Notes on the Holy Blood of Hayles.¹

By W. H. St. John Hope, M.A.

Those who have given any attention to the development in the plan of the eastern limb of any one of our great cathedral, collegiate, or monastic churches are aware that, apart from the question of adding a lady chapel, any important eastern extension is usually due to the desire to build a chapel for the tomb or shrine of some person of great or particular sanctity connected with the church. Chichester, Ely, Rochester, Wells, Lincoln and Lichfield, Winchester and Worcester all afford examples, and to them may be added the most notable of all, the metropolitan church of Canterbury, concerning which we have the explicit statement of Gervase that William the Englishman in 1179 laid the foundation for the enlargement of the church at the eastern part, because a chapel of St. Thomas was to be built there.

To these and many others that could easily be named there has been added within the last few years another remarkable and unsuspected example in the Cistercian abbey of Hayles. The site of this was excavated by the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society in 1899 and carefully planned by Mr. Brakspear the following year, when it was found that the original square east end of the church had been replaced by a rounded apse with an outer ring of five polygonal chapels. In the middle of this uncommon arrangement was a rough block of masonry which had clearly formed the base of a shrine.

The abbey of Hayles was founded in 1246, by the wealthy Richard, earl of Cornwall, brother of king Henry III, and in 1251 the church, which, together with the dorter, cloister, and frater had been finished at a cost of 8,000 marks, was solemnly hallowed on the Nones of November.

In 1267 the founder, who had been elected king of

¹ Read before the Institute, 4th May, 1910.
the Romans in 1256, crossed over to Germany and there married his third wife Beatrice, niece of the archbishop of Cologne. “At the same time,” says the Hayles chronicle, “his son Edmund obtained there that noble portion of the blood of Jesus Christ. This he afterwards in 1270 on the day of the exaltation of the Holy Cross carried to Hayles, with a proper history put forth and confirmed by the blessed pope Urban.”

The founder of Hayles, king Richard, died in 1272 and was buried in his own abbey, and five years later, in 1277, we read that the new work of the church of Hayles was dedicated, together with the shrine in which the precious blood of Christ is placed, by Dan Godfrey, bishop of Worcester.

Here then we have the history of the eastward extension of the church of Hayles and the object of its shrine-platform; a shrine noteworthy beyond all others in England for containing, not the body of the chief saint or some portion thereof, but a mere reliquary, albeit its reputed contents was some of the blood of our Lord.

One further reference to it occurs in the chronicle of the abbey, that in 1295 “the noble man Edmund earl of Cornwall sent to Hayles of his gift a gold cross with a foot of enamel, which contained inserted in it the most noble portion of the very precious blood of the cross of Christ.”

It is not the object of this paper to deal at length with the well-known story of the Holy Blood, but to discuss certain documents connected with the disappearance of that notable relic, the Holy Blood of Hayles, transcribed by myself from the originals in the Public Record Office, which I do not think have hitherto been printed in full.

Shortly after the suppression of the lesser monasteries, or those whose value was of less than £200 a year, in 1535 a crusade was started against all images and relics which had been objects of veneration.

In the Chronicle of England during the reign of the Tudors written by Charles Wriothesley, Windsor Herald, and reprinted by the Camden Society in 1875, it is related that in a sermon against idolatrous images, and the rood of Boxley in particular, preached at Paul’s Cross on 24th
February, 1537–8, by John Hilsey, bishop of Rochester, that worthy prelate delivered himself after this sort:

he said, how he confessed a woman twenty years ago in Oxford, which woman was the miller’s wife, by the Abbey of Hailes, and how she shewed him how the abbott of the same place had given her manye jewels that had bene offred ther at the holie bloode, and how he would have geaven her one jewell which she knewe verie well hanged about the said holie bloode, and said to the said abbott that she would not have that bloude, 1 because she was afraid because it hanged by the holie bloud, and the abbott said tush! thou art a foole, it is but a duckes bloode; and this the said bishopp shewed that it was true, as he besought God he might be damned if it were not so as he said; and also how he had shewed the King and the Counsell of the same, and that it should be knowen more openlie afterward. 2

My old friend, Mr. J. T. Micklethwaite, once remarked to me, concerning this particular sermon, that Hilsey certainly deserved to be damned for breaking the seal of the confession made to him by the miller’s wife, and herein some of us will no doubt agree. But the question is, Why should the abbot assert that the Holy Blood was but that of a duck?

The woman’s story, as told by Hilsey, seems to imply that the abbot’s excuse was invented on the spur of the moment, and it is quite likely that the sight of the ducks swimming on the mill-pond suggested the ready lie to overcome the woman’s scruples.

Hilsey’s public announcement at Paul’s Cross at any rate had the effect of calling in question the genuineness of the Holy Blood of Hayles, and an enquiry was apparently addressed to the abbot on the subject.

The abbot at this time was Stephen Sagar, who in 1527 had succeeded Anthony Melton, whom Hilsey credits with giving away the jewels of the shrine to the miller’s wife. Sagar, like Hilsey, owed his advancement to Thomas Crumwell, and it is more than probable that both abbot and bishop were acting in collusion.

Sagar’s reply to Crumwell is quite characteristic:

It is not unknown unto your honoure how that there is in the monastery of Hayles a bloode whiche hath byn reputed as a myracle a great season, and now I come to tell your lordeship playnly that I have a conseycens putting me in drede lest ydolatry be commytted theryn giving the very

1 *Sic,* for “jewell.”
2 *Wriothesley’s Chronicle* (Camden Soc. N.S. xi), i, 75.
honoure of the bloode of Chryst to that thing whiche I can not tell what hit is, and having this conscyens I was and ame wondyrly perplexyd for to put hit away of myn own private auctoryte seing hit hath byn alowed there to be shewyd to suche as seke for hit, I feared lest I shulde condemne myself to be gylyt in my usyng of hit as chaunging and renewyng hit with drackes bloode wheryn I offer myself rudy to suffer the most shamefull deth that ever man suffred yf ever hit may be provyd that hit was other chaunged, renewyd, or ever lokyd apon to try what hit is to my knowledge, but is there styll as far as ever I can know or lern evyn as hit was brought thyther, and there is one monke alyve ny .lxxx. yeres of age whiche hath kept hit almost xl yeres and he will (as he sayes) apon his lyf make the same answere, and for discharge of my conscyens in voyding of ydolatry, and to save my honesty towarde the worlde I do most humble beseche youre honoure to sende thyther youre commyssion by whome shall please you to examyn my trewth and honesty in this matter apon daunger not only of my offyce and suppression but also of my lyf yf I be founde gylyt in any worde that I have here saide, and then farther by your auctoryte so to order that bloode that hit be no more noted to mynyster occasion of ydolatry."

The letter bears neither signature, date, nor address, and is endorsed in another hand: "Thabbot of halles bill."

The abbot's letter was apparently written in London, whither he had been compelled to journey at the suggestion of the bishop of Worcester, Hugh Latimer, who informs Crumwell in a letter of 25th August that he is told that "the bluddy abbott," as he coarsely calls him, said among his brethren that his last coming up to London by Latimer's occasion cost him besides the expenses of his journey, £140, so that he was not able to make household provision, and required the best mitre, the best cross, and another thing or two to make chevance withal for provision. All the jewels of the house, adds Latimer, may thus be surveyed away without Crumwell's knowledge.

On his return to Hayles, abbot Sagar wrote another letter to Crumwell, in the following terms, from which it will appear that he had now fully made up his mind as to the spuriousness of the Holy Blood:

Pleasith hit youre hono' aftyr my most humble dewty with Immortall thanckes for youre inestymable goodnes towarde me ever att my nede. to be advertysyd that where hit is so that the case where that faynyd relycke callyd the bloode was in doth stande as yet in the place there styll as hit

1 P.R.O. State Papers, Henry VIII, § 129, pp. 120, 121.  
was in manner and fashion of a shrine so that I am a ferde lest hit shulde
mynistre occasyon to any weke person looking therapon to abuse his con-
scyens therwith, and therefore I do beseech you to be so good lorde unto
me as to give me lycens that I may putt hit downe every stycke and stone
so that no maner of tokyn or remembrans of that forgyd rellycke shall
remayne there during the tyme that hit shall please god, oure soveregne
lorde the kings majesty and yo' good lordeshipe that this pore howse may
stande, and as touching the valo' of the sylver and golde that is theryn I
thynck hit is not worth xl. li. scant and xxx. li. by estymacion. Wheryn
hit may please yo' lordeshipe to give credyt to this berer and by the same
to lett me know yo' pleasure in the premyssys beseeching yow most humbly
to contynew my good lorde as ye have ever byn, and to accept this pore
tokyn whiche I do send you att this tyme a strange pece of golde, and this
the blessyd Lorde of hevyn longe preserve yo' lyf and helth to his pleasure
amen, Att Heiles the xxiii daye of Septembre.

Yo' most boundyn bedesman
Stephyn abbat there.  

What had brought about this change of front does not
appear, but a letter from Richard Layton to Crumwell,
which, though undated, clearly refers to the foregoing
events, has this significant passage :

"As commanded I bound the abbot of Hailes in £500
from the day of his departure from London, to alienate
no moveables and make no grant under convent seal from
the day of his privy surrender forwards, and so sent him
home."  The abbot had therefore probably been squared.

On 4th October, 1538, the king's commission was
issued to the bishop of Worcester, the prior of Worcester,
the abbot of Hayles, and Richard Tracy, who on the 28th
of the same month met at Hayles.

In a letter to Crumwell dated the same day, Latimer
thus reports the result of the commissioners' investigation :

Syr we have byn bolting & syfftyng the bloude of Haylles all this
forenown Hytt was wunderslye closely & craffelye Inclosyd and stoppyd
upe for takyne of care. Ande hytt clevesh fast to [the] bothom of the
lytell glasse y't In. Ande verelye hytt semyt [h] to be an unctuousse
goom and compound of many thynges. hytt hath a certen unctuousse mos
tnesse & thowgh ytt seme sumwhat lyke blude whyelt ytt in the glasse
yett whan ony parcell of y' same ys taken ought ytt turnyth to a yowlownesse
and ys cleevynge lycke glew. Butt we have natt yett examinyd all the
monkes. And therfore thys my brother abbott shall tell your lordshippe
what he hath seen and heare in thythis matter and in the end your lordshypp shall know all together. Butt we perseve nott by your commysshen whether wee shall send ytt up or leve ytt here and stifyye ther of as no bloude(?)

On the 16th of November Latimer wrote to Cromwell about various matters, including the Blood of Hayles, concerning which he enclosed a list of certain relics that accompanied it, with the remark “rede thys the Inclossyd.” The list seems however to have got lost on the way, and the letter is endorsed:

“The Bushopp of Worcyster about the bloud of hales but yt is imperfect by meanes of the want of his lettre with his mencyeneth.”

For the next incident in the history of the relic we are again indebted to Wriothesley’s Chronicle, from which we also learn that it had been sent up to London:

Also the 24th day of November, beinge Sunday, the Bishop of Rochester preached at Pauls Crosse, and there shewed the bloude of Hales, and recanted certeine wordes that he had spoken of the sayd bloude that it was a duke’s bloude, and nowe shewed playnely that yt was noe bloude, but hony clarified and coloured with saffron, and lying lyke a goume, as it evydently had bene proved and tasted afore the Kinge and his counsayll, and did let every man behould yt there at Pauls Crosse, and all the way as he went to dinner to the mayres, to loke on yt, so that every person might well perceive the abuse of the sayd thinge.

The positive statement of Hilsey that the so-called Holy Blood had at last been proved to be nought but clarified honey, coloured with saffron, is a considerable advance upon the guarded account given by Latimer of the examination by himself and the other commissioners, and I am afraid we shall have to concede, after the clear description

1 P.R.O. State Papers, Henry VIII, § 138. The following version is also given by Hearne, in his edition of Benedict of Peterborough, p. 751: The bishop of Worcester and others to Cromwell. By the King’s Commission directed to them 4 Oct. 30 H. VIII. repaired 28 Oct. to the monastery of Haylez and viewed a certain supposed relic called the Bloud of Haylez “which was enclosed within a round berell garnished and bound on every side with silver.” Had it opened in presence of a great multitude and taken out of the berell. After close examination believe it to be an unctuous gum coloured. In the glass it looked a glistering red, somewhat like blood; but a little taken out of the glass looked yellow like amber or basse gold. It cleaves like gum or birdline. Have enclosed it in red wax, sealed with their seals and locked it in a coffer remaining by indenture with the abbott, giving the key to Ric. Tracy, till the King’s pleasure be known. Signed by H. Wigoern, Henry prior of Worcester, Stephen abbout of Hayles, Richard Tracy, with four seals. Calendar of Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, vol. 13, pt. ii, no. 710.

2 P.R.O. State Papers, Henry VIII. § 139, p. 135. (Cal. vol. xiii, ii, no. 856.)

3 Wriothesley’s Chronicle (Camden Soc, N.S. xi), i, 90.
of the commissioners, however much we may hesitate to do so on sentimental grounds, that the Holy Blood of Hayles, like so many of the relics that were brought to this country, in spite of certificates as to their genuineness, was a delusion and a fraud. A little consideration will show that it is quite impossible that the contents of the reliquary could have been blood of any kind, whether of man or bird. No matter how carefully it was stoppered, blood would (I am informed) have become blacker and blacker by degrees, and eventually have dried up, especially if it were of any age. If the blood were recent, as the popular account asserted, its inevitable decomposition would have drawn from Latimer language which he was quite capable of using, yet his account shows that there was nothing offensive about the contents of the reliquary.

Whether the relic was actually merely clarified honey it is impossible for us to say, but the account of its appearance is not contradictory, and Hilsey states that it had been tested by tasting before the king and his council, and proved to be so. Here, therefore, we must leave the matter.

What became of the relic is not recorded, but when the abbey of Hayles was surrendered by Sagar on 31st December, 1539, the commissioners reported on the following 4th January that the plate, etc. had been reserved to the king,

"beside the garnyshyng of a small Shryne wherein was reposyd the counterfett relyk tymys past."