

THE MONASTIC INSTITUTIONS OF COVENTRY.¹

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It is impossible to review the evidences which yet remain in the ancient city of Coventry of its ecclesiastical wealth and importance in the middle ages, without being convinced that it held no mean position compared with other cities of England in regard to its religious houses. We first meet with notice of it as possessing a nunnery of the Benedictine order said to have been founded by St. Osburg, and being under her especial charge. Of this convent we have not the slightest relic, and no particulars save the record of its destruction in the raid of Canute and Edric in 1016, nor is the actual site positively known. For nearly thirty years the place lay desolate, and then a new monastery was founded in 1043, under the auspices of Leofric, and his Countess Godiva. He was a nobleman high in the councils and personal esteem of Edward the Confessor. Dugdale says that it occupied the place of the former house, and if so, the destroyed habitation of the Nuns was on the south bank of the Sherbourne, where the remains of the institution which succeeded it are still to be met with.

Under the fostering care of the Earl and Countess, and by their unbounded liberality, the new monastery rapidly gained reputation and wealth. Godiva spared not even her own personal adornments, but generously offered both gold and jewels at the shrine of St. Mary and St. Osburg. Here the noble pair were eventually buried, and even at the Conquest the possessions of the abbey were held

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sacred, and confirmed to them under the hand and seal of the Conqueror. Only three abbots held rule here, for on the death of Leofwinus, Robert de Limesey, bishop of the diocese, asked and obtained the custody of the abbey from the king, and in 1102 removed the see from St. John's, Chester, to Coventry; the title of abbot being thus absorbed in the higher dignity of bishop, became extinct, and the government of the monastery was then vested in the prior.

Limesey soon showed himself in his true colours, it was not the welfare of the priory he sought to promote, but the gratification of his own avarice. He read the injunction of our Lord to Peter, "Feed my sheep," in the reverse way, for instead of so doing, he fleeced them, by robbing the shrines of their gold and jewels, starving the monks, and reducing them and their house to poverty; they must have felt some satisfaction in burying him in his Cathedral in 1117, tinged with some pardonable regret that they had not been required to perform the rite a few years earlier.

During the wars of Stephen, Coventry suffered severely. The castle, which belonged, together with the greater part of the city, to the Earl of Chester, was besieged by Robert Marmion, of Tamworth, on behalf of the king. This nobleman turned out the monks and converted the priory into a fortress, from which to attack the castle, but he came to a tragical end himself, for having had some deep trenches constructed to defend his position, and forgetting their whereabouts he fell into one of them, and was dispatched by one of the Earl's soldiers. This was regarded by the monks as a judgment upon him. On the conclusion of peace, a few years afterwards, the monks were reinstated, and matters were in a fair way for improvement with them, when fresh troubles arose in the form of disputes with the then bishop, Hugh Novant, who appears to have been the first to style himself Bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, his six predecessors having signed as Bishops of Coventry only.

Between Novant and the monks, the discussion waxed warm, and on one occasion it came to blows, for the monks rushing on the bishop, broke his head with one of the crosses belonging to the church, a powerful argument it is true, but one which recoiled upon themselves, for the bishop laid a complaint against them before the Chancellor, and

the monks were expelled, secular canons being placed in their room. This state continued till 1198, when owing to repeated representations made to several successive Popes by Thomas (one of the dispossessed monks) the Benedictines were re-instated, and were enabled by liberal assistance afforded them, to put their house in order again.

During the wars of the Barons, the monks of Coventry suffered severely from both parties before and during the siege of Kenilworth. Friend and foe served them alike, the only compensation made to them at the time being the issue of letters from the King (Hen. III.) to the monks' tenants, recommending *them* to afford what relief *they* could to their landlords, promising them *recompense from God* and *thanks* from him: he was so impoverished himself it was all he had to give. In the course of the next sixty years the original cathedral church in which the Bishops of Coventry had been enthroned, and most of them buried, gave way to the magnificent priory church of which the remains of the west end are the most important portions left. As their wealth increased, the monks extended their buildings until nearly the whole of the area between the two churchyards and the river was occupied by the courts and offices of the monastery, and we can even now trace considerable fragments of the Priory buildings scattered over the site, and incorporated with modern erections.

But the time arrived when the long association of the Benedictines with Hill Close was finally severed, and the home which they had extended and beautified during a period of five centuries became to them a habitation no longer, when in spite of the intercession of Bishop Lee, who pleaded hard for the preservation of what he described as his principal cathedral church, the decree of the monarch went forth for its destruction, and we seek in vain the long drawn aisles, the stately towers, the cloistered areas, and the noble halls where parliaments had been held, princes entertained, including this same Henry VIII. himself, who so ruthlessly caused its destruction and spoliation. The greater part of the monastic buildings has been removed or buried beneath the accumulations of three centuries. Thomas Camswell was the last of the priors, and the gross income at the suppression amounted

to £731 19s. 5d. from which certain payments had to be made reducing the net sum to about £500 per annum, a very large sum in those days.

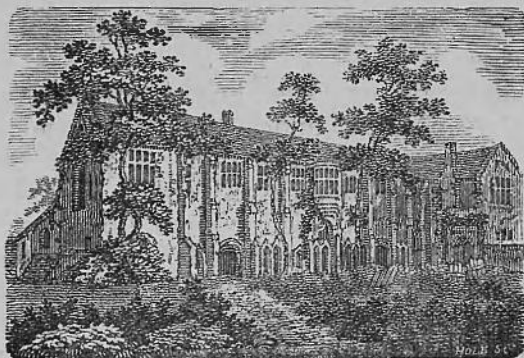
The Hospital of St John the Baptist was founded by Prior Laurence, in the reign of Henry II, at the suggestion of the then Archdeacon of Coventry, and was established to meet a want, which the necessities of the unsettled times had created. There was at that period no organized provision for the sick and infirm, the poor, or the stranger, and this institution was designed to supply this want; and though managed by a separate staff of officials known as the master, brethren and sisters, was always more or less subordinate to the prior and convent. It had all the principal features of a religious house, a chapel, (now much curtailed, and for the last three centuries used as a Grammar School), refectory, dormitories, infirmary, and other offices. The community wore a special dress, were subjected to strict regulation, managed their own financial affairs, and derived their income from distinct sources, assisted by contributions in provisions, &c., from the priory. At the dissolution, the net income was £67 a year; it shared the fate of the other religious houses, excepting utter destruction. The chapel, diminished in size by the setting back of the west front, and the removal of its south aisle, still remains. It was converted into a school by John Hales, 1545, who came into possession of it by purchase, at the time of the general wreck, and on the removal of the scholars to new premises on the south-side of the city in 1885, ceased to be used as such.

There was some fear at the time of the removal of the school, that this venerable structure would be either demolished, or appropriated to some entirely secular purpose; but fortunately it has been secured by the vicar and churchwardens of Trinity, having been purchased by subscription, and is now used as a mission hall for weekly and occasional services, a meeting room for young men's institutions, and other useful parochial purposes, a much preferable fate to being converted into either an auction room or theatre, or to entire removal; to one of these, it seemed at one time, this venerable relic was doomed.

The Hospital for Lepers was founded by Hugh Kevelioke in the time of Hen. II. This Earl of Chester had a Knight in his household who had contracted this loathsome disease in one of the crusades, and it was out of affection for him that the Earl founded this Lazar House. It was first dedicated to St. Leonard but was afterwards known as St. Mary Magdalene, both names being frequently found associated with hospitals established for lepers. It was situated at the west end of Coventry in what is now known as Chapel Fields, at the angle formed by a lane leading from the old Holyhead road to Hearsall common. Of the structure nothing now remains; the last remnant, a portion of the chapel, used as a barn, having been removed about 1847. On ceasing to be used as a Lazar house it came into the possession of Basingwerk Abbey, Flintshire, but was afterwards appropriated by the monks of Coventry; it then reverted to the Crown. Edward IV. gave it to the monks of Studley as a free chapel and it was from this circumstance that the district is called Chapel Fields.

The Franciscans or Grey Friars settled in Coventry about the year 1230 under the patronage of Ranulf Earl of Chester, who gave them a piece of land on his manor of Cheylesmore on which they built their church and monastery. They were liberally supported by families in the neighbourhood. Among these were the Hastings of Allesley and Fillongley Castles, one of the chantries attached being that of St. Nicholas or the Hastings Chapel. The monastery was in close proximity to the Manor House of Cheylesmore, and the fraternity enjoyed certain privileges in connection therewith. Stone was freely granted them from the park wherewith to supersede their shingled dwelling with a more permanent structure, and access granted to the park itself for the benefit of their members. Riches rolled in as the brotherhood increased in popularity, and even Isabella the infamous Queen of Edward II. was among the list of its patrons. The Friars were great promoters of the miracle or sacred plays, which drew large concourses of people to Coventry to witness these pageants. They were energetic emissaries of the Pope, and in consequence enjoyed considerable privileges. They were subject to

no diocesan control and were very busy agents in bringing heretics to the fiery ordeal in the old quarry in the park close to the Little Park Gate. But as their influence waned, so did their income diminish, and at the dissolution of monasteries a sad record is given of the decay of this house, its dilapidated condition, and its reduced circumstances, much the same state of things being the case with the manor house adjoining, for the Commissioners in referring to them in 1534 say, "The hole howse besides the churchys in moch ruynes," and they add "adjoynynge unto the fryery ys an olde manor called Chyldsmore . . . The hall ys down." The only fragment of this friary remaining above ground is the steeple, to which, after standing alone for nearly three centuries a new church (Christ church) was attached in 1832. This is the first of the three tall spires we see on entering Coventry from the railway station.



REMAINS OF WHITEFRIARS MONASTERY, COVENTRY.
(From Reader's History of Coventry, 1810.)

Another order of Friars afterwards obtained a position in the city, the Carmelites or White Friars who, by means of the liberality of Sir John Poultney, (four times Lord Mayor of London), built a house at the east end of Coventry in 1342. This, by means of generous contributions of the wealthy, was by degrees so enlarged and beautified that it maintained a high place among the religious houses in that city where it enjoyed so great a reputation for sanctity, that numbers of rich citizens selected it as a place of sepulchre; and, no doubt, the

friars, like their brethren the Franciscans, reaped no small benefit from the concession. Their church was not built on their own ground, but on land adjoining, for which they paid an annual rent of 2s. At the dissolution the net revenue of this house was only £7 13s. 8d. per annum. The friars were discharged without pension, and the property came by purchase eventually into the hands of John Hales, who, in the disused church, first opened his school. Misunderstandings arising between him and some leading citizens, who, raising a plea that there was a want of church accommodation in this part of the city, obtained a grant of the church from the crown; and then discovering that there was no further need for additional churches, pulled it down and sold the materials, Mr. Hales having removed his school to the Hospital of St. John, and converted the Friary into a residence. In doing this, many alterations were made, and after passing through subsequent changes of proprietorship, the house ultimately came into the possession of the guardians of the poor, who incorporated it with their house of industry, and thereby preserved it from any further demolition. The chief portions now remaining, are the eastern avenue of the cloister, with two vaulted chambers adjoining, a portion of the Chapter House, with dormitory above, the entrance to the prior's lodgings, the cloister gateway, and the outer gate of the precincts, in Much Park street. Queen Elizabeth was a guest here. During her reign, a private printing press was surreptitiously placed here, from which some of the celebrated Marprelate tracts were issued; and in 1642, it was severely injured in the siege, when the city was attacked by Charles 1st. It may be here remarked that the introduction of the Friars into England was not by any means graciously received by the orders of regular monks, for on the advent of the Franciscans we find the Benedictines lamenting after this fashion—"Oh shame! oh worse than shame! oh barbarous pestilence, the minor brethren are come into England!"

We meet with our next example of religious foundations in Coventry, at the west end of the City, just within the Walls, and here it may be noted that of all the nine foundations which possess in a greater or less degree the character of religious houses here, seven of them are

within the fortifications, and it is partly owing to the influence of the older fraternities, and the conditions of grant of stone, &c., by Edward the Black Prince, that his manor house, together with the priory, the hospital, and the two friaries were brought within the line of wall, which owing partly to this fact, is so irregular in its circuit. The Collegiate church of St. John Baptist adjoined the Spon gate, and originated with a grant of land of very limited extent, made by Isabel, to found a chapel at "Babbelak," in which masses were to be solemnized for the repose of the soul of her dear lord Edward, late King of England, among others, hoping thereby, no doubt, to justify herself to the world, and satisfy her own conscience for the share she had had in causing him the bitter miseries which terminated at Berkeley. The chapel was built by the brethren of St. John's Guild, and to it was attached a hermitage (though we learn of only one occupant), the work was largely promoted by William Walshman, formerly valet to Queen Isabel, and both area and buildings much increased by his munificent aid, and the Black Prince's additional grant of land. Suitable buildings for the purpose of a Collegiate establishment were raised, and a Warden and Priests installed : the necessary provision of means being supplied by the united Guilds. The offices were ranged along the sides of an irregular court, the church forming the south side, the great gate on the east, the dirge hall, warden's and priest's chambers on the north and west, the school forming an extension along the west side of Hill street. There can be but little doubt that the present dining hall and dormitory of the Ballake Boys' Hospital formed this northern wing of the College.

At the dissolution the college became by purchase the property of the Corporation, and the Hall and adjacent buildings were converted into a Bridewell, which was removed about fifty years ago. The church after many vicissitudes, and adaptations as a lecture hall, temporary prison, &c., was converted into a parish church in 1734, a rectory attached to the free grammar school, a union dissolved some years ago. The whole fabric has been restored, and internal and external accumulations removed, the process revealing some singular peculiarities, in fact the whole church is a study. In ground plan a parallelogram,

in the clerestory stage cruciform, with tower in centre, no right angles, eastern and western piers of the tower totally different, and the north and south clerestory unlike. The south aisle of the nave is called Walshman's aisle.

On the south-east of the city, within walls of its own, stands all that remains of the Carthusian Monastery of St. Ann, or Charter House: a few fragmentary portions are incorporated in the modern dwelling house. It was founded on a parcel of land of fourteen acres known as St. Ann's Grove by William Lord Zouch of Harringworth, Northamptonshire, in 1381. He did not, however, live to see his purpose carried into effect, but left £60 per annum towards its future maintenance. The design did not lack support; the Botoners, a family to whom St. Michael's Church was so largely indebted, the Luffs, and other citizens of wealth, contributed liberally to the erection of the church, chapter house, cloister, and cells. Local efforts were largely supplemented in 1385 by Richard II. on his return from Scotland, who further endowed it with possessions which had belonged to the alien monasteries, and himself laid the foundation stone of the church, being regarded as principal founder of the monastery. Among its possessions were the advowson of the parish church of Sheffield, the priory of Ecclesfield, &c. At the dissolution its income amounted to £131 6s 8d. above all reprises. John Bockard was the last of the priors, and having made an easy surrender was, together with the assenting eight monks, liberally pensioned, he himself receiving £40 a year.

Two other foundations of a pre-reformation origin remain to be noticed, which, though charitable institutions, partook of a semi-religious character and which still exist. The oldest of these is the hospital for old men founded in 1506 by Thomas Bond, an ex-mayor of the city, for "ten poor men as long as the world shall endure and a woman to look to them," as the brass in St. Michael's church quaintly expresses it. The recipients were to be chosen as far as possible from decayed members of the Trinity Guild, to wear a monastic dress, and daily after they had supped to go into the church hard by and say fifteen paternosters, fifteen aves, and three creeds, and a devout secular priest was to be appointed to attend upon them,

to preach and give spiritual consolation, and to pray for the souls of the founder and others. At the dissolution this foundation had a narrow escape of being confiscated, but the Corporation intervened, and the charitable intentions of the founder were maintained, although a further attempt was made by the son to set aside the will, which was frustrated by a decree in Chancery. The double cloistered fabric of half timber work still remains, and occupies the northern side of the enclosure of which St. John's Church forms the southern.

The other Institutions to which I have referred, is Ford's Hospital for aged women, and was founded in 1529 on the east side of Grey Friars-lane. The building is a perfect gem of timber frame work, and was evidently constructed for the purpose it still serves. Wm. Ford was a merchant, he was Mayor in 1496, and his executor, William Pisford, also an ex-Mayor, nobly seconded his efforts by adding to the endowment, and to the building. At first aged men and old married couples partook of the charity, but this was subsequently altered, and aged women are now the only recipients. Like Bond's Hospital, Ford's Almshouse had a narrow escape at the dissolution, on the pretence, that as a priest was provided to perform the service of the mass in the little chapel over the gateway, it was an institution "given to superstitious uses," a plea which was fortunately over-ruled. Owing to the depreciation in the value of the property of both these charities, the number of inmates and recipients has been much decreased of late years, but they still exist as evidences of the large hearted benevolence which characterized the good old merchant princes of Coventry, who out of their wealth, did not forget the claims for consideration of the wants of their poorer fellow citizens. Let us hope that it will be very long ere the influence of the "dead hand" will fail to assert its power, and that the pious intentions of these generous founders will continue to be held sacred for the benefit of future generations. We have in Coventry a recent proof that the spirit of this best of all gifts—of charity—is not dead amongst us, for a noble benefactor recently deceased has bequeathed, in addition to many "other good gifts," a sum exceeding £100,000 to found an asylum for aged women, and the name of David

Spencer may thus be added to those of Bond, Ford, Wheatly, Haddon, White, Hales, Bayley, Fairfax, Baker, Billing, Crow, and a long roll of other generous names whom the citizens of Coventry have good cause to remember with thankfulness and gratitude.

I have thus briefly treated in some order of time, of the monastic institutions of this ancient city, which originated and flourished previous to the reformation, and which exhibited, more or less, the character of religious houses; to attempt to give anything like a detailed history and description of either of them would entail a much longer chapter, than the epitome of the nine, which I have the honour to lay before my hearers; but I shall have said enough to convince them that Coventry held a high rank in the mediæval period, as a city rich indeed in monastic fraternities, and in the glorious houses they erected and adorned.