" Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Lancaster,
The eldest son, and heir of John of Gaunt,
Crowned by the name of Henry the Fourth,
Seized on the realm, deposed the rightful King,
Sent his poor Queen to France, from whence she came,
And him to Pomfret, where, as you all know,
Harmless Richard was murdered traitorously."

Thus Shakespeare, finely but a little inaccurately. Before she " was sent to France " the young queen, Isabella of Valois, was confided to the care of Bishop Metford at Sonning, and here she was kept in virtual confinement. At the time of her sojourn she would have been about eleven years old. In 1399, while Richard was a prisoner in the Tower of London, a plot was set on foot to restore him to the throne. The conspirators included the Earls of Huntingdon, Salisbury and Kent, and their design was to kill the new King while he was keeping Christmas at Windsor. Starting from Oxford, they surprised the castle, but Henry, having been forewarned of their intention, had fled and was busy at London gathering troops to crush the rebellion. The conspirators scattered; but the chief of them came hot-foot to the young Queen at Sonning, and told her that Richard had escaped forth of prison and was lying at Pomfret with a hundred thousand men. They induced the Queen to leave the Manor Place by the Thames, and in the dark of the night they fled to Cirencester, where the Earls were taken and beheaded. The episcopal house of Sonning was therefore once the temporary home of an English Queen. Her guardian bishop lies buried in Salisbury Cathedral under an

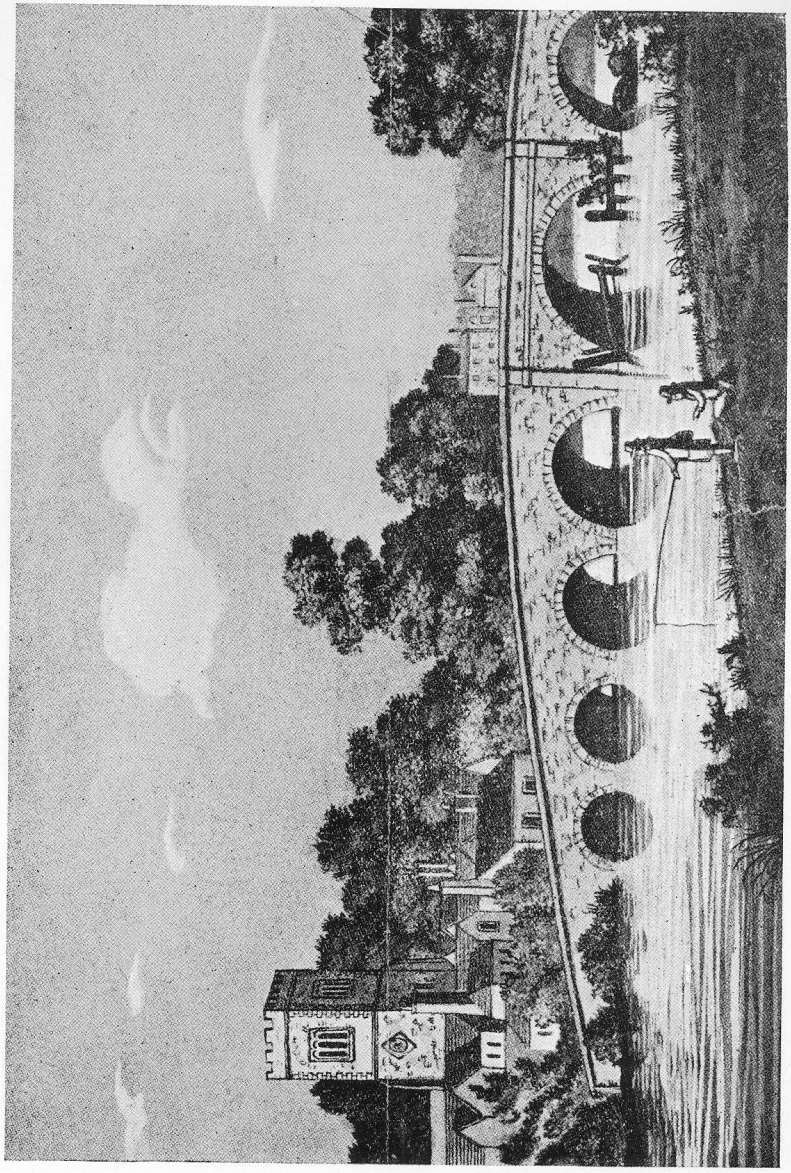
exquisite monument, his recumbent effigy being of the purest alabaster.

So much for the bishops; and now for something about their residence. It had long been known that the site of the house was somewhere near the church, and tradition had always placed it on the mound behind the lock. In 1912, the late Mr. C. E. Keyser obtained permission from the owners of the Holme Park Estate to undertake excavations, and carried out the work at his own expense in that thorough manner which is typical of all he did. The excavations were made in 1913-1914, but had to be suspended in consequence of the war. The late owner, had he lived, intended to recommence the work and carry it beyond the stage reached by Mr. Keyser, for there was yet much to be done. In the course of the undertaking it was discovered that two, if not three, buildings had been erected on the original foundations of the Bishops' residence. There were disclosed the footings of a great hall, with pantry, buttery and kitchen, and a great chamber for the use of guests; a private set of chambers for the bishop and his household, with a chapel, all surrounded by a high curtain wall, defended, where space allowed, by a ditch, and entered by a strong gatehouse. Nothing was discovered of earlier date than the 13th century, except a few finely worked 12th century stones which had been used as building material; so that if the pre-Conquest house was on the present site—as there seems little doubt it was—all traces of it have vanished. The 13th century house ran parallel with the Thames—the lock cut was not then made, of course—and closely resembled the palace built at New Sarum by Bishop Richard Poore about the same time. It was of some defensive strength, for in 1337 the reigning bishop, Robert Wyville, secured a licence to crenellate and fortify the house, and his successor, Ralph Erghum, obtained a similar permission. There were considerable alterations and additions made about this time. A second great rebuilding was undertaken in the 15th century, which embraced a new hall with its entrance porch, oriel and staircase of fine proportions. The details of this rebuilding so closely resemble those of St. George's Chapel at Windsor that it seems likely that it was the work of Bishop

Richard Beauchamp, who was Surveyor of the King's Works at Windsor in 1473, and is reputed to have built the great hall at the palace of Salisbury. He was Bishop of Sarum from 1450 to 1482. In the reign of Henry VII. the great gatehouse was built, and probably a water gate on the north. Leland came to Sonning in 1541, and he has left this record: " and yet remaineth a fair olde House there of stone even by the Tamise Ripe longging to the Bishop of Saresbyri and therby is a fair parke." In 1574, as I have previously stated, the manor of Sonning was exchanged with the Crown, and it is probable that from this time the stately house began to fall into decay. The first house on the ruins may have been built in or soon after the year 1628, when Charles I. granted the Manor to Laurence Halstead and his father-in-law. Abraham Chamberlain. They were rich merchants of London, and many of them are buried in a vault in Sonning church. In 1654, the manor was conveyed to Thomas Rich, a Turkey merchant, who was created a baronet in 1660. His massive and very fine monument you may yet see in the church beneath the tower. The manor came to the Palmer family about the year 1772, and one of the acts of Richard Palmer was to pull down the Halsteads' house and erect another higher up in the park. This took place in 1796. I believe the house built by Richard Palmer yet remains as the core of the present mansion of Holme Park.

It may be thought strange that so massive and extensive a structure as the Bishops' house could disappear so thoroughly, and that, with the exception of the foundations which lie beneath the grass, nothing remains to indicate its one-time glory. But an acquaintance with the excoriated fragments of Reading Abbey will show how thoroughly these magnificent mediæval structures were levelled to the ground and became quarries from which any one who wished could cart away building material. The curious may find in the tow-path between the bridge and the lock mute evidence as to where part of the structure went; while the walls and foundations of some of the more ancient houses in the village contain material from the same source. Then, again, there is

THE BISHOPS' MANOR PLACE AT HOLME PARK, SONNING.



The building on the site of the Bishops' Manor House, 1792.
[*from an old print*]

little doubt that at different times additions and repairs to the church were made from the available material close at hand.

Standing to-day upon this mound in the park the imagination cannot fail to be stirred by the thought of what has happened here since the day when, at Dorchester on the Thames, in the year 635, "Cynegils, King of Wessex, was baptised by St. Birinus, and Oswald, King of the North Humbrians, was his sponsor." For it must have been soon after this that there came to Sonning the small and intrepid vanguard who spread Christianity into the fastnesses of the eastern part of Berkshire. And upon this venerable site there would now seem to be a risk that dwellings will arise which cannot hope to share the glory of that which has gone before.