

EASTON MAUDIT.¹

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Close to the stately Castle, and bordered by the lofty trees of Ashby Park, lies the little village of Easton Maudit, straggling along a winding lane south of the beautiful Decorated parish Church. Shut in and retired above all other Northamptonshire villages is this small collection of houses. To the west and south it is bounded by the park, deer chase, and woods which form the immense enclosure of Castle Ashby. Situated on no great high road, and approached only by lanes running for the most part through pastures and parks, and barred by field gates in true Northamptonshire fashion, it might well escape the notice of the passing traveller, were it not for its slender spire rising above the cedars of its ancient park.

It is the East town, afterwards shortened to Easton or Eston, which takes its distinguishing name from the lord of the manor in the time of Henry I, one William Malduith, the king's chamberlain, who married Maud, the heiress of the last owner of the Fee, Michael de Hanslape, and ward of the king. The name soon became corrupted from Malduith to Mauduit. The present form Maudit appears to be quite modern.

The property changed hands several times in the next following centuries, and in the reign of Elizabeth another heiress (of the family of Trussel) married the Earl of Oxford, who sold the manor to Sir Christopher Yelverton, the founder of the great family, originally from Rougham in the county of Norfolk, but so long connected with this place.

At Easton Maudit, as is often the case where the whole parish is in the hands of one family, and where consequently no one has an interest in making a profit out of each individual cottage, the Comptons allow the old people to remain on when past work. We find therefore many old Northamptonshire sayings and phrases in the mouths of Easton folk who have lived in the same restricted area all their lives, in a spot as yet unreached by the changing tide of shoemakers.

Names of families remain too in the registers for generations, besides the names of those who are commemorated on the monuments. The Coopers (of whom the present representative is the old parish clerk who remembers the funeral of the last Earl of Sussex, May Day, 1799); the Labretts (formerly Lebean); and the Faireys (sometimes oddly spelt Pharaoh) have been christened, married, and buried here for many generations, and their descendants still keep up the names.

There are other things worth notice in the Registers which go back to

¹ Read in the Historical Section at the Northampton Meeting, August 5th, 1878.

1539, and own their preservation to the illustrious vicar Thomas Percy. The actual records of this early date do not however exist, for, as Percy points out in a note in his own hand-writing: "A public scrivener in 1599 transcribed in one fair hand the earlier entries into the present volume." Percy caused the registers which he found, to be bound in one volume, with blank leaves of parchment added, which are still used for the record of events in the parish, other than christenings, burials, and marriages, which are entered in the usual books.

An entry in 1701 records how one of the Coopers, Thomas, a dissenter, died of small-pox, and was put into the ground in the churchyard, but "his widow and friends gave no notice to the vicar, because they would not have the office of the Church used at his interment." There are also such facts recorded as the death of an old lady of over 90 still keeping all her teeth in her head. A certificate attached to one of the pages of the register, tells us that one of the vicars, Francis Tolson, was buried in lambs'-wool, in 1745, in accordance with the Act of Parliament.

This Francis Tolson was for four years curate of the parish, but in 1736 Barbara, Dowager Viscountess Longueville, used her interest with the patrons (Ch. Ch., Oxford), and procured him the Vicarage. As a thank-offering and first fruits he gave 20s. to be put out to interest to provide six white loaves for the widows and orphans every third Sunday in Lent, probably the day when he read himself in. The old Lady Longueville also gave him a scarf, and made him chaplain to her grandson, the young Earl of Sussex. "Mr. Tolson was bred to the law," says Percy, "which accounts for the accuracy of his statements," and the future Bishop also gives us in the Register a list of the works published by his predecessor while he still followed the law.

In this volume also we find numerous references to the magnificent set of Altar plate at Easton Maudit so remarkable for its antiquity and history. Bishop Thomas Morton, the ejected prelate who found a refuge at Easton during the Commonwealth, gave a silver gilt chalice and cover with the initials T. M. engraved on them. Sir Henry Yelverton, his host, "that true son and great ornament of the Church of England," gave a silver gilt flagon and two patens about the same time. This information is given by Percy, and we find that when he was Incumbent, he was in the habit of receiving this plate from the custody of the Earl of Sussex and using it occasionally on Easter Day, as his predecessor Francis Tolson had done. The plate, he tells us, was given into the care of the Earl "in the time of the rebellion 1745," and "deposited for the greater security in a private place in Lord Sussex's library" (to such an extent had the dread of the wild highland followers of Charles Edward penetrated, that it alarmed the inhabitants of this retired village); and the fact of its removal from its hiding place and its use at the Easter celebration, is an event recorded three times with great solemnity, and attested by many witnesses.

Amidst the glories of the county the parish Church of St. Peter and St. Paul holds no mean place. It is an edifice of the later part of the Decorated period, and has the advantage of having been completed at once, without subsequent alterations or additions, except the Chapel of the Yelvertons with its strained arch, which is later, and may have been the Lady Chapel, and was at one time shut off from the Church, and entered by a private door at the north side. The Church consists of a

nave and two side aisles, with a chancel, north of which is the interesting chapel already referred to, containing very remarkable monuments erected over the vault below. From the tower at the west end rises a capital example of the later Northamptonshire steeples, pierced with three tiers of lights, and finished at the angles with pinnacles and flying buttresses. The spire was carefully repaired, and partly rebuilt in 1832. The advowson in the time of Edward III was given to the convent of Lavenden, Buckinghamshire, in an adjoining parish, and the church may have been built when they were patrons.

In the tower hang five bells, four of them bearing the date 1663, and three of them the maker's name, John Hudson. One bears the inscription, "God save our King," for these were the days when loyalty ran high after the restoration. One bell bears the initials, and another the full name of Sir Henry Yelverton, Bart., the friend of Bishop Morton, and donor of a portion of the famous altar service of plate, who doubtless gave this second present to the Church, when the King had got his own again. He died soon after in 1670.

The remaining bell has on it the motto: "*Dulcis sisto melis campana, vocor Gabrielis.*" It is of course the Angelus bell as is shown by its bearing the name of the angel of the Annunciation, though it is now rung at one o'clock instead of at noon-day, and at six in the morning, and six in the evening. It goes by the name of the French bell, as it is said to have been brought from Normandy.

The church was restored seventeen years ago, chiefly by the liberality of the late Marquis of Northampton, the then patrons (Christ Church, Oxford) contributing £25 out of a total of £2,527. They ceased to be patrons however in 1873.

The monuments are chiefly collected in the chapel to the north of the chancel, some being moved there from their original positions at the time of the restoration of the church. In the middle of the nave, however, the five children of Bishop Percy, who died while he was vicar of Easton, have been commemorated by modern tiles; and in the same way some other old slabs have been "restored" so to speak. One of these is the modern memorial of the old vicar Tolson, whose christian name is however strangely spelt Frances, an error reproduced, but not undesignedly, from the ancient inscription. Whether on account of his being unable to rest in his lambswool shroud, or whether because he is disturbed about this mistake, which probably originated with some ignorant stone-cutter, this lady-vicar is said by the village people to be often seen wandering disconsolately by the margin of the moat at the bottom of the vicarage grounds.

At the entrance to the chapel of the Yelvertons lies the slab of Bishop Morton, which formerly covered his grave near the altar, but was moved here unfortunately at the time of the church restoration. A Latin inscription records the eventful life of this confessor of the seventeenth century, who, after having been successively dean of Gloucester and Winchester, and bishop of Chester, Lichfield and Coventry, and Durham, was driven by the Puritans from his see, "*diuturnâ (heu nimium) ecclesiæ procella.*" At Easton House, after having been for some time the guest of his friend, Sir Christopher Yelverton, and tutor to his son Henry, he underwent, September 22nd, 1659, at the great age of ninety-five, "*senex et cœlebs,*" says the inscrip-

tion, "his last and happiest translation," says his chaplain and biographer, Dr. John Barwick, "from the vale of misery to a throne of glory." He was buried at Easton Maudit Church on the festival of St. Michael in the same year, and thus just missed the king's restoration, and his own probably to his see.

The Yelvertons themselves, knights, baronets, viscounts, and earls, together with some of their ancestors on the female side, are commemorated by two magnificent Jacobean tombs, besides some slabs and mural tablets. In the centre of the chapel a grand canopy supported by four pillars (commonly called in the place the bedstead), covers the tomb of the founder of the family at Easton, Sir Christopher Yelverton, serjeant-at-law, speaker of the House of Commons, and a justice of the Court of Queen's and King's Bench, in the reigns of Elizabeth and James I. The knight reclines in his robes and ruff beneath the canopy. By his side lies his wife, Dame Mary, of the family of Catesby, from the neighbouring parish of Whiston. Both effigies are of life size and of coloured alabaster; they exhibit all the most minute detail of dress and ornament, executed in that delicate manner which is one of the chief delights of the sculpture work of the period. On the north and south faces of the tomb on which the parents lie, kneel the children, four boys on one side, and eight girls on the other. One of these boys, by name Henry, also rose to the bench. He was attorney-general to James I, and knew the ups and downs of royal favour, for he was sent to the Tower in 1620 on account of some practices contrary to the wishes of the king, before he reached the Court of Common Pleas in the reign of Charles I. His monument is against the north wall of the chapel, and though as interesting, is perhaps hardly as well executed as that of his father. He died in 1629, and his effigy, in black gown and ruff, looks down from what is apparently one of the shelves of a bookcase, and is surrounded by the volumes of his library. On a lower shelf lies his wife Margaret, the daughter of Robert Beale, who was Queen Elizabeth's envoy in the Low Countries and elsewhere. Beneath kneel the four sons and five daughters.

The canopy above is supported by hooded mutes, upon whose cushioned heads rests the ponderous pediment of the monument. Between are emblems of death and burial, spade, bier, skulls, &c., worked into a tangled ribbon. The colouring of the whole is very perfect, and notwithstanding the quaint conceit of the bookshelves with their clasped volumes turned edge outwards, the monument is a remarkable specimen of the time when the Renaissance had taken the place of Gothic, and the Italian style was pervading this island.

The famous Yelverton Library "enriched with immense store of books, both printed and manuscript," was begun by this Sir Henry Yelverton with the diplomatic papers received through his wife of Robert Beale. Another Sir Henry added the manuscripts of his old tutor Morton, and his wife the Lady Longueville, Tolson's patroness, was at the same time engaged in collecting a series of portraits. The books were dispersed by public auction in 1784, and a list of the Beale papers is given in an Oxford catalogue of the Manuscripti Yelvertoniani 1672.

Old Sir Christopher's grandson, the third of that name, was both knight and baronet, but with his great great grandson, Henry Yelverton, begin the higher honours of the family. This Henry, first Viscount Longueville, was the son of the Sir Henry Yelverton who was the friend

and pupil of the aged Morton, and presented the plate and bells to the church, and placed the Bishop's manuscripts in the library. From his mother, Susanna Longueville Baroness Grey of Ruthyn, he received the name of his title. He died in 1703, and his son became Earl of Sussex, but the family shortly afterwards became extinct.

Some mural tablets and hatchments along the wall of the north aisle show us the arms of the family with various quarterings. Above hang the helmet, processional sword, tattered banner, and knightly gilt spurs of some ancestor.

The old mansion of the Yelvertons was pulled down quite at the close of the last century. It stood to the north-east of the church, and the fish ponds or moats which bounded its grounds to the west and north-east still exist, while the cedars which lined its gardens are still flourishing—a strange and unusual feature in an English hedgerow. The old park stretched away to the east, and is still an enclosure finely timbered, through which runs the public road shut off at each end by gates.

A sketch of Easton Maudit would not be complete without a reference to the vicariate of Thomas Percy. His care for the registers and church plate has already been mentioned, and in the former he has inscribed many facts concerning himself. He was presented to the living by his college, Christ Church, Oxford, and was instituted November 17th, 1753. He makes two notes of the event, and in one of them strangely enough gives the year as '63. Two vicars came between Francis Tolson and himself, one of them the vicar of Castle Ashby, a Pembroke man, the other a Christ Church man. The Pembroke man, observes Percy, was presented because he was a remote relation of Dr. South.

He mentions his own marriage with Anne Gutteridge of Desborough in this county, April 24th, 1759, at Desborough, and the entries of the births and deaths of their children follow. He resigned April 20th, 1782, when appointed to the bishopric of Dromore, but he had held the deanery of Carlisle along with the vicarage since 1778. Many of his literary works were completed in the old vicarage house, a portion of the present dwelling. His "*Reliques of Ancient English poetry*" were published in 1765 while he was still vicar of Easton.

Here he gathered round him "a brilliant literary society"—Dr. Johnson, Shenstone, Goldsmith, and Garrick were entertained by him at the vicarage. There is in Boswell's *Life* a letter by Johnson to Sir Joshua Reynolds, dated August 15th 1764; "at the Rev. Mr. Percy's at Easton Maudit, Northamptonshire, by Castle Ashby," in which the Doctor happily congratulates Sir Joshua on his recovery from sickness, saying that not having heard of his illness until he heard of his recovery, he had been spared much pain. The name of the great thinker is still associated with the vicarage by a raised terrace, which goes by the name of Johnson's Walk. Hence, doubtless, he often gazed on the slender spire rising above the then low-roofed vicarage. And here will we take leave of the home of Bishop Percy, and the sheepfold which he once shepherded.