

Original Documents.

INDULGENCE GRANTED BY JOHN VEYSEY, BISHOP OF EXETER (1519—1551), FOR THE MAINTENANCE OF A BEACON-LIGHT AT THE CHAPEL OF ST. NICHOLAS, ILFRACOMBE, DEVON.

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THE inhabitants of several parts of the maritime county of Devon, with its extensive northern and southern coasts, seem at an early period to have venerated St. Nicholas as a patron saint. There are many churches and chapels in Devon dedicated in his honor, and the great Priory of St. Nicholas at Exeter was devoted to this saint on its foundation by William the Conqueror, who made it dependent on his more important establishment at Battle Abbey. St. Nicholas was born at Patara, a city of Lycia, and became Archbishop of Myra, the capital of that province of Asia Minor. He is supposed to have died on December 6, A.D. 326, and to have been buried in that city. His memory has been held in particular veneration by the Western Churches since the year 1087, when his relics were removed from Lycia to Bari, on the coast of Italy, opposite to Ragusa. The popularity of the saint was great, and he appears to have been specially venerated by sailors and fishermen, and also by merchants and mariners trading from shore to shore through the perils of the sea. This *cultus* seems to date from an early period: it has been attributed by Hospinian, in his treatise on the origin of Christian Feasts, to certain legendary statements, to which allusion is made by Vincentius and Mantuanus. The latter, a poet of the fifteenth century, writes thus:—

“ Cum turbine nautæ
Deprensi Cilices magno clamore vocarent
Nicolai viventis opem, descendere quidam
Cœlituum visus sancti sub imagine patris,
Qui freta depulso fecit placidissima vento.”

Among the miracles attributed to him was the saving of the ship, in which he had embarked for the Holy Land, from a terrible storm, and restoring to life a sailor who had fallen overboard and was drowned.¹ St. Nicholas appears to have been especially popular in seaport towns; and there are no less than 376 churches in England dedicated in his honor.

At Ilfracombe, in Devonshire, there appears to have been a chapel, situated on a conical hill rising immediately above the harbour, dedicated to St. Nicholas, as early as the reign of Edward III., when the town was

¹ See Gent. Mag. vol. lx. p. 1076.

called upon to furnish six ships to the fleet of that monarch ; it had then already become a maritime port of some consideration. This chapel of St. Nicholas was doubtless resorted to by sailors and others connected with shipping, who were desirous to implore the saint's intercession for prosperous voyages and fair weather, just as we now see the celebrated Chapel of Notre Dame de la Garde, on the south of the town and harbour, above the Fort of Saint Nicholas at Marseilles, crowded by devotees previously to embarking or on their return from a voyage. There exists also in Minorca, as related by Armstrong in his history of that island, a remarkable chapel of St. Nicholas, near the entrance of the harbour of Ciudella, to which mariners resorted frequently, and presented pictures representing their perils or deliverance through the intercession of the saint. Numerous votive tablets were thus suspended in the fane, according to an usage to which Horace and other writers allude as prevalent in much earlier times. Bion the philosopher, as we are told, saw such votive paintings hanging up in a temple of Neptune near the sea-side.²

The *cultus* of this saint being so generally recognised amongst mariners, it was highly suitable that a beacon-light for their safety should be placed in any church or chapel dedicated to him, and situated on or near the coast. In the year 1522 we find accordingly that the Chapel at Ilfracombe was made use of for such a purpose, as appears from the following curious document, of which the original is preserved in the Episcopal Registers at Exeter. It is here printed from a transcript made by our late venerable friend, the Rev. Dr. Oliver, to whose investigation of ecclesiastical antiquities in Devon we have on so many occasions been indebted.

The Chapel-Hill, or St. Nicholas' Hill, in course of time received the name of "the Lantern Hill," its present designation ; the sacred character of the building on its summit probably ceased at the time of the Reformation, when the missive of the bishop had no longer any influence; but the beacon-light had been found too useful to be done away with, and to the present time it has continued to guide the mariners to the harbour of Ilfracombe. It is now a well regulated light-house, with modern improvements, whilst part of the building is used as a reading-room.

In Murray's Handbook for Devon is the following notice of the Lantern Hill:—"On Lantern Hill stands the light-house, about 100 feet above the sea, a quaint-looking building for the purpose, and, in fact, an ancient chapel, which was dedicated to St. Nicholas, and the resort of pilgrims, but which probably at all times displayed a light for the guidance of fishermen. A part of the building is now fitted as a news-room for the inhabitants and visitors." The position of the light-house is well shown in the view of Ilfracombe harbour given by Lysons in the *Magna Britannia*, History of Devon, vol. ii., p. 289.

There is also a view of Ilfracombe in Moore's *Devonshire*, in which the Chapel-Hill is fairly represented. Ilfracombe, or Ilfordcombe, it may be remembered, is a place of interest to the topographer and the antiquary, as having been for some time, it is believed, the residence of the learned Camden. It is a prebend in the church of Salisbury, and was held by him as a lay prebend.

² See the notes to St. Nicholas's Day, in Brand's *Popular Antiquities*, vol. i., edit. Ellis, 1841, p. 231.

REGISTER OF JOHN VEYSEY, BISHOP OF EXETER, vol. ii., fol. 13.

Document dated 15 April, 1522.

Johannes, permissione divina Exoniensis Episcopus, universis et singulis Rectoribus, Vicariis, Capellanis, et Curatis quibuscunque per Diocesim nostram Exoniensem ubilibet constitutis, salutem, gratiam, et benedictionem. Gratum et acceptum admodum altissimo tociens impenditur obsequium quociens piis operibus in charitatis visceribus devotius insistitur, que iram nostri Redemptoris apud humanam fragilitatem mitigant, et misericordias complacendo excitant Salvatoris. Cum itaque, sicut fide digna relatione accepimus, in quadam capella Divi Nicholai super Portu Ville de Ilfardcomb nostre Exoniensis Diocesis fundata luminare quoddam singulis annis per totam hyemem nocturnis temporibus in summitate dicte capelle ardens, velut stella nocte choruscans, invenitur, cujus splendores de longinquo aspicientes quamplures naves (que)³ procellarum impetibus tempestatibusque in mediis spatiosi maris fluctibus miserabiliter ad mortem usque sepe numero periclitantur, atque debitos cursus, in dicti luminis fuissent⁴ occasione adjute, derelinquentes, tute in portum de Ilfardcomb predictum recipiuntur. Sed, quoniam dicte Ville inhabitantium absque piis aliorum Christi fidelium elemosynis amplius ad dicti luminaris sustentationem⁵ minime suppetunt facultates, de Dei igitur Omnipotentis immensa misericordia, beatissimeque Virginis Marie matris sue, beatorumque Apostolorum Petri et Pauli, Patronorum nostrorum, omniumque Sanctorum meritis et precibus confidentes, omnibus Parochianis vestris, et aliis quorum Diocesani hanc nostram. Indulgentiam ratam habuerint pariter et acceptam, de peccatis suis vere penitentibus et confessis, qui ad inventionem seu sustentationem dicti luminis manus porrexerint adjutrices, xl. dies Indulgentie de injunctis sibi penitentiis misericordati in Domino relaxamus per presentes. Datum ut supra.

³ *Que* seems here wanting to complete the sense.

⁴ Though this word seems singular,

the transcript appears to read thus.

⁵ *Sustentatione* in the transcript, probably an accidental error.