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THE PARISH OF WILLEDON.

BY FREDERICK A. WOOD, ESQ.

The parish of Willesdon is bounded on the west and north by the river Brent; on the east by the old Roman road to Edgeware; on the south-east by the stream formerly called Kilbourn, now a sewer; on the south by a lane once called Flowerhills, now Kilbourn Lane, thence by the Harrow Road; while the south-western portion stretches out into a tongue of land abutting on the parishes of Hammersmith, Acton, Ealing, and Twyford.

It contains, according to the Ordnance Survey of 1865, 4,382 acres.

The earliest historical notice of this parish is found in the charter by which Athelstane granted to the Dean and Chapter of S. Paul's, or rather "ad monasterium statutum n Londoniâ civitate ubi diu Sanctus Erkenwaldus episcopatum tenuit," 10 mansas at Neosdune cum Willesdune.

Two ridges, spurs from the high ground of Hampstead, run east and west; the northern ridge forms the southern bank of the Brent,

and on this was the manor of Neasdon; the southern ridge is parallel to it, and on this was situated the manor of Willesdon; between them ran a small brook called the Slade, rising on the eastern boundary of the parish at Cricklewood, and joining the Brent on the western boundary near Stone Bridge, where it spreads out into a large marsh.

Though these charters of Athelstane bear a very doubtful reputation, and Kemble has shown that many of them are forgeries, this particular one is not marked by him as one of the forged charters. These manors, farms, or tons, (the termination "ton," as in Kenton, Acton, and others, points to a Saxon origin,) would not be found in the solitary glades of the forest, but as near as possible to the roads through the district; and, as the great Roman road ran along the eastern side of the parish, it is there that we naturally look for the earliest traces of occupancy; and we find that the manor of Willesdon was situated in the south-east corner of the parish, and constitutes what is now its urban portion, called Kilburn, continuing by the side of the Edgware Road along the southern base of the southern ridge, while the manor-house was situated almost opposite the Priory of St. John the Baptist at Kilburn. The manor of Neasdon, at that time apparently the most important, stretched along the banks of the Brent, and abutted on the Roman road at Brent Bridge.

The next notice of the parish is found in the great survey of the Conqueror. In this survey Neasdon is not mentioned at all. The manor of Willesdon is set down as containing 15 hydes, that of Harlesdon five hydes, and East Twyford two, equal to about 2,640 acres of cultivatable land, of which nine carucates and three virgates and six acres, equal to about 1,131 acres, were cultivated, while there was in the parish woodland sufficient for pannage for 650 hogs, of which 500 were set down to Willesdon. Both Harlesdon and East Twyford are situated at the western end of the southern ridge, one on each side of the road to Harrow, and had been taken out of the old manor of Willesdon since the time of the first charter, and this points to the probable date of the origin of the highway to Harrow; while Neasdon was undoubtedly then included with Willesdon, and formed the forest which afforded so large a supply of acorns for the swine of the manor.

Many documents of the reigns of John, Henry III. and the Edwards show that as early as A.D. 1200 a church existed in the parish. No mention is made of a church in Domesday, and though this omission

does not positively prove that there was no church, it strengthens the inference that the church was of later erection.

In 1200 John the son of Gorman is called parson of Willesdon, and various leases refer to the land now called the Rectory Farm, which is set out at length in a terrier of the 33rd Henry III. (A.D. 1249) as containing one virgate, 12 acres, and one messuage at the gate of the churchyard; this with the great tithes constituted the rectory, always held by the Dean and Chapter of S. Paul's as chapter property. The parish was served by a vicar, and in a deed dated 2 Edward I. the dean and chapter grant to Alan de Mortham, a minor canon, the great tythes belonging to the church of the Blessed Mary of Willesdon, saving to themselves the right of presentation to the vicarage.

During this period the prebendal manors of the parish must have been created, for in the Valor Ecclesiasticus of Nicholas IV. (A.D. 1291)—

	£	s.	d.
The parsonage is valued at . . .	12	0	0
The prebend of Willesdon . . .	4	0	0
The prebend of Brundesbur' . . .	2	0	0
The prebend of Mappesbur' . . .	3	6	8
The prebend of Chambleynswod . . .	2	10	0
The prebend of Harlesdon . . .	3	6	8
The prebend of Twyford . . .	2	19	0
The prebend of Neasdon . . .	3	2	0
The prebend of Oxgate . . .	2	8	0

—the first six having been carved out of the old manor of Willesdon, the two last out of the old manor of Neasdon, and there is a regular succession of Prebendaries in the lists published by Newcourt from the beginning of the twelfth century.

These manors must have increased in value during the next two reigns, for in the Inquisitiones Nonarum, in the reign of Edward III. the ninth is estimated for the prebend of Willesdon at 14*s.* 0*d.* equal to an annual value of 6*l.* 6*s.* 0*d.*; those of Bromes at 12*s.* 4*d.* equal to an annual value of 7*l.* 5*s.* 11*d.*; of Mapes at 21*s.* equal to an annual value of 9*l.* 9*s.* 0*d.*; and those of Chambers at four shillings, equal to an annual value of 1*l.* 16*s.* 0*d.* In these inquisitions no mention is made of Harlesdon or Twyford, nor of Neasdon or Oxgate.

The next notice we have is in the Valor Ecclesiasticus of Henry VIII. where the prebends are valued as follows :

	£	s.	d.
Wylesdon, annual value	12	0	0
Brundesbury, „ „	14	6	8
Mapysbury „ „	12	0	0
Chamb'leynswode „ „	8	6	8
Harleston „ „	10	2	3
Twyorde „ „	5	6	8
Neesdon „ „	7	13	4
Oxgate „ „	7	1	1

During the various Ecclesiastical revolutions many of these possessions have been lost to the church, and the commissioners now hold lands only in the manors of Willesdon, Brondesbury, Mapesbury, and Chamberlaneswood.

An Inquisition in the Court of Wards dated 38 Henry VIII. shows how largely this process of conveying has affected church property. In this inquisition is set out the property of Michael Roberts of Neasdon, who died in 1545 ; he left all he possessed to an expected son, who either was never born or died in infancy, with reversion to his brother Edmund Roberts. The property in Willesdon held of the various prebendaries was 443 acres, of the value of 44*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* and at a rental of 1*l.* 17*s.* 3*d.* The grandson of this Edmund left every acre of this property as a freehold.

When the land first came into the possession of the church the area of cultivation must have been very small. In *Domesday* only half of the land of the parish is said to have been capable of cultivation, and only half of that was under the plough ; but when the numerous and needy followers of the Norman were thrust into the Church, not necessarily excluding the Saxon clergy, but sharing with them, their better knowledge of agriculture and their greater energy would enable them to make the lands which had only sufficed for the maintenance of the Saxon clergy serve for their own as well. *It was the Normans* who divided the parish into prebends.

Early in the reign of Henry II. the priory of S. John the Baptist was founded, and the conventual buildings rose among the trees on the banks of the Keeleburn. It was built by the Benedictine abbots

* If a forgery, not fabricated until long after *Domesday*.

of Westminster for three of the maids attendant on the then dead Queen Maud, herself almost a Benedictine nun. Though without doubt the foundation of this priory exercised great influence in the neighbourhood, yet as it is not situated in the parish it scarcely comes within the range of the subject in hand; but one of the duties undertaken by the nuns was the relief of travellers on the Great Roman Road, and, as the priory from the first was a sort of hospice, it must have drawn a population round its walls. Here travellers towards S. Alban's would stop to form parties for the purpose of mutual protection in passing through the dense forest through which ran the road, immediately they had ascended the steep hill in front; here they would stop to ask at the shrine of the Baptist for the saint's protection; here also they would halt, after having passed the dangers, to recruit and to thank the saint for their deliverance. The church of the priory would no doubt be also a place of worship for the neighbours, though it was not in the parish; for though the priory was not founded much, if at all, before the church in the centre of the parish, yet long before the priory was founded an oratory existed in the woods on the banks of the stream, and this would serve the purposes of worship quite as well as the church built in its place.

This period was the golden age of church-building, but this out-of-the-way parish does not appear to have had any church till the middle of the twelfth century. The two round pillars of the nave of the present edifice are all that remain of the church then built, which was most probably a lancet-windowed church with a belfry, and if the font originally belonged to Willesdon, of which there is some doubt, it would I think strengthen this supposition, for the disengaged columns of the central shaft and what is left of the capitals appear to be Early English, but of a rather late period. The situation of the church, close to an extensive marsh, and in the midst of what in those days must have been a dense forest, and at the end of a long lane which even in the last century led nowhere except into the common lands which extended to the Brent, is a riddle that I have not been able to solve. Will the fact that it was the shrine of a miraculous image throw any light upon its loneliness? or would the fact that the rectorial lands (the demesne of the dean and chapter) were situated in this part of the parish help to explain the selection of the site,* on the supposition

* See the article *On the Pilgrimage to our Lady of Willesdon*, by John Green Waller, Esq., at p. 173 of the present volume.

that they would build the church as near as they could to their own property, or rather on it, for the rectory-house stood and now stands at the gate of the churchyard.

The changes that have passed over the parish have been very gradual. The church held the land, and was of course an absentee landlord. The tenants reclaimed the woodland and the marsh, which they held at very small quit rents. I find that the predecessor of the Roberts's in the reign of Henry II. held the land at Neasdon for the annual rent of a hen, redeemable for three halfpence. The successful yeoman would try to compound for these rents, and become a freeholder, and though the landlord would not part with the surveyed lands, he could sell the waste that had been reclaimed; or the tenant might gain a freehold by squatting till lapse of time gave him a holding, but these freeholds were very few. The greater part of the land was held on lease of the different prebendaries, who granted their leases as private freeholders; the documents therefore relating to them are not found among the archives of the Dean and Chapter of S. Paul's.

After the Reformation the prebendal lands of Oxgate, Neasdon, East Twyford, and Harlesdon, were almost, if not altogether, lost to the church. Those of East Twyford appear to have been dealt with even before that age of spoliation. The other three were absorbed by the Roberts's, who, as bailiffs to the Dean and Chapter of S. Paul's, had chances of which they availed themselves largely. This family, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were the largest private landowners in Willesdon. The last male heir died in 1700, leaving the property to five sisters, coheiresses; these ladies gradually parted with their shares, and towards the middle of the eighteenth century the greater part of this estate came into the possession of the Nicolls of Colney Hatch, and the Nicolls of Burton Hall, Hendon. The property of the former passed by marriage to the Duke of Chandos, and, again by marriage, to the Dukes of Buckingham. The other branch of the Nicolls retained their share, and, bit by bit, bought up all the rest, and they now hold the bulk of the Neasdon property, in the person of Katharine Nicoll Prout, the cousin of the last of the Nicolls, who died about sixteen years ago.

Another manor, that of Malourees, which embraces a large area along the Slade Brook, and in the central basin, and crosses the parish from Cricklewood to Kensal Green, was bought by Archbishop Chichele for the College of All Souls, and is still held by that corporation.

In 1815 an act was passed for inclosing the common lands: these were all re-arranged, and 500 acres of the waste were sold, thus creating a number of small freeholds. This process of creating freeholds had been going on for some time before. The parish authorities compelled the squatters to pay rates, and the land they occupied became freehold by lapse of time.

A short note on the population of the parish, at various times, may prove interesting, as an introduction to the register.

In Domesday the population of the various manors is reckoned to be 49 villeins, six bordarii, and three cottagers, which, with the reeves, and leaving out any free inhabitants, might give a population of about 200 souls.

The nature of the offences punished at the courts does not give a bad indication of the character of the population, and in a court roll of Henry II., A.D. 1154, I find that Thomas White was fined 3s. 4d. for destroying the lord's wood with his cattle, but the fine was afterwards forgiven.

Agnes the wife of Richard Everard is a common huckster, and sells beer in cups and dishes not sealed with a measure: she was fined 2d.

John Bruen of Neasdon "est communis pandoxator," a common ale-brewer, and breaks assize, and was fined 4d.

In a roll at the Augmentation Office in the reign of Edward VI. it is stated that there are in the parish of houselyng people 240, which would give a population of 400 to 500.

In the 26th Charles II. the number of houses reckoned to the hearth tax was 93, with 277 hearths.

In 1795 the parish contained 130 houses and 715 inhabitants.

This short account of the parish will, I trust, serve as an introduction to the notes that I have made on the old register.

The Act for enforcing the keeping of these parish registers was made in 1530, but for nearly forty years it seems to have been a dead letter in this parish, or the sheets have been lost. The first date in the early register is 1569, and this date is not an original entry; in fact the entire register up to 1614 has been copied at one time from some more ancient volume, and there is no certificate attached to the copy showing that it was a true one.

The register commences in 1569 and ends in 1740, thus extending

over a period of 171 years, or rather 167 years, for, though the first entry is dated 1569, there are but two in that year, two more in 1572, and in 1573 the register seems to have been kept regularly.

In the first complete decade from 1590 to 1599 there are entries of 108 births; in the last complete decade, from 1721 to 1730, there are 205 births, showing that the children born in the parish had nearly doubled. The death register exhibits a remarkable difference; in the first decade there are 57 deaths, in the last 427, but of these 72 are nurse children belonging to other parishes, so that the number really due to the parish ought to be only 355. Thus, while the births were only doubled, the deaths had doubled twice and were bidding fair to double a third time, being six times the number of the first decade, or in other words, in the fresh period, the births are the double of the deaths; in the last the deaths are twice as many as the births. The ratio between the two kept decreasing from 1569 to the middle of the seventeenth century, when the numbers of births and deaths were about equal; the deaths then increased in a greater proportion than the births, till in 1740 they were double the number, which shows that in the sixteenth century the parish could not afford a living for those born in it, and a large number had to emigrate into the outer world, while there was not influx to make up for such emigration; but that in the eighteenth century the state of things which exists now had commenced, the parish had ceased to be exclusively rural, and the movement was being initiated, which will eventually turn our beautiful green fields into streets of houses.

In taking the death rate of the parish at the beginning of the last century, I had to make a large deduction from the number registered: in the ten years between 1721 and 1730 there were 72 nurse children buried; the parish was in reality one huge baby-farm for the pauper children of the urban parishes of Westminster, S. Martin's-in-the-Fields, S. Giles', and S. Anne's, Soho; as they had no workhouses, they farmed out the paupers in the neighbouring country districts, and the deaths of the poor children form a seventh of the whole number registered, and this practice could not but have had an injurious effect upon the morals of the parish.

In the register I have found many curious omissions: there were but two entries in 1569, none in 1570 or 1571, two in 1572. From 1573 to 1585 the entries appear to have been made pretty regularly; in this last year there is a break, and a leaf or two has been torn out,

and in 1586, 1587, and 1588 there are no entries at all. I think these omissions have been owing to a change of vicars: perhaps no one was appointed for some time. After 1588 the register is kept regularly till 1590, but in 1593 there is not a death registered, though 28,000 people died of the plague in London. In 1604 there is but one entry, a birth.

The great plague of 1625, which in London carried off 35,000 people, seems to have had little influence in Willesdon, for in that year the deaths registered were only 12, against 14 in the previous year, but in 1626 there was an increase of seven over the average.

In 1637 three deaths are entered as from "the sickness," showing that the plague which had been raging in London in 1636 was extending itself into the country.

After 1644, when the vicar, R. Clark, died or was promoted, the entries become most irregular. The Dean and Chapter were in difficulties with the House of Commons, and probably no vicar was appointed. In 1648 a man called Parkins was vicar; his brother was chaplain to Sir John Franklyn, a large leaseholder in the parish, and Puritan Member for Middlesex. The register was greatly neglected, for from 1644 to 1652 there are only entries of 16 births and four deaths.

In 1653 Sir William Roberts, the chief lay landlord in the parish, one of Cromwell's lords, performed the marriages himself as a justice of the peace, and kept the register by deputy.

In the year 1665, the year of the great plague, the entries of deaths were 35, while in 1664 and 1666 there were only 16 in each year.

The register unfortunately contains no continuous list of vicars, but it shows us that those mentioned were quiet, pedantic gentlemen, who lived to a good old age, and made themselves comfortable. The first of whom I find any notice is Robert Griffiths: there is an entry of his burial in 1614. He was succeeded by Thomas Gyffard, who signs his name at the bottom of each page of the register as Vicarius de Willesdon; he was therefore a resident, in fact he kept the register himself for seventeen years. He calls a strange pauper woman a "peregrina." There is no entry of his burial.

He was succeeded in 1631 by Richard Clarke, who died in 1644, just before the troubles of the Rebellion; he also kept the register himself, and his fine small hand is a great contrast to the sprawling writing of his predecessor.

For ten years after Clarke's death the register seems to have been kept exclusively for the family of the Roberts, for they and their friends and dependents are the only people of whom it takes any notice. But in 1653, Sir William Roberts started the register afresh as a secular, not an ecclesiastical record. He recites the Act by which Parliament abolished all religious ceremonies connected with marriage, appoints a tailor as registrar, and commences to marry the parishioners most vigorously (I am afraid that as a ratepayer he found that it was necessary). In 1655 he married eight couples, a larger number than had been married in any year for twenty-two years previously. In 1658 he married six couples; but the effort seems to have exhausted the parish. For 1659 and 1660 there are no entries of marriages.

At the Restoration, Sir William's registrar, the tailor, was evidently deposed, for a fresh hand commences to note the christening of the children; during the reign of Sir William children are born only, they are not christened, and though after 1660 the rule is to enter children as being christened, yet in a few cases they are registered only as born; some sturdy Puritan has kept up his hatred of the baptismal cross, and there was really no strict church feeling in the parish to make him ashamed of himself, for Willesdon was a nest of Puritans. Once its church contained a shrine, as well known, and almost as sacred, as that of Walsingham: How came it that the devotees of Mary had become such bitter enemies?

E. Parkins, the vicar during the Rebellion, was spoken of by the Parliamentary Commissioners as a singularly godly preacher of the Gospel, and in 1652 they voted an increase to his salary of 50*l.* per annum, but I do not find that they ever paid it. I have no notice of his death or promotion, nor of the appointment of his successor; but in 1670 there is an entry of the burial of Francis Chamberlain, vicar. He was immediately succeeded by William Hawkins, who was vicar for fifty-nine years, dying in 1730. The mottoes which he wrote in the register in 1694—

“Nisi quietus enim nihil beatus est.” *Epicur. Mor.*

καὶ φιλοτιμῆσαι ἡσυχάζειν. 1 Thess. iv. 11.

show perhaps the secret of his longevity. He was quiet, therefore he was happy; and he strove to avoid strife. He married Mary Roberts, a sister of the last Roberts of Neasdon, who was buried under a blue slab close to the altar. His curate Thomas Knight married Eleanor, another sister, so that the chief proprietor of the parish, the vicar, and

the curate were brothers-in-law. Hawkins died in 1730, and was succeeded by Thomas Hillman, who was vicar at the close of the register.

In the register there is but one centenarian noticed: William Franklyn, who died in 1627, is said to have been 107 years old.

An interesting subject connected with registers is the scale of fees; there are, however, very few details in this register.

In 1599 James Forth paid 15*s.* to be buried in the church; a large fee, which we shall see was not allowed to be a precedent.

In 1724 there are receipts of Dr. Hawkins for 5*s.* and 7*s.* 6*d.* for marriage fees.

In 1694 I find a memorandum that three people had left their fees unpaid; one of them was a cobbler.

Among other curious items are the notices of collections. In the seventeenth century, before the invention of fire insurance, it seems to have been the custom whenever a farm or house was burnt to send a begging petition, to friendly or neighbouring parishes, for the relief of the sufferers.

In 1659, 1*l.* 3*s.* 3*d.* was collected towards a brief granted to S. Bride's, London, for relief of their losses by fire. In the same year 1*l.* 7*s.* 1*d.* was collected for loss by a fire in Suffolk.

And in 1660, 13*s.* was collected for the relief of a fire at Loude-water, I presume in Hertfordshire.

The French Protestants appear to have been favourites in Willesdon, for in 1688, 2*l.* 2*s.* 1*d.* was collected, and in 1694 2*l.* 1*s.* 11*d.* for the relief of the French Protestants then in England. I think there must have been some local cause for this sympathy, for I find a great many French names in the register, such as Rambouillet, Lefabre, Lemayre, Tamberlek, and there are allusions also to some refuge in the parish for poor Frenchmen.

Though the register appears to have been generally kept with considerable care, yet its guardians have permitted great liberties to be taken with its contents; some of its pages have been cut out; between 1587 and 1588 two pages have disappeared; alterations are numerous; there are insertions of names long after the proper date of entry. One of the most flagrant cases of erasure is to be found towards the end of the volume. In 1611 certain parishioners undertook the trusts of the charities, agreeing to render regular accounts, and signing their names to the document, which is a formal authorisation and

undertaking. Whatever they did they were ashamed of, for the objects of the trusts, and the name of the auditor, and the signatures of the more responsible of the trustees, have been carefully erased.

The register also contains the history of another case of gross neglect of public trusts. In 1629 Francis Roberts gave to the parish the rental of a piece of land, in trust to certain parishioners; these trusts were absolutely neglected, and the bequest lapsed. In 1660 his grandson, Sir William Roberts, resettled the trust, but he altered the conditions and made it of very much less use to the parish. From other sources I know that the trust was allowed to lapse again and again, and at the end of the last century the parish had to bring an action against the then owner of the land to regain it, and they were enabled to do so by the existence in the register of the first bequest and the first resettlement, signed by the original giver and his grandson.

One of the most curious comments which has been erased is to be found in the handwriting of Thomas Gyffard, the vicar in 1628.

On the burial of a child of Sir William Roberts, Gyffard remarks that "Sir William paid nothing for the child's christening or burying, that he offered but a 1*d.* for his lady's churching, and but 2*d.* for burying in the church." In face of the sum of 15*s.* paid in 1611 for the same privilege, we can understand the indignation of the parson at the meanness of the Lord of Neasdon, who, however, seems to have had the grace to feel the vicar's satire, though his mode of showing it was on a par with the act itself; for, when Sir William had the register in his own hands, he kept it for nearly five years, and the line has been carefully blotted. But the vicar used good ink, while the knight's blotting was made with ink that has almost totally faded, and the original satire shows black through the lines by which the attempt was made to obliterate it.

The register contains also a copy of the judgment in Chancery against the Governors of the Free School of John Lyon at Harrow, "for attempting to divert to purposes connected with the school the money that Lyon left to repair the Harrow and Edgeware Roads," and it also contains a copy of the will of Mr. Edward Harvist, Brewer, bequeathing land for the same purpose.

This paper is, I am afraid, already too long, or I had purposed to give some notices of the principal families found in the register. I cannot, however, conclude without a remark on the necessity of this

work of arranging, collating, and analysing all the documents connected with a parish. I am endeavouring to do this for Willesdon, and have succeeded in getting together a mass of details respecting it: the labour grows under my hands, but I hope, with time, to get it into order. Whatever may be the value of such work, it would be incalculably increased if it could be systematically undertaken in all parishes of the county. The work done in one parish is, by itself, comparatively useless, but as part of a larger scheme it would afford valuable materials for a history of Middlesex. It is just suited to an amateur; it gives occupation, while it is not necessarily all-engrossing; and, could such a work be inaugurated under the auspices of our Society, the result would, I believe, be most valuable, and would assuredly greatly redound to its credit.

ST. DIONIS BACKCHURCH.

BY WILLIAM DURRANT COOPER, F.S.A., V.P.

This is one of the few parishes and churches in England which take their name from the Arcopagite, one of the earliest converts made by St. Paul at Athens, and the first Bishop there. France has taken him for her patron saint; and the miracle of his walking two miles after his decapitation, though well refuted, still obtains credence.

In this country, however, he has not been equally popular; only five parishes and one hamlet* have had him as their saint, viz., one near St. Austin, in Cornwall, one in Lincolnshire, † a hamlet near Waltham, Hants, one, the parish of St. Dennis, Walmgate, in the City of York, and two parishes in the City of London; St. Dionis, Gracechurch Street, now destroyed, and this parish, which contains about three acres.

When the first church was here founded (for there have been three) is not known. It certainly existed temp. Edw. I., since we have the name of the rector, Reginald de Standen, in 1288. That church, or a portion of it, lasted till the reign of Henry VI., when it was wholly

* There was the Priory of Denny in Cambridgeshire and there is the Manor of that name.

† Alias Kirkeby la Thorpe. *Possessions of the Hospitalers. Camden Society.*