

THE MONASTERIES OF SHROPSHIRE: THEIR ORIGIN AND  
FOUNDERS.—LILLESHELL ABBEY.<sup>1</sup>

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THERE are few subjects of that class and period, whereunto the foundation of Lilleshall Abbey belongs, which can be more exactly described both as regards dates and circumstances. Much of this has been ably done already,<sup>2</sup> and the object of the present narrative is mainly to supply a few additions to, and to suggest some trifling corrections in, former accounts.

Richard de Belmeis, first Bishop of that name, who held the See of London, died January 16, 1127. He had been for a great portion of his life the representative or Viceroy of Henry I. in Shropshire. He died seized of a temporal estate in that county, which included the manor of Tong, also of several churches, and of the deanery or chief prebendal interest in the church of St. Alkmund, Shrewsbury. The last he held immediately of the king.

At his death he left two nephews, sons of his brother Walter. The elder of these, Philip, was his temporal heir, and so became at once lord of Tong. The younger, Richard, was not yet of age, but was already destined for the Church.

In the years 1138 and 1139, or about that time, Philip de Belmeis seems to have been interested in the prosperity of Buildwas Abbey, a Savigniac house recently founded in Shropshire, by Roger de Clinton, Bishop of Chester. The manner in which he encouraged that establishment, and his own personal admission into the fraternity of Savigny preclude all idea of his having a contemporary admiration for any other religious order.

Before many years had passed—specifically before the year 1145, Philip de Belmeis was of another mind. The

<sup>1</sup> Communicated to the Historical Section, at the Meeting of the Institute in Shrewsbury.

<sup>2</sup> History of Shrewsbury (Owen and Blakeway), ii. 265, u.

introduction of regular, as distinct from secular canons, into England, belongs to no earlier period than the reign of Henry I., and according to one account, the elder Richard de Belmeis had been instrumental, about A.D. 1108, to their first settlement in this country.<sup>3</sup> During the next thirty years, many colleges of secular canons were changed into regulars, and many houses of the latter class were newly founded.

In the Lateran Council of 1139, all regular canons throughout the dominions of St. Peter were subjected to the rule of St. Augustine; but there was a sect of this order which had long previously professed an improvement on its fundamental ordinances, and which from its first house having been dedicated to St. Nicholas of Arras, and situated near that city, was called Arroasian. A number of these latter canons are said to have been introduced into England in 1140, under the auspices of Alexander the Magnificent, Bishop of Lincoln. They were placed at Dorchester in Oxfordshire, once the episcopal seat of Alexander's predecessors, and where probably a college of secular canons made way for these Arroasians.

Within five, probably within three, years of this date, the Dorchester canons were ready to increase their influence by emigration. Some of them found their way into Shropshire, where Philip de Belmeis was their first patron. By a charter, addressed to Roger, Bishop of Chester, he gave them a tract of land in his manor of Tong, now known as the Lizard Grange, and other advantages, which, be it observed, must have somewhat qualified the value of his previous favours to Buildwas. Verbally, his charter conveys "land to found a Church in honour of St. Mary (given) to Canons of the Order of Arroasia, who had come from the Church of St. Peter at Dorchester, and are serving God and St. Mary there" (that is, in the locality now given to them), "regularly," (that is, according to the Rule of Regular Canons).

This humble introduction under the patronage of a Shropshire knight, was a prelude to greater fortunes; but before I pass to the next event which befel these Arroasian canons, I must resume my account of Richard, younger nephew of Richard de Belmeis, Bishop of London. When

<sup>3</sup> Viz. at Christ Church, within Aldgate, London.

the latter had been dead about seven months, that is, in August, 1127,<sup>4</sup> King Henry I. is known to have been waiting on the coast of Hampshire for a favourable opportunity of crossing the Channel. Doubtless to the same period belongs a charter dated at Portsmouth, whereby the king grants to Richard de Belmeis, nephew of the deceased Bishop, all the "Churches, Lands, and things" which having in the first instance been held by Godebald and Robert his son, had since been held by the Bishop, of the King.

There is every presumption that we rightly indicate the gift thus conveyed, if we say that it consisted of the prebendal estates of Lilleshall, Atcham, Uckington, and Preston Gobalds, with the Churches thereon, and that the whole constituted a preponderating interest in the Collegiate Church of St. Alkmund, Shrewsbury.

Richard de Belmeis, whom we will only call Chief Prebendary of St. Alkmunds, was at this time hardly of age. He was nevertheless a dignitary of St. Paul's, London, and had actually been appointed Archdeacon of Middlesex by his uncle several years before. His extreme youth, however, had induced an arrangement whereby one Hugh, a Chaplain, had custody of the archdeaconry, to hold as it were *in commendam*, till Belmeis should attain a fitting age. This period arrived during the episcopacy of Gilbert the Universal (January, 1128, August, 1134); but the archdeacon in possession forgot or evaded his oath; and his refusal to resign his trust was countenanced by Bishop Gilbert. The death of the latter prelate was followed by a long vacancy in the See of London. In 1138, Richard de Belmeis went to Rome as a representative of the Chapter of St. Paul's in its opposition to the election of Anselm to that bishopric. The appeal succeeded, and Belmeis then brought forward his own personal grievance in regard to the archdeaconry of Middlesex. This matter the Pope (Innocent II.) referred back to the decision of two English bishops (Hereford and Lincoln), who before the end of the year gave sentence in favour of Belmeis. In apparent connexion with his induction to this office, Belmeis was ordained deacon in December, 1138, by Henry, Bishop of Winchester, at com-

<sup>4</sup> Monasticon, vi, 262, Num. II. Mr. Blakeway (Hist. Shrewsbury, II. 264, note 3) dates this charter in August, 1128,

but Simeon of Durham's Chronology of the period (which Mr. B. followed) is erroneous by a year.

mand of the papal legate, Alberic, who was then visiting England.

In July 1141, for that undoubtedly is the date of the document referred to, I find Archdeacon Richard de Belmeis in the court of the empress at Oxford, and attesting her charter to the Shropshire Abbey of Haughmond.<sup>5</sup> It was the era of her pride and triumph, for Stephen was then her prisoner. Among her other attendants, were David, King of Scotland, Robert de Sigillo, recently appointed to the long vacant see of London, Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, Reginald, earl of Cornwall, William and Walter Fitz-Alan, and Alan de Dunstanville,—the four last all associated with Shropshire history.

The release of Stephen towards the close of this same year, again set the kingdom in a blaze. Political parties were once more confounded, and many men re-adjusted their allegiance as interest or passion might direct. Amidst all this turmoil and distrust, it is marvellous to observe the impulse which was given to religious institutions. Stephen and the Empress vied in their patronage of the Church, not befriending different orders in opposition to each other, but more commonly lavishing their jealous favours on the same.<sup>6</sup> Meantime, there were men whose conduct, favourably interpreted, would indicate that they belonged to no political party, and of whom the worst that can be said is, that they adhered to each party in turn, according as it might suit their designs; designs, I mean, not of rapine or bloodshed, but of peace and benevolence. These men pursued their ends without molestation, nay, often with double encouragement.

Among them was Richard, Archdeacon of Middlesex, who, whether at the suggestion of his brother Philip, or in sympathy with the bishop of Lincoln, selected the Arroasian order for his munificent favour. His first step, taken, I doubt not, in 1144, was to transfer them from the Lizard to Donington Wood, a part of his prebendal estate of Lilleshall, not six miles distant from their first abode. This he did, doubtless, under a full assurance of that consent, temporal as well as ecclesiastical, which followed his act.

<sup>5</sup> Harleian MSS., 2188, fo. 123.

<sup>6</sup> The eleemosynary charters of Stephen and the Empress are usually found in pairs. Often, too, *mutatis mutandis*, they

are verbal copies of each other. The policy of the rivals in this respect being once made known, of course the chartered bodies availed themselves largely of it.

We know that in the spring of 1145, Stephen was occupied in the eastern counties, specifically in Norfolk and Suffolk ; we know that at the same time, Imarus, Bishop of Tusculum, was in England as legate of Pope Lucius II., who died during his deputy's embassy, viz. on Feb. 26, 1145.

This, then, is the proximate date of a charter<sup>7</sup> whereby king Stephen, then at Bury St. Edmunds, "at the prayer of Archdeacon Richard, grants and concedes to the Canons Regular, of Duninton, the prebend which the said Richard had in the church of St. Alchmund at Salopesbery, and all his demesne and things, and moreover, all the other prebends of the aforesaid church, whenever they should fall vacant."<sup>8</sup> The first witness of this charter was Imarus, Bishop of Tusculum, legate, the second Robert (de Betun), Bishop of Hereford.

It is obvious to me that the consent of the diocesan Bishop (Roger de Clinton) to this enormous transfer of Church estates was as yet wanting, and I know not that it will be extravagant to associate his hesitation with a very natural feeling of jealousy in behalf of his own foundation of Buildwas, which had already been brought into a kind of rivalry by Philip de Belmeis' adoption of the Arroasian canons in preference to the Savigniac monks. Still suggesting, rather than asserting, I venture to point out how Eugenius III. succeeded to the papal chair in March 1145 ; how Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, the great patron of the Arroasians, was in especial favour with that pontiff ; how he visited him at Rome in 1145-6, and again at Auxerre in 1147 ; and how, within those intervals, Roger Bishop of Chester had the Pope's order to confirm Richard de Belmeis' endowment of the Donington canons.—

We know the latter fact, not from any existing charter of Bishop Clinton, but from a succeeding and further confirmatory charter of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury, which is preserved and records the circumstance.<sup>9</sup>

Theobald's charter, even if written in his exile, was appa-

<sup>7</sup> Lilleshall Chartulary, in possession of the Duke of Sutherland, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup> Or "be surrendered" by the existing prebendaries ; for I take it that the reading of the original, was "quando dilabuntur." Perhaps, however, (whenever they should lapse) was the expression used.

<sup>9</sup> The original deed, with a perfect seal of the Archbishop, is among the Duke of Sutherland's Muniments at Trentham. A copy thereof (given *Monasticon*, vi., 263, Num. VII.) is from fo. 46 of the Lilleshall Chartulary.

rently written before he knew of the death of Roger de Clinton, and therefore in or before 1148. It indicates one if not two changes which had taken place since Stephen's confirmation. It speaks of Belmeis' gift as intended for the building of an abbey in the *Wood of Lilleshull*. Thither, therefore, had the canons at length removed, viz. to a site three miles distant from Donington Wood. There they remained. Lilleshall Abbey was therefore commenced between the years 1144 and 1148. Archbishop Theobald also calls Richard de Belmeis, *Dean of St. Alkmunds*, and describes his particular *prebend* to be that of *Lilleshull and Hetingeham* (Atcham).

If Belmeis had only recently become Dean of St. Alkmunds, and probably such was the case,<sup>1</sup> it was obviously that he might have every facility for converting the secular into the regular establishment, a business which we know to have been substantively and eventually completed. Thus, whether in Belmeis' time, or later, all the prebendal estates of St. Alkmund's became the property of the canons of Lilleshall.

The next charter which I should notice, is the confirmation of the empress Matilda to Lilleshall Abbey.<sup>2</sup> This interesting document seems to me to have passed very soon after she quitted England, viz. in 1148, but I must speak of it with caution, as its nearly obliterated condition makes some of the few words which I fancy myself to have deciphered very problematical.—

Matilda, the empress daughter of king Henry, addresses William Fitz-Alan and Walter (perhaps his brother) and all her faithful in Shropshire with greeting. She receives William, Abbot of Lylleshull and the canons, who are there serving God for the souls of her father Henry and her mother Matilda, and for the welfare of herself and hers, under her tutelage and protection. Wherefore, her will and mandate was, that the aforesaid William and his canons should hold all their things freely and quietly: viz. the Church of St. Alcmund, of Salop, with its appurtenances and franchises as already confirmed to them by episcopal authority. The witnesses seem to be, H. (Hugh) Archbishop of Rouen; Joceline, Bishop of Sarum; Philip, Bishop of Baieux;

<sup>1</sup> The name of the Dean of St. Alkmund's, at the close of Henry I.'s reign, and probably at the commencement of

Stephen's, was Adam. *Monasticon*, vol. vii. 750, No. xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Lilleshall Chartulary, p. 44.



Richard, her chancellor; Robert de Curcy; William de Ansgervill. The deed (I think) is dated at Faleise.

We must now say a word as to the confirmation of Walter Durdent, Bishop of Coventry (consecrated 2 Oct. 1149), which seems to me to have passed soon after his succession, and before September, 1152,<sup>3</sup> when Richard de Belmeis was elevated to the see of London. The latter person is mentioned in Durdent's charter only as Dean of St. Alkmund's. His conversion of the secular prebends is spoken of as a thing done. The building of the Abbey of St. Mary, in the wood at Lilleshall, has commenced. The previous confirmations of king Stephen, pope Eugenius, archbishop Theobald, and bishop Clinton, are all alluded to.<sup>4</sup>

Next follows the Charter of Henry duke of Normandy, sought and obtained by the prudent canons of Lilleshall while that prince was still an exile. It merely confirms the Church of St. Alkmund's with all the privileges which it enjoyed in time of Henry I. It is attested by Arnulf, bishop of Liseux, (Humphrey) de Bohun. Walcheline Maminot, William fitz Hamon, Warin fitz Gerald, Richard fitz Haldebrond, and Manasser Biset. It is dated at Argentan, in Normandy, and passed probably in 1151.<sup>5</sup>

The same prince's charter, after he ascended the throne, is a document of some historical interest. He confirms all things, quoting the previous charter and grant of his "Lady the Empress," a mode of designating his mother, which I have not elsewhere met with. The deed is attested by R. (Robert)<sup>6</sup> Bishop of Lincoln, R. (Richard) Bishop of London, Thomas the Chancellor, Manasser Biset Dapifer, Warin fitz Gerald Chamberlain, Robert de Dunstanville and Joceline de Baliol.<sup>7</sup> It is also dated at Alrewas "in exercitu," a circumstance which, with the witnesses' names, proves the

<sup>3</sup> There is a doubt about this. One of the witnesses is Geoffry Abbot, of Combermere, and William, *first* Abbot of Combermere, is said to have been living in 1153, viz., when "Pelton Abbey was founded." There is, however, a strong presumption that the foundation of Pelton was earlier than 1153. If so, the objection to dating Walter Durdent's confirmation earlier than 1153, is invalid.

<sup>4</sup> Monasticon, vi. 263, No. iv.

<sup>5</sup> The date is assigned on these grounds. Henry became Duke of Normandy early in 1151, by cession of his father Geoffry.

In the autumn of that year he became also Earl of Anjou by his said father's death; and in 1152 he acquired further titles by his marriage with Eleanor of Poitou. In the deed before us, he simply styles himself Duke of Normandy, but he is known to have used his other titles before his accession to the throne of England. The presumption therefore is that he used them as they accrued. (Vide Lilleshall Chartulary, p. 44.)

<sup>6</sup> The name *Richard* has been used here by error of the transcriber.

<sup>7</sup> Lilleshall Chartulary, p. 44.

deed to have passed in the first year of Henry's reign (1155); but whether the king took Alrewas (Staffordshire) in his line of march when going to or returning from York in February, or when going to or returning from Shropshire in July, seems uncertain.<sup>8</sup>

A contemporary precept of the same king gives the abbot and canons of Lilleshall a new privilege, viz., an exemption from "toll and passage," under a penalty of 10*l.* recoverable from any one who should charge them with such dues.

It would be beside my present purpose to attempt even a summary of the various grants and privileges which were bestowed on Lilleshall Abbey within the first century after its foundation. Neither will I enumerate the bulls of popes, or the charters of kings, archbishops, and bishops, which confirmed and recorded these successive benefactions.

As, however, I profess to give full particulars of the *Foundation* of Lilleshall, it seems fitting to relate whatever more is known of its founder,<sup>9</sup> Richard de Belmeis.

Notwithstanding all his ecclesiastical dignities, he was not ordained priest till September 20, 1152, when his previous election to the See of London rendered that preliminary to his consecration imperative. His consecration followed at Canterbury, on Sunday, September 28, 1152, Archbishop Theobald officiating, and nearly every English Bishop attending.—

Henry of Winchester, the only notable absentee, sent a message to the synod excusing his own non-attendance, but expressing in high terms his assent to Belmeis' promotion. Elegance of person, polished manners, industrious activity, and scientific accomplishment, are all attributed to the new bishop by his great panegyrist, who predicts that the tree now to be planted in God's temple will, with divine help, flourish and be fruitful. Such was the pious tone assumed by Henry of Blois, who, though not as yet sated with ambition and statecraft, gave after-evidence that he sometimes spoke both solemnly and sincerely.

Richard de Belmeis, Bishop of London, seems to have been a party to the conventions which, in 1153, gave peace to the

<sup>8</sup> Antiquities of Shropshire, by the Rev. R. W. Eyton, vol. i. p. 249.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the term co-founder would be more correct, with reference to the share

which Philip de Belmeis had in the matter. For an account of him, see Antiquities of Shropshire, vol. ii. pp. 201-6.



distracted nation by settling the succession on Henry Duke of Normandy.

On December 19, 1154, he attended the coronation of that prince at Westminster. I find him occasionally but not often at court in 1155; and Prince Henry, who was born at London on February 28, was baptised by Bishop Belmeis.

The next year the king was in Normandy, but a court held at Colchester May 24, 1157, was attended by Belmeis. Not again at any later period do I hear of him in public or in attendance on the king. He died on the fourth of May, 1162, after suffering for many years from some disorder which, as one of the chroniclers informs us, deprived him of speech.<sup>1</sup> His uncle, the former Bishop of London, was, as we know, attacked by paralysis many years before his death, and the nephew's malady was not improbably of a similar nature. His age at his death must have been considerably less than sixty.

No record remains of his having done anything for the fabric of the Church of St. Paul's, the Cathedral of his See. His whole cares of this kind were probably devoted to the completion of that Augustine Abbey of which we have been speaking. It was associated with the neighbouring heritage of his kinsmen and with the memories of his own early advancement:—it was situated also in the county which had nursed the greater genius and fortunes of his illustrious uncle.

<sup>1</sup> Joh. Hagustald. col. 278.