

THE CHURCH OF THE SAXON CORONATIONS AT KINGSTON.

BY

W. E. ST. LAWRENCE FINNY, M.D., M.Ch., F.S.A.,
Barrister at Law, Inner Temple.

AFTER the death of Alfred the Great in 901, seven of the Kings who succeeded him between 902 and 979 were crowned at Kingston. (See *S.A.C.*, Vol. XXXVII, Part ii (1927), pp. 211-19.)

Among the West Saxons the King was elected and appointed by the Witan-a-Gemot from among the descendants of Cerdic. Subsequently the new King was consecrated or "hallowed" by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who anointed him with oil and enthroned him, gave him his ring and sword, and then crowned him and handed him his sceptre and rod.

The Church of these coronations, not mentioned by historians, is distinctly referred to in the recension of the Service used at Kingston, "The Coronation Order of Ethelred II" (MS. 146, Corp. Christi Coll., Cambridge), the rubric of which directs that "two bishops shall lead the King by the hand from the Assembly of the Elders (the Witan) to the Church," and directs his prostration before the Altar "when the King has come to the Church." It is evident therefore that there was a church at Kingston in which the Saxon Kings were hallowed and crowned; the question arises "When and where was this church built?"

In the year 838 in the reign of Egbert, King of Wessex, who had a royal palace at Kingston, a Great Council was held, as its records relate (Cottonian Chester Augustus II, no. 20), "at that famous place called Kingston in Surrey." At this Council a compact of mutual co-operation and support to last in perpetuity, was made between Ceolnoth, Archbishop of Canterbury, accompanied by twenty-four bishops and others representing the Church, and King Egbert, his son Ethelwulf the sub-King of Kent, and many West Saxon noblemen representing the Kingdom of Wessex. This compact in the time of the Heptarchy secured for the Archbishop and the Church the protection of the most powerful King and Kingdom in England, and asserted for the Bishops their right to rank in the State as "Spiritual Lords," a right which they still retain. It was also beneficial to Egbert, who as a Prince had resided at the Court of Charlemagne and had there observed how

much that great monarch had strengthened his powerful kingdom by making a compact with the Church and had seen the stone church at Aachen built for Charlemagne's coronation: and so it is more than probable that Egbert, who had long planned this alliance, had foreseen that for such an important assembly of Bishops and Church dignitaries, a building larger than an ordinary Saxon parish church was absolutely essential, and with his acquired knowledge of Continental architecture had built a new stone church suitable for the Great Council. As the first act of the Great Council was the acceptance by the Archbishop of a gift to the Church of land at Malling in Sussex from King Egbert and his son Ethelwulf, and as such a gift was conveyed to the Church by public declaration before the altar, it is evident that there was such a church at Kingston in the year 838. The question remains, where in Kingston was that church built?

The shape and proportions of the nave of All Saints', Kingston, and the part under the tower arches, seem to suggest that they may be standing on the site of Egbert's Saxon church. This view is supported by the knowledge that in addition to Egbert's royal palace in the Bittoms at Kingston, the Saxon bishops of Winchester had an episcopal palace in the town at that time, which was known as the Bishop's Hall, and stood beside the river near the church. Biden in his *History and Antiquities of Kingston-upon-Thames* (Kingston, 1852, p. 9) tells of this episcopal palace by the riverside in Egbert's time. It remained in use by the Bishops of Winchester until 1392, when William of Wykeham leased it to Henry Harland. By Leland's time its glory had departed; he tells us in his *Itinerary*¹ (c. 1540) that "by the *Tamise* side there is a House yet caullid the *Bishopes Hauille*. But now it is turnid into a commune Dwellinge House of a Tounisch Man. It was suntyme the Bishop of *Winchester's* House." The Kingston Tannery now stands on the site of this former Saxon "Bisceopes Heall," but the old name Bishops Hall survives in the 150 yards of roadway which extends from the Tannery across Thames Street towards the west door of the Parish Church, as it did in the days of the coronations of the Kings at Kingston, when the bishops and clergy passed along it from the Saxon Bishop's Hall to the Saxon Church of All Hallows which stood there.

As there are churches built in Saxon times still standing in England, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Egbert's church at Kingston remained standing for at least one hundred and forty-one years; if it did, it was the Church of All Hallows to which

¹ *The Itinerary of John Leland the Antiquary*, 3rd ed., Oxford, 1770, Vol. VI, p. 24.

Edward the Elder, the son and successor of Alfred the Great, and his grandsons Athelstan, Edmund, and Edred, and after them Alfred's other descendants Edwy, Edward the Martyr and Ethelred II came in succession to be crowned at Kingston by Archbishops of Canterbury. The fragment of a stone cross with Saxon carving on it, now in the north transept of All Saints' Church, may be part of a cross erected by Egbert to commemorate his Great Council at Kingston at the close of his reign; as he had erected a cross on Castle Hill in Caistor, Lincolnshire, inscribed with his name and his gift of the spoils of victory to pious uses to commemorate his first great achievement in 927, when he defeated and subjected the Kingdom of Mercia, and set free and re-established his Kingdom of Wessex.

The reason that Edward the Elder came to Kingston to be crowned instead of remaining at Winchester where he had been elected King by the Witan, appears when we realise that Edward had learnt statesmanship and the art of warfare from his father Alfred the Great, and Edward's coming to Kingston was part of Alfred's plan to induce the Angles and the Saxons to forget their former differences and combine against their common enemy the Danes. The Thames divided the Angles in Mercia north of it from the West Saxons south of it, the only ford was at Kingston. The defeated Mercian King Burhred had retired to Rome, the Mercians therefore chose as their leader Alderman Ethelred who was married to Alfred the Great's daughter Ethelfleda; so doubtless when her brother Edward was crowned King of the West Saxons at Kingston, Ethelfleda came across the ford, accompanied by her Mercian nobility, as guests of honour at her brother's coronation, and the Angles and the West Saxons joined the festivities of the day, and made an alliance against the Danes, for subsequently their combined forces fought together successfully, capturing town after town throughout the Midlands, fortifying and garrisoning them as they went, and driving the Danes before them. When in 919 Ethelfleda, who was known as "The Warrior Queen," died at Tamworth, her brother Edward was chosen King of the Angles in Mercia, and became the first King of the Anglo-Saxons. Edward continued the successful warfare, and captured and fortified Colchester among other towns: before he died at Faringdon in 924 he was acknowledged the Overlord of all the other Kings and Kingdoms in England.

Athelstan succeeded his father Edward and carried on this valiant work, and in 937 defeated a great alliance of the Danes from all parts, including the King of the Orkney Isles, and Anlaf, who came from Dublin with 615 ships, also Constantine King of Scot-

land who had joined them. At this battle of Brunanburgh five kings and seven earls were slain with terrible slaughter, and the victorious Athelstan became the first sole King of All England.

Athelstan was worthily succeeded on the throne by his two brothers, Edmund and Edred, who in their reigns maintained and strengthened the kingdom which he had won ; and so it was that the coronation of Edward the Elder in the church at Kingston led to the union of the Angles and the Saxons, the defeat of the Danes, and to the foundation of the Kingdom of England ; and the heroic bravery of Alfred the Great's son and daughter and three grandsons led to the expansion of Alfred's Kingdom of Wessex until it became the Kingdom of England, and with that expansion went the alliance, made in 838 in the Church at Kingston, between the Church and State, which still remains, and now the Kingdom of England founded by Athelstan, and of which he was the first sole King, has lasted a thousand years, and the Anglo-Saxon people of which Edward the Elder was the first King is the greatest power for good in the world.

The Parish Church of Kingston-upon-Thames dedicated to All Saints was built on the foundations of an earlier church about 1125 by Gilbert the Norman, the founder of Merton Priory ; it was originally a cruciform structure with a central tower, chancel, north and south transepts, and a nave with a west door facing the river. On the south side of the church, level with the south transept but quite apart from it, there used to be a simple rectangular pre-Conquest church, 60 feet long and 25 feet wide, dedicated to St. Mary. In 1380 the walls of the south transept of the All Saints' Church were taken down, and the east and west walls rebuilt 60 feet apart and extended southwards until they met and joined on to the east and west walls of the Chapel of St. Mary, and communication was made between the church and the chapel by two arches supported on a column between them. On the north wall within the Chapel of St. Mary east of these arches, were placed six large 14th-century paintings of kings, removed from the south transept walls before they were taken down ; one of these paintings was of King John, who granted Kingston's first extant charter, the others were of Saxon Kings crowned at Kingston, they were described in 1674 by Aubrey in his *History of Surrey*,¹ who states that they were in two rows of three, one above the other, Athelstan, Edwy and Edred above, Edward the Martyr, Ethelred II and John below. Aubrey also states that there were inscriptions under them which he gives in English and he says that the one under Athelstan states that he was crowned in the Market Place. This

¹ Vol. I, p. 20.

statement has been repeated frequently, and Dean Hook in his *Lives of the Archbishops of Canterbury* gives an elaborate but imaginary description of Athelstan's coronation, which is unfortunate, because the inscription which is in Latin does not mention the Market Place at all, and tells us that Athelstan was crowned in the Church. It was because of these paintings that the Chapel of St. Mary became spoken of as "the Chapel of the Coronations."

After the suppression of the monasteries and chantries, which began in 1536, the Chapel of St. Mary was used as a parish storehouse until March 3rd, 1729-30, when it fell in partial ruins which were pulled down in 1731, and the site was left bare until 1825, when it was merged into the churchyard and used for burials, and in time the position of the site was forgotten.

After the destruction of "the Chapel of the Coronations" the paintings of the Kings which had been within it disappeared. Local historians inform us that they were all destroyed when the Chapel fell in ruins; however, one writer of crude verses, printed in 1731, asserted that "their Pictures still are seen, . . . just at the entrance in." The explanation seems to be that the pictures on the part of the wall which collapsed were broken to pieces, but those on the other part of the wall were uninjured, and could be seen through a crevice in the south door which was boarded up, and that soon afterwards the paintings that survived were either sold or given away. I therefore searched for a long time for either whole paintings or pieces of them, and as a guide to what to look for, I found that in Milton Abbas in Dorsetshire there is a 14th-century painting of Athelstan and another of his mother Queen Ecgwina in royal robes, and in Beverley Minster in Yorkshire there are 14th-century paintings of Athelstan and St. John of Beverley, and in the Lecture Hall of the Society of Antiquaries in London there is a 14th-century painting of King Athelstan, another of a "Saxon King," and the head from another painting of a "Saxon King"; an inscription under each of these last three states that they came from Baston Manor House, Keston, Kent, in 1813. In the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol. C, part II (1830), pp. 497-502, there is a letter signed A. J. Kempe, which states that these pictures were discovered in 1813 when Baston Manor House was being renovated; they were painted on wood, and had been used as wainscoting in a room in the servants' quarters. He states that some were put in sideways and pieces of other pictures were fitted in between them; the owner had instructed the decorator to repaint them, but with the help of Charles Stothard, F.S.A., he succeeded in showing them to the Society of Antiquaries, but that neither he nor Stothard nor the owner of Baston Manor

House could find out how the paintings came to be there. Kempe also relates how Stothard tried to decipher the Latin inscription under one of the Kings, the inscription under the other having been sawn off to fit it into the wall. Kempe gives the inscription as "Athelstanus Edwardi . . . filius regnavit anno . . b . . . et Consecravit Sanctus . . . tanus hic reges Wallensium et Scot . . . pacem recepit eos sub se regnare . . .," and he translates this: "Athelstan the son of Edward reigned 15 years. Holy Wulfstan consecrated him. He received the Kings of the Welshmen and of the Scottishmen and permitted them to rule in peace under him." This translation however omits one all-important word; it is the word "hic" which means "here," and identifies the picture as having come from Kingston where Athelstan was crowned. When that picture hung in the Parish Church before it was moved into St. Mary's Chapel, it told the people there that it represented Athelstan, who, as they all knew, had been crowned by the Archbishop "here," that is in Kingston Church of All Hallows: so the painting of Athelstan, and of "A Saxon King" and the fragment of a painting bearing "A King's head" in the Lecture Hall of the Society of Antiquaries, are the long-lost pictures from the "Chapel of the Coronations" in Kingston.

Since 1882 attempts have been made to find the site of the Chapel of St. Mary in Kingston Churchyard. In *S.A.C.*, Vol. XXXV (1924), pp. 98-103, the late G. H. Freeman reproduced drawings made in 1726 of the Chapel of St. Mary about three years before it fell in ruins, and he gives extracts from the Vestry Minute Book relating to its destruction in 1729-30, but his conjectural plan as to where the Chapel stood, and Major Heales' conjectural plan of the site which Freeman reproduced from *S.A.C.*, Vol. VIII (1883), are both incorrect. In 1926 I excavated and discovered the site of the Chapel, the walls of which were 2 feet 6 inches thick.¹ Since then I have rebuilt small portions of them with their own stones, and marked the sites and the site of the altar with slabs and bronze tablets placed over them, and given a correct plan. The late P. M. Johnston, F.S.A., who saw the excavations, and had examined the tiles found on the floor of the Chapel of St. Mary, thought that it may have been built between 1030 and 1050, and the drawing of it made in 1726 seems to confirm this opinion.

The Domesday Survey Book of 1086 mentions only one Church at Kingston then, and as St. Mary's Church was built before that date it must be the Church referred to; we therefore want to know what had become of the Church of All Hallows in which the Saxon Kings were crowned down to the time of Ethelred II,

¹ *S.A.C.*, Vol. XXXVII, Part ii (1927), pp. 215-219.

“the Unready.” In the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* there is a long record of the appalling ravages by the Danes, year after year, in the reign of that King, and how in 1009 they came up the Thames as far as Staines, burning towns and churches on both sides of the river; it seems impossible that the church of Kingston could have escaped destruction then, if it had not been destroyed earlier. The Danes’ method was to kill the priests, rob the churches and set fire to the contents and roofs, leaving only the bare walls standing, and so St. Mary’s Church, built alongside the ruins of the older All Hallows’ Church, was probably one of the many churches built by Canute after he came to the Throne and became a Christian, in recompense for the damage done by the Danes. Doubtless the Church of St. Mary, though small, was quite large enough for the diminished population of Kingston. It follows then that about 1125, when Gilbert the Norman built his cruciform church at Kingston dedicated to All Saints, he did as every other Norman builder did when he built a cruciform church in Surrey, he rebuilt and re-roofed what remained of the walls of the nave of All Hallows’ Church, and built his tower on arches on the site of the previous Saxon chancel and his new Norman chancel east of it, and transepts north and south of it. So if you go into Kingston Parish Church of All Saints and stand under the central tower arches, you are standing by the site of the altar of the Saxon Church of All Hallows where before the Norman Conquest, between 902 and 979, Archbishops of Canterbury consecrated and crowned seven Saxon Kings of England, all of whom were direct descendants of Alfred the Great.