WALL

FLOOR

Higden's Tomb (from east, looking down), in South Choir Aisle, Chester Cathedral

(See page 115)

R Newstead, Photo.

The Discovery of Ralph Higden's Tomb

BY THE VEN. E. BARBER, M.A.,

ARCHDEACON OF CHESTER

(Read 13th May, 1902)

RECENT papers and discussions have brought prominently before us the name of Ralph Higden, and it is, therefore, not inappropriate that we should put on record the circumstances connected with the discovery of his tomb in the south aisle of the Choir of the Cathedral. I will first quote the paragraph dealing with the matter from p. 37 of Dean Howson's "Handbook to Chester Cathedral"—

"It was always believed that Roger Higden" (observe the Christian name here given), "the author of 'Polychronicon' (a mediæval history of great note), was buried near the door of the south aisle of this Church. No such door was known to exist in 1868. In the process of restoration, however, a doorway (now fully restored) was discovered in the south wall of this aisle. Hence it was inferred that the burying-place of Higden was now approximately known. Attention was soon afterwards called to a hollow sound in the floor under one of the mural arches near this point. The place was opened; and it is believed that, for a moment, the actual body of Higden was seen. Everything, however, speedily vanished, except some bones and part of the cerecloth in which the body was wrapped. A full account of this probable discovery was laid before the Chester Archæological Society by the Precentor, who was present at the opening of the grave."

I have not been able to find, in the published Transactions of the Society, any papers relating to the subject; but the Rev. E. L. Y. Deacle, who was then the Precentor, has very kindly furnished me with his recollections of the event, and also with some correspondence which he had at the time on certain interesting points connected with it, and which are not given in Dean Howson's brief statement. I only regret that we have not the paper which Mr. Deacle read in the old King's School shortly after the discovery, and which he tells me he has only recently destroyed. This paper was probably the communication to our Society to which Dean Howson refers in the paragraph I have quoted.

By the kindness of the Editor (Mr. Cooper), I am able to give an extract from the *Chester Courant*, of June 3rd, 1874, being a portion of a paper read by Rev. E. L. Y. Deacle, at a meeting of the Archæological Society, on May 27th :—

"On February 16th, in repairing the stone seat which runs along the wall in the south aisle of the Choir, the workmen came across a stone-slab forming part of the seat. On the slab there was a rich foliated cross, being styled the Cross of Glory. Under the slab was rough stonework, which had to be removed in order to restore the ashlar. The workman employed in removing these stones was soon attracted by the hollow sound beneath, and on going a little deeper he came on three stones, one of which had formed part of the mullion of a window. These stones were found to be the covering of a stone-grave partly cut in the wall. The stones were carefully removed in my presence, and disclosed a grave 2 feet 4 inches from the level of the floor. The grave had never been disturbed; but there lay the body, marvellously perfect in form; the hands crossed on the breast; the arms, as far as the elbow, lying on either side of the body! The skull had fallen from the cavity cut in the stone to receive it, and was resting on the breast. For the first few moments after opening the grave the framework

of the body seemed most complete, and so perfect and distinct that I could see the fingers of the hands clasped. In a short time the distinctness of the form was gone, and besides some of the larger bones nothing remained but a glittering white powdery matter and the brown cerecloth which still enveloped the lower part of the body. This cerecloth was of coarse plaited work, and of a woollen material. The grave was made with flags set on edge, with a hole cut out of the solid stone for the head. The length of the grave was 5 feet 3 inches from the shoulders to the feet, and the rest for the head was 9 inches long. The breadth across the shoulders was 1 foot 5 inches; and where the feet, which were tied together, lay the width was 12½ inches. The actual depth of the coffin or grave was 13½ inches. . . . . Across the legs, reaching from the feet above the middle of the body, there lay the remains of a decayed hazel rod."

I will now give the narrative of the discovery as gathered from Mr. Deacle's letters. Writing on March 10th, 1902, he says:—

"I was present when Higden's grave was opened some three feet below the floor. The stone-coffin was covered with three stones, one of which would seem to have been used in a window. The skull fell out of the head-rest when the grave was opened, and bits of bone, a fragment or two of the cassock in which he was buried, and a fine white powder the actual form of the spine (were seen). The grave proved to be that of Higden by an account of a Royal Progress found in the Bodleian Library, where the grave of Higden was pointed out at a measured distance from a doorway (unknown in my day) which led into the cemetery. . . . . On the body in the coffin was laid a hazel wand, the purpose of which was not clearly understood."

Writing again, in answer to further enquiries, on April 17th, 1902, Mr. Deacle adds:—

"I read a paper on the subject in the King's School of that time, and not long ago destroyed it. I believe that the only people present were Frater (the Clerk of the Works), one or

two of the Vergers, and myself. After a certain quantity of soil had been thrown out, they came on three fragments of stone covering the stone-coffin. I got into the hole, and a rope was passed round the stone over the head of the coffin. On exposure to the air the skull fell from its place; then the three stones were lifted and bits of a serge cassock were found, a bit of which I sent to the British Museum, and from the unguent used they fixed the date of burial, which coincided with the date of Higden. A friend was about that same time hunting for something in the Bodleian Library, and gave me an account he found there of a Royal Progress, when the tomb or burying place of Higden was pointed out at a given distance from the doorway into the cemetery. This doorway, or indications of it, were unknown to us, but the plaster was removed, and the jambs of the doorway were found; the distance we measured, and it agreed with the number of feet mentioned in the account of the Royal Visit. This confirmed the belief that the grave was that of Higden."

I applied to Mr. Haverfield for further information as to this Bodleian Manuscript, and cannot do better than give you his answer, on April 22nd, 1902:—

"I cannot find or hear of any Bodleian MS. describing a Royal Progress and also alluding to Higden's Tomb in Chester Cathedral. But there is a MS. of Higden's "Polychronicon" in our Christ Church Library, and at the end of it a note by a later hand (15th or 16th Century), which seems to contain the words which you quote. It has been printed several times. I have verified the text to-day, and enclose it."

The MS. was given to the library by Dr. Burton, an alumnus of Christ Church in 1595, and the note was probably written by him. The following is the note:—

"Corpus hujus Ranulphi conditum est in Monasterio S. Werburgi in australi parte templi juxta chorum prope ostium quod ducit in cemiterium: Arcus illi in muro excavatus est. Inscriptum fuit in muro; 'Non hic sub muro, sed subter marmore duro.' Ostendit Mr. Bucksey (?)"

The translation is as follows :—

"The body of this Ralph was buried in the Monastery of S. Werburg, in the southern part of the Church by the Choir, near to the door which leads into the cemetery. An arch for it has been hollowed in the wall. [This] inscription was on the wall: 'Not here under the wall, but beneath the hard marble.'" [Mr. Bucksey showed this.]

As the words in this note are quoted in the correspondence which Mr. Deacle had at the time with Judge Wynne Ffoulkes, and to which I shall refer, I cannot but think that this is the MS. (and not one in the Bodleian) from which his friend quoted at the time of the discovery, though no specified distance of the tomb from the doorway is given. As to Mr. Bucksey, the late Mr. Thomas Hughes (who was Sheriff of the City at the time when Mr. Deacle read his paper) made the following suggestion :—

"With regard to Mr. Bucsey (or Bucksey) furnishing Dr. Burton with information as to the grave of the monk, I would suggest the following explanation. When the Dean and Chapter heard that the Earl of Leicester was at Shrewsbury, they sent Dr. Bucksey (or Bucsey) to Shrewsbury to meet the Earl, and invited him to Chester. Perhaps Dr. Burton was in the suite of the Earl, and as the Earl came here, it was probably on a visit to the Cathedral that Bucksey showed Burton the tomb of Ralph Higden."

I think this also explains Mr. Deacle's impression as to "the account of a Royal Progress."

I will now turn your attention to some points which were dealt with at the time by Mr. Deacle's various correspondents. First, as to the place of sepulture in (or near) the wall of the Church. Taken by itself, the note or memorandum on the Christ Church MS. would seem to imply that an arch had been hollowed out in

the existing wall of the aisle for the purpose of constructing the tomb. The Clerk of the Works, however, was of opinion that the arch was constructional, and so of a date some 70 or 100 years before the death of Higden. Further, the inscription points to the interment being not in the wall, but under a marble-slab close by, whilst the only marble-slab was that over the arched-tomb in the wall. These considerations ought, perhaps, to be modified by the fact that the note on the MS. is ascribed to a writer of the 16th Century.

I gather from a subsequent letter from Mr. Deacle that, before the restoration of the south aisle, "there was little to prove that there was a tomb *in* the wall. The marble-slab projected six inches beyond the face of the wall, standing up above the pavement some four or five inches. The recess was not apparent, being filled in with rubble and mortar. The slab was of Purbeck marble, bearing a foliated cross."[1] It was when this slab was removed and the soil excavated to the depth of three feet, that the coffin, covered with three stones (the centre one having apparently been used elsewhere), was found. Mr. Deacle is under the impression that he saw on the wall, where the cavity was found, the inscription: "Non hic sub muro sed subter marmore duro." The tomb, therefore, if not actually in the wall was close to it, and may have been partly in the wall and partly under the adjoining pavement. A memorandum in Mr. Deacle's handwriting, and written at the time of the discovery, seems to point to this latter conclusion. It has reference to a somewhat similar position of the tomb of Archbishop Stephen Langton, in the east wall

[1] Here, I think, Mr. Deacle's memory may be at fault, as the slab is, apparently, of a red stone; and in the paper which he read shortly after, it is spoken of as a *stone*-slab.

of the Warrior's Chapel of Canterbury Cathedral, though, in this case, the arch which carries the wall of the chapel is thrown over the *centre*, and not over the length, of the tomb. I may quote a sentence from this memorandum:

"There is a story that the tomb is placed partly in and partly out of the chapel on account of the Interdict at the time of the Archbishop's death; this, however, is only a legend."

At the time of the discovery of the tomb, Canon Blomfield drew Mr. Deacle's attention to the fact that several of the later Abbots were buried in the south aisle of the Choir. Thus—

"Thos. de Byrchehylles, who died 1323, was buried there, nearly in a line with the pillars and opposite the western arch; his grave was opened to make way for Dean Smith in 1787. Wm. de Bebington died 1349, and was buried on the right side of his predecessor. Wm. de Mershter died 1386, and was buried in the south aisle of the Choir, on the right side of Wm. Bebington, and so almost up to the south wall, and close to the arched tomb."

Canon Blomfield, in mentioning these facts, was contending that it was unlikely that a richly-ornamented tomb would be erected in honour of an ordinary monk. But may not this be the very meaning of the inscription, as if the arched recesses had been prepared by the builders of nearly one hundred years before for the interment of some future Abbot or dignitary, and to show that Higden's body was not occupying such an honourable position? That such a provision should be made beforehand is not deemed out of the question is shown by the contention of some architectural authorities that the six Norman recesses in the south walk of the Cloister, evidently erected at one time, were intended for the tombs of the early Abbots. Moreover, the tomb which I learn from Judge Wynne Ffoulkes is Higden's, is the westernmost of the three, and is not under one of the

two canopied arches, but is really part of the stone seat; a portion of the wall being hollowed out.

The memorandum on the Christ Church MS. may be taken as pretty conclusive evidence that the tomb opened in 1874 was the tomb of Ralph Higden.

Before turning to other points I cannot refrain from reading another letter of Canon Blomfield's (dated February 23rd, 1874), which I am sure you will like to hear, though it seems to advance a contradictory theory to that put forward in the other letter :—

"The custom of burial in or under the walls of Churches has been much discussed by the learned in *Notes and Queries*, and some curious traditions on the subject mentioned, but no definite conclusion come to; nobody seems to know much about it. The practice seems to have prevailed in the 14th Century, at which period, probably, some of the tombs which originally projected from the walls were inserted into them. An idea prevailed in some places that the Church wall was a kind of neutral ground, neither within the Church nor without it, in which ecclesiastics who had committed some venial offence were buried. But the right of mural interment was certainly not limited to ecclesiastics, as there are many instances of knights and others so buried. I have an indistinct idea of some traditional statement that the tombs in the south wall of the Choir were removed to that spot at some time when the wall was repaired or rebuilt."

The late Mr. Ewen supplied some notes to Mr. Deacle which will be listened to with much interest; with them was the enclosing letter (dated February 23rd, 1874) :—

"There is no doubt, in my own mind, that the 'cerecloth' found in the Cathedral is a hand-made cloth, and corresponding with that one found in a Celtic Barrow in Yorkshire, and mentioned by Dr. Rock. Weaving was not introduced into England until 1331. The Act of Charles II. appears to confirm the continuance, to a late period, of woollen burial garments."

The following were the notes :—

"The earliest record of wooden-coffins in England is at the burial of King Arthur, who was buried in an entire trunk of oak, hollowed, A.D. 542." *(Haydn's Dictionary of Dates v. Coffins).*

"A little deeper was a coffin hollowed out of an oak tree, and within lay the bones of the renowned King Arthur and his fair Queen Guenevere." *(Cameos of English History).*

"After the Conquest the practice was introduced into England of placing stone coffin-lids, with or without effigies, under low arches. In the 13th Century the flat grave-stone was employed, on a level with the floor." *(Article upon Tombs, in "Faiths of the World").*

Then follows another quotation from the same book :—

"Burying the dead had begun to be practised by the Anglo-Saxons when their history was first written by the Christian Clergy, and was never after discontinued. The ordinary coffins were of wood, and the superior ones of stone; the bodies of Kings were wrapped in *linen*, but the clergy were dressed in their priestly vestments."

To this Mr. Ewen added the query: "were not their vestments cowls *(sic)* of coarse woollen?"

An extract from Stanley's *Memorials of Westminster* is then given :—

"King John, with a view to escape the demons he had so faithfully served in life, gave orders to wrap his body in a monk's cowl, and to bury it between two Saints (Wolfstan and Oswald)."

After some notes (which are scarcely relevant) on "The Act of Charles II.," "Worsted," and "Bishop Blaize," I find the following, though no mention is made of the source from which it is taken :—

"March 2nd, 1787. Some few weeks ago we mentioned the discovery of an antient and remarkable coffin, with the remains of an embalmed body, in our Cathedral, since which

a record has been found that proves it to have been a clerical gentleman named Thomas Birchelsey, otherwise Lytheller, a Chaplain to King Edward I., by whom he was appointed Abbot of this Cathedral, on the 30th January, 1291, and died in the reign of Edward II., in 1324."

I have since ascertained that this paragraph is extracted from the *Chester Chronicle* of the date given, and am much indebted to Mr. Wm. H. Davies, the Chief Reporter, who kindly made search in the files of the paper, and verified the extract. This grave was evidently the one "opened to make way for Dean Smith in 1787," as mentioned in Canon Blomfield's letter already quoted.

The hazel wand on the body in the coffin gave rise to many conjectures, the result of which will best be given by quoting the letters which Mr. Deacle received on the subject.[1] One dated April 13th, 1874, and signed "Emily S. Holt," contains the following:—

"I believe I can tell you the meaning of the hazel-stick. It was a preservative against witchcraft. A cross of *witch*-elm *(sic)* was found in the coffin of Henry IV. (see Strickland's *Queens of England*, ii., 104). It is very unreasonable to offer you this statement merely on my *ipse dixit*, but I am sorry to add that I cannot state my authority. I have looked for it in vain, and I can only say that the fact has lodged itself in my memory from some source at present unknown."

I have given this theory as it was advanced, because it would not have been fair to suppress it. But against it must now be set the opinions of two ecclesiastics of the Roman Church. In a fragment of a letter, dated from Stonyhurst College, Blackburn, (and from which

[1] It may be well to state that a month later, on March 18th, 1874, another grave was opened, and in this were found a chalice and paten, a pair of leather sandals, a buckle, the remains of some silken vestment, and a hazel rod in a far better state of preservation.

the signature, I regret to say, has been torn away, together with the name of the authority referred to), are these words :—

"According to this learned priest the hazel-rods were buried with persons who had done penance in lifetime, and were (so to say) *post mortem* absolutions. In some cases it appears that the dead body was scourged with rods of this wood, and the rods were buried with the corpse."

An earlier sentence in this letter shows that the writer had been in correspondence with Mr. T. Hughes, F.S.A., on the subject. Another letter to Mr. Hughes, from the late Rev. Canon Cholmondeley, I am able to give in full. It is dated May 1st, 1874, and is as follows :—

"I omitted to inform you that similar confessional wands to those which I described to you as being in use at St. Peter's, are also to be seen (and are used) in the six other Basilicas of Rome. There, also, are these rods seen attached to the Confessionals. On the whole, I am inclined confidently to think that in the graves you named (as well as in Rome and elsewhere) they are meant as symbols of 'Penance, Absolution, and Indulgence'; whether (1) they intimated the office of *Penitentiary* as having attached to the deceased person during life; or (2) whether they signify *post mortem* Absolution and Indulgence; or (3) whether the person deceased received *in horâ mortis* some special Absolution from Rome, which was so indicated. Still, all these are only applications of one radical idea, viz., that the wands you saw and the wands I have seen are symbolic of Penance, Absolution (and also, perhaps, Indulgence). You will not fail to observe the affinities of thought between this symbolism and the types and figures of the Old Testament. And, in speaking of Christian Antiquities, the connection between the Old Testament and the New should always be borne in mind. You will, therefore, remember (1) Aaron's Rod, &c., &c.; also (2) David's words: 'Thy rod and Thy staff have comforted me' (Protestant Version); and (3) 'By faith, Jacob, dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and adored the top of his rod,' Hebrews xi., 21 (Catholic Version)."

It is not possible, of course, to arrive at any complete solution of the matter, and to say which of the alternatives here suggested is the true one. Higden, however, was a *lay* monk (as Judge Wynne Ffoulkes reminds us), no sacramental vessels being found in the coffin; the wand, therefore, could not have implied that he exercised the office of a confessor; and, most probably, indicated that he had received absolution *in horâ mortis*. In the other grave the presence of the sacred vessels would seem to show that the person buried was a confessor.

We shall all agree that it is interesting to have had these points brought to our notice, and that we owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Deacle for his kindness in making this possible, by placing these various papers at our disposal.

Though I have finished the subject, so far as it refers to the discovery of the tomb, there is one point on which I would add a few words. In one of his letters Canon Blomfield writes thus:—

"I have a copy of Higden's Polychronicon as translated by Trevisa in 1527, now a scarce book. Though the chronicle is continued down to 1480, there is no mention of Higden's death or place of burial. I see that, in the Harleian Catalogue of the British Museum, he is thus described: 'Polycronicon Ranulphi Monachi Cestrensis exemplar pervetustum, &c. Revera est Polycratica temporum seu Polychronicon Rogeri Monachi Cestrensis quam fœdissime defloravit Plagiariorum insignissimus Ranulphus Higden commonachus suns.' So he is not held in much respect as an original or trustworthy historian. If Caxton had not printed his book, both that and his name would, probably, have been lost in oblivion long ago."

I sent this extract to Sir Edmund Maunde Thompson, the Principal Librarian at the British Museum, and have been favoured by him with the following memorandum :—

"No authority is given in the Harleian Catalogue for the statement that Higden's Polychronicon is plagiarised from the Polycratica of Roger of Chester, and, presumably, it is simply Wanley's interpretation of the fact that some of the extant MSS. give the work the title of the Polycratica of Roger of Chester; and others that of the Polychronicon of Ranulph of Chester (*i.e.*, Higden). The origin of the belief in the existence of two distinct persons may apparently be traced to Bale, who gives separate accounts of them, and makes Roger twenty-two years earlier than Ranulph. Bale does not himself charge Ranulph with plagiarism, but that accusation was made by Fuller, and repeated at greater length by Wanley. Modern scholars have generally supposed that the two persons are identical, the name Roger being simply an error, and the title Polycratica (which is meaningless as applied to a chronicle) merely a mistaken reminiscence of the Polycraticon of John of Salisbury. According to Babington, the name Roger is not written by the original scribe in any of the copies in the British Museum; nor in that at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge; nor in that at Lambeth. The whole question is discussed by Babington in his introduction to Volume I. of the Edition of Higden in the Rolls Series; and summarised in the articles on Higden and Roger of Chester in the Dictionary of National Biography."

Mr. Haverfield also writes to the same effect :—

"In all probability there never was such a person as Roger of Chester, author of Polycratica. His name and his book's name alike, arose from an error of some one who meant to name Ranulph Higden and his Polychronicon; by a slip of memory or writing R[anulph] of Chester was turned into Roger of Chester; and the Polychronicon (perhaps abbreviated) into Polycratica. . . . . It is, all the same, roughly true that Higden was a great plagiarist. Nearly all the mediæval chroniclers were, except when writing contemporary history;

and only a little of Higden is contemporary. It would not, I think, be unfair to add that Higden is, perhaps, in this respect of plagiarism, rather worse than most of his fellows. His work is a sort of pleasant easy-going Universal History, which became very popular, but is not (even with respect to its age) critical or scientific, or really historical. In such qualities Higden is a long way behind the best mediæval chroniclers. The present value of his writings consists, I imagine, in a quantity of miscellaneous information, given here and there and anywhere, about various subjects; little interesting things. For one, he is the first writer who mentions Rycknield Street by that name. I suspect he made a blunder in doing so, but still the name has stuck."

I must apologise for having detained you so long. It was only when I had written the greater part of this paper, that it occurred to me that Mr. Deacle's earlier and contemporaneous paper might be found in the files of *The Chester Courant;* otherwise, I would have merely transcribed that paper, and given you the account in Mr. Deacle's own words.