

A DESCRIPTION OF FIVE FINGER-RINGS AND TWO SEALS,  
THE PROPERTY OF THE MARQUESS OF RIPON, K.G., &c.

(Exhibited at the Ripon Congress, July, 1874, and at the Monthly Meeting held in  
London, November 6, 1874.<sup>1</sup>)

OF the series of finger rings and seals that I am about to describe, four or five at least were found at various times among the ruins of Fountains Abbey, near Ripon, long before that most lovely and interesting spot was owned by their present possessor, by whom they were exhibited at the Ripon meeting of our Institute, and since at the Society's rooms. They are altogether seven in number, of which five are rings and two are seals.

The circumstances and period under which they were severally found unfortunately do not seem to have been noted. Three at least of them were in the possession of the Messenger family, owners of the estate and occupants of Fountains Hall when Dr. Burton wrote his "Monasticon Eboracense" (London: 1758-59, fol.), in which work, on the engraving that faces page 140, he has figured those numbered 2, 6, 7, on our plate. Burton writes, "most of these seals have been found at different times in the ruins of this Abbey, and are now in possession of Mr. Messenger."

It is presumable, from this passage, that some others, besides those which he has figured, were seen by Burton in Mr. Messenger's possession, but we are without particulars. From the Messengers they probably passed into the hands of Mr. W. Aislabie, of Studley, who purchased the estate from that family in 1768, and with it have since become the property of its present noble and hospitable owner.

Walbran, in his excellent "Guide" (p. 89, ed. 1851) states that on the removal of the mass of cinders and rubbish in the coal yard adjoining the Abbot's kitchen, during the excavations made in 1848, a silver spoon, a silver ring, and a brass ring were found, but we have no means of distinguishing which, if either, is among those before us. One of them, a silver ring, but which we know not, was found, as his Lordship informs me, in 1855. To commence with the rings:—

No. 1. A signet ring of bronze, the bezel of elongate octagonal form, the hoop in alternating spiral bands, which, commencing at the three narrower sides of the octagon as slightly convex members, are divided from each other by a line of beading. On their wider ends, at the shoulders of the ring, they are each incised with two leafy sprays or buds, which have originally been filled in with enamel, an enrichment that also occurs on gold rings of the same period and fashion; the colours still perceptible are white and very dark red. Can these be intended for rose-buds, alternately white and red, to denote the nascent union of the two great rival houses of York and Lancaster? which event took place at the accession of Henry VII. in 1485, and to which approximate period this ring may be assigned. It has been richly gilt, and from its large size

<sup>1</sup> See p. 107.



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



6.



7.

Seals and Rings found at Fountains Abbey,  
and  
in the possession of the Marquess of Ripon.

would seem to have been worn on the thumb. On the bezel is deeply incised a bearded male head, whose brows are encircled with a twisted fillet, tied in a bow and falling behind. The inscription, in old English characters, reads *Ricardus Scherdr.* A corded edging surrounds the whole.

It might at first be thought that this is a ring of magical or prophylactic virtue, and that the head represented was that of John the Baptist, the potent spell against the falling sickness or epilepsy; but there is no charger or cup, as usually shown, containing the severed head of the Precursor; nor is it an heraldic bearing. It may possibly convey some covert allusion to the owner, a *rebus*, but the force of it does not occur to me, and I am more disposed to consider it as a merchant's mark, a Saracen's or wild man's head—perhaps the sign of the owner's warehouse. In all respects this is a fine and interesting ring, and is in a good state of preservation.

No. 2 is a monster ring of brass or latten, a signet, which also has been gilded; the shank plain and of nearly semi-circular section, swelling to the bezel, which is slightly raised and of a somewhat ovoid circular form. This bears, in deep intaglio, the head and bust, in full face, of an ecclesiastic, perhaps of a sainted abbot, but more probably that of S. Bernard, the type of the Cistercian order. He holds a pastoral staff or crozier in the right hand; his hair is cut short over the forehead, the tonsured head being surrounded by a dotted nimbus or aureole. Over his left shoulder is the old English letter *h*; an imperfectly defined corded moulding forms the edging. Though the period would approximate, it is hardly probable that this could have been the seal ring of Marmaduke Huby, who was created Abbot in 1494, and whose initials are seen above the lowest west window of the tower at Fountains Abbey, as in a niche above the ridge of the transept his probable effigy is still visible.

The ring is very coarsely made by casting to a pattern, the head and bust of the saint not having been incised but cast in intaglio, and little, if at all, touched up by the graver, small signs of its working being perceptible, except upon the letter *h*, which shows distinct marks of tooling. From this we may surmise that such rings may have been made in quantity, perhaps for the use of certain members of the order, each individual one having its owner's initial superadded; or as tokens of pilgrimage to the shrine of S. Bernard. It is probably of the later decades of the fifteenth century, and is one of the three represented (but not very accurately) in Burton's "Monasticon," and described by him as "a ring seal worn on the thumb."

Layman or clerical, a stalwart Yorkshireman must have owned it; no meagre mannikin could have borne the weight of so much metal, or supply a digit of such dimension as two inches and three quarters in circumference! a marked development of thumb power quite beyond that of ordinary mortals in the present day.

No. 3. A silver thumb signet, of coarse workmanship, with corded hoop and elongated octagonal bezel, upon which is engraven a merchant's mark or emblem, that partakes in fashion of the cross and the *caduceus*, in combination with some letters. We may perhaps infer therefrom that our cautious trader wished to propitiate the pagan as also the Christian powers! On either side of the "mark" is a spray of laurel (?), and the

whole is surrounded by a beaded or corded edging. Although rude, this is an interesting merchant's signet of the end of the fifteenth or earlier years of the sixteenth century. The corded moulding or edging, which occurs on several of these examples, and which is so frequent upon signet rings and seals of the fifteenth and following centuries, may have originated in the habit of surrounding the brittle wax of the seal with a twisted band of grass, straw, or parchment, in the form of a fillet, by which it was protected from fracture or abrasion; a practice which came into use in the fourteenth century.

No. 4 is a curious ring of betrothal or matrimonial character. It is a flat hoop of silver, half an inch wide, the lower portion of which, to the extent of about one fourth of the whole circumference, is formed into two interclasped hands—the well-known *fede* or betrothal emblem. The hoop portion is divided by engraving into four panels, each of the first three bearing a letter of the sacred monogram *i h c*, and the fourth a palm branch.

These letters, and their surrounding edges, are reserved in the plain surface of the metal, the ground around them being incised by cross hatching with the graving tool. I find no signs of enamel or niello, but this ring has been gilt.

Figures of saints, and the sacred monogram, are frequently met with on rings of the fifteenth century, and were not restricted to those for the use of ecclesiastics. One of silver, in the Londresborough collection, has the clasped hands, and the inscription ✠ IESUS . NAZARUS . REX . We may therefore assume that this was a layman's ring, and probably had served to record the betrothal of his future wife, or his marriage with her. It is of a somewhat unusual type.

No. 5 is probably a prophylactic or cabalistic ring: a plain band of silver one-sixth of an inch wide, formed into a simple hoop, and engraved outside with the inscription shown upon our plate, which may be in old French, but which has defied the most cunning readers to interpret. It also is probably of the fifteenth century.

No. 6 is the bronze matrix of a seal which has been figured in the *Monasticon*, but certainly is not that of an Abbot of Fountains, as has been supposed. Moreover, no abbot is recorded of the name of Peter, since Peter Aling in 1274, throughout the lists given by Burton or by Dugdale. It is apparently of the latter part of the fifteenth century or early sixteenth. One inch and an eighth in diameter, it is circular in form, having engraved in the centre a shield with the bearings, argent, a bordure engrailed — ? — over all a bend, sable. The head and shoulders of an angel, whose wings fall on either side, rise above and behind, as though balancing or supporting the shield, at the base of which, on each side, is a key, emblematic of the saint after whom the owner was named. The circumscription, in old English lettering, reads *S. Pierre . de . Fontaines .* it is filled in at its termination with three roses, and surrounded by a corded moulding. The upper portion and ring for suspension have been broken off, above a projection to which it tapers in a six sided form. I can find no traces of gilding.

It is, in all probability, the private *sigillum* of one Pierre de Fontaines, a member of one of the French families of that name, but in connection with which the shield does not appear to have been recorded. The nearest coat among English families, but differing in the colours,

seems to be that of Belkmore, viz., gules, a bordure engrailed argent, over all a bend of the last. Its occurrence among the ruins of Fountains may be considered as purely accidental.

No. 7 is a steel matrix of a seal of the "Curia" or Court of St. Mary of Fountains. It is circular, one sixteenth less than an inch in diameter, and engraved with a whole length figure of the Blessed Virgin, holding the Child on her right arm. Both have an aureola of rays above, and an awkwardly executed scarf or veil falls on either side of the Virgin's head; they are represented in full face, and her figure is rendered in a peculiarly squat manner, the engraver having, in a somewhat arbitrary way, apparently to adapt it to the limited space, curtailed the figure by leaving out the upper half of the legs from the knees, and the lower half the body from the waist! The arm is clothed with a full sleeve, and a short but ample skirt is worn beneath a tight-fitting bodice. The inscription ✠ CVRIA . B . MARIE . DE . FONTIBVS, in Roman character, surrounds the figures, and is encircled by a dotted edging.

The seal tapers to the stem in a conical form pared into eight sides, which unite beneath the lowest of four projecting members, the upper of which is faceted and surmounted by a loop for suspension. A seal, perhaps of somewhat earlier date, but of nearly similar design, is also engraved in the Monasticon, with the note "said to be the seal us'd at their court." In the collection of casts from seals made by the late Mr. Charles Spence, are two that have since been presented to the library of the Society of Antiquaries by Mr. Perceval, one of which seems to have been taken from Lord Ripon's matrix, the other from that engraved in Burton. On the latter the Virgin is represented as veiled and crowned; the figure and drapery are more correctly and artistically drawn, the legend similar, but the ✠ smaller.

The seal, now in the hands of Mr. Nicholson, the present Steward of the Court, may possibly be that figured by Burton.

Burton informs us that Richard II. confirmed to the Abbey all possessions, granting also "sac, soc, toll, team," &c., with the courts of all their tenants, nomination or removal of their own bailiffs and servants, and with power to inflict fines and forfeitures within the said precincts.

A peculiar ecclesiastical jurisdiction was also held by the Abbey of Fountains, but of which no trace remained in 1828. But it would seem that the Court still possesses certain functions which originally appertained to Fountains, and that it formerly had jurisdiction both for debt and criminal misdemeanor. A court is still held at Fountains, at which any transfer of property by sale or otherwise within the Manor and Liberty is registered, and to which court each occupier or owner in the said manor is liable to be summoned, as being a sort of fief or feoff to the lord of the manor—now the Marquess of Ripon. It also appears that they are still so summoned in rotation, but that practically the most severe penalty inflicted is perhaps that condition of mind and body which follows too good a dinner.

The seal figured by Burton was therefore that of the Court of the Manor and Liberty of Fountains, the powers of which were derived from the dissolved monastery, and probably is not older than the latter end of the sixteenth or earlier years of the seventeenth century; while that under consideration may be some fifty years more recent. It does not appear to have been under ground, and is only slightly rusted.

I am indebted to Mr. Carter, one of our hospitable entertainers at Ripon, and a member of the Institute, for some of the above information. The office of Steward to this Court is held by Mr. R. W. Nicholson, who also fulfils the duties of Town Clerk at Ripon, and is in possession of a duplicate seal of the "Curia" of Fountains.

From that gentleman I have since received the following rough notes ;—

"The monastery, having been founded by Thurston, Archbishop of York, in the reign of King Stephen, and having been largely endowed by most munificent gifts afterwards from subsequent benefactors, and thus rescued from the state of poverty and privation under which the first abbots and monks had so patiently and bravely struggled, had, in the reigns of Stephen, Henry II., Richard I., and succeeding monarchs, not only their possessions confirmed to them, but received also grants of 'Inspeximus' and confirmation, and other grants of almost every kind of privileges, franchises, and immunities (including privilege of sanctuary within, if not beyond, the boundaries of the 'site' or 'close' of the Abbey), which the sovereign could bestow or subjects could hold—besides which many ecclesiastical privileges and immunities were conferred by various Papal Bulls.

"Amongst many other franchises (not incident to ordinary feudal tenures) there was a Court of Pleas, having jurisdiction for the recovery of debts and the redress of other civil injuries, the jurisdiction of which long survived the dissolution of the monastery, in which plaints were entered and tried, in comparatively very recent times.

"The Court for the Manor *and Liberty* of Fountains, of which the most honourable the Marquess of Ripon is the lord, and his local solicitor, Mr. R. W. Nicholson, of Ripon, is the steward, and which was formerly held in the Court House, or (as it is called in the records of the Abbey) the 'Hall of Pleas,' is still held annually in Fountains Hall. The jurisdiction and franchises of the Court extend over all the large possessions of the monastery (wherever situate) at the time of the dissolution, and amongst the other franchises still maintained by the visitors and jurors of the Court, is the exemption from all chartered tolls throughout England, Wales, and Ireland."

C. D. E. FORTNUM.