

Becket's Well, Derby.

BY GEORGE BAILEY.



THE earliest record of a well is that of which we read in Genesis (ch. xxi, v. 19). Water from this well preserved the life of the founder of that race which is now one of the principal factors in the "Eastern question." The well still remains, and associated with it is one of the oldest love stories of which any record has come down to our time. Isaac dwelt by this well, Lahai-roi, and it appears to have been his custom to stroll out at eventide towards this well engaged in meditation; and on one of these occasions he first saw Rebecca. From their union is descended another great race, whose preservation is no slight difficulty for people who do not believe in miracles. Ancient grave-mounds and ancient wells are the two most ancient things left to us of the early works of man, and both are threatened in these commercial days. It used to be considered that the man who had dug a well was a public benefactor, for wells were a necessity; and so it came to pass that to these old wells some name or other was given, such as that of its original digger. The earliest of them, Jacob's well, still exists; and not far away is the burial-place of the patriarch and of his son Joseph. These wells were the usual places of meeting for conversation or gossip, and served, too, as resting-places for the tired traveller. The mouths of wells were often surrounded by a wall wide enough to form a seat; though in others the contour was entirely of one block of marble pierced through its centre, and richly sculptured on the sides. Some of these well tops have found their way to

England, and may be seen in museums, or in private possession. There used to be a very fine one in the conservatory at Branksea Castle, Dorset.* On ancient marbles of Greece are representations of maidens coming from the well, with vases on their heads, to be met by their swains, who relieve them of their burdens. It is also stated that Bacchic dances were celebrated round the wells of Callichorus. Times and manners changed, and then the wells begin to have, in many instances, curative properties attributed to their waters. The waters of some left a red deposit (iron), others a yellowish green sediment (sulphur); some were always cold, but never frozen; others slightly warm. These waters were used externally and internally. The Romans appear to have first made use of the warm springs in this country as baths; and the baths of Matlock, Buxton, Bath, and others, have continued to be used for curative and hygienic purposes down to the present time. Having written thus far on biblical and classic wells, we come now to consider wells such as that which gives a title to these remarks.

There are scattered over the United Kingdom a very large number of ancient wells, many of them termed holy wells. The whole subject becomes interesting now these wells are fast being destroyed. It is far from unlikely that some of these old wells, near the Roman roads, were made at first by the Romans, and have been handed on for some two thousand years; if so, Becket's Well may be of such an origin. Not a few of our wells date back to an early period of English history. One of the earliest of these is that which takes its name from the Saxon king of Northumbria, Oswald, who was slain by Penda, king of Mercia. The venerable Bede says people carried away the earth, to which miraculous virtue was attributed, until a hole was formed, and this became a well, the water of which had also miraculous powers. But the worst of it is there are two wells both making the claim that they occupy the site of Oswald's death. One is at Winwick, near

* There is a fine Venetian well-head of this class, richly sculptured, and said to be of twelfth century date, in the courtyard of Wilton House, near Salisbury. It was illustrated in the *Reliquary*, vol. i. (new series), p. 231.

Warrington, the other at Oswestry; of course we cannot pretend to say which is correct, for these ancient saints had a curious propensity for duality. We will not attempt to explain the mystery; we know there are the two wells, and that they are both called after St. Oswald. Another well in Wales, at Holywell, the most famous in the three kingdoms, has the name of St. Winifred. A Welsh prince, Caradoc, sought this damsel in marriage. This she would not agree to, so he cut off her head, which rolled down the hill into a church, where St. Beuno was officiating; and at the place where it rested, in front of the altar, the waters of the holy well began to flow. Whatever its origin, the well is there, and to this day miraculous properties are attributed to its waters, which are sent to different parts of the country in bottles; some, we have been informed, comes to Derby. St. Beuno appears to have been a skilful surgeon, for it is related that he successfully united her head to her body again, and "she lived in the odour of sanctity fifteen years afterwards."* These two instances are sufficient to show the antiquity of these so-called holy wells.

It was quite usual, however, to give saintly names to wells which had no miraculous or curative virtues attributed to them; neither were they always called after saints. One at Allestree was called Capersuch well. Many such will doubtless occur to the reader; and it would be interesting to have all names of wells in this county, whether holy wells or otherwise, recorded in this Journal, especially now that the urban sanitary authority is doing its best to get rid of all wells, particularly in districts where a water company has established itself. As "Rare Ben Jonson" said, "There's nought so sacred with us, but may find a sacrilegious person."

We come now to the particular well under consideration, that of St. Thomas Becket at Derby. How or why it received the name of the murdered archbishop we are unable to say. He was murdered on Tuesday, the 29th December, 1170. Now there had been

* Dent's Chap Books, dealing very fully with the history of St. Winifred and Holywell, printed about the middle of last century, have just (1889) been reprinted by Mr. Elliot Stock.

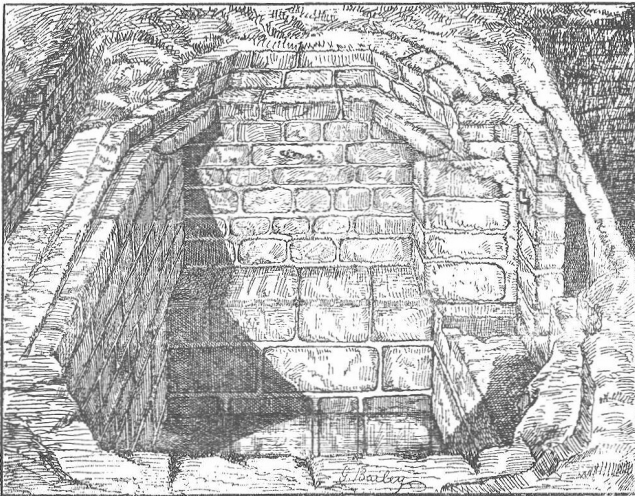
at Derby from late Saxon times a cell of Cluniac monks, founded by a Saxon earl, Waltheof, who lived in the early part of the reign of the Conqueror, and by whom he was beheaded in 1074. He dedicated this establishment to St. James.* The building stood at the angle of what is now St. James' Street and the Strand; at the dissolution of the monasteries it was taken possession of by Henry VIII., and granted, together with other properties, to the Burgesses of Derby, which grant was afterwards confirmed by Queen Mary. It is called in the deed "The free chapel, with all its appurtenances called St. James' chapel," &c. This priory was distant but a stone's throw from the well, so that it seems at first quite reasonable to suppose that these monks would only be too glad to dedicate it to the sainted archbishop, and also build a chapel to his memory not far off. Simpson, indeed, in his "History of Derby," says that such a chapel did exist, but that no traces remained in his time. On going further into the matter, a doubt arises as to whether the monks of St. James had, after all, anything to do with it, because the well is not a natural spring, but is a conduit, supplied by the water of a spring in the Newlands, which, together with Abbey Barns, was a grange belonging to Darley Abbey.† The abbots of Darley were very tenacious of what they thought to be their rights, so they would not be likely to hand over a good thing like a holy well to a convent of alien Cluniac monks. We are obliged, however, to leave the question of possession in doubt, for we have no means of solving it. The abbots of Darley and their monastery, together with Becket's chapel and the Free chapel of St. James', and the monks of Cluny, have all passed away; but the well remains. For a long time it had come to base uses, and so it might have remained but for the public spirit of Mr. Keys, a member of the Archæological Society, who has, at his own charges, had it cleared out. He has also restored the conical covering which existed until recent years, but which had fallen into decay and dropped into the well. And in

* Rev. D. P. Davies, *New View of Derbyshire* (1811), p. 189.

† Simpson's *History of Derby*, pp. 186, 308.

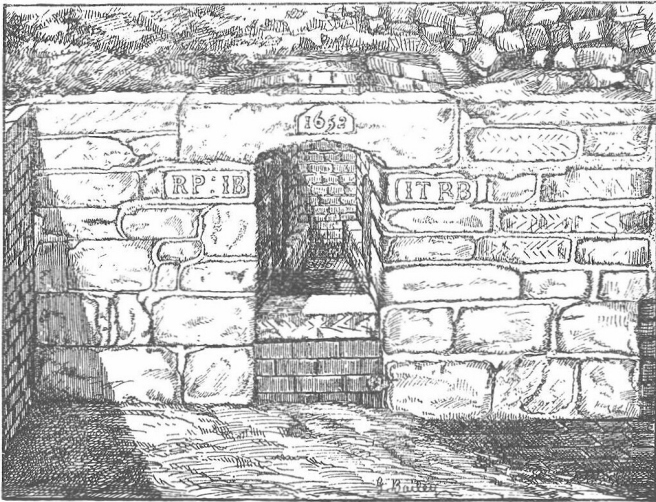
passing, we cannot help saying nothing has astonished us more than the disgustingly filthy condition into which the well had been allowed to subside, having been made the receptacle for all the foulness of the neighbourhood. We shall not soon forget the feeling of nausea we experienced while making the sketches which accompany this paper, the dèbris being allowed to remain for weeks, although we have what is called a "sanitary authority." The architecture of the well is certainly not very imposing, but it shows what could be done in the good old days of Oliver Cromwell.

We will now endeavour to describe the stonework and other features of the well as it recently appeared; and here we must refer to the drawing which shows the appearance of the



well before the octagonal cone was again raised over it. By this we are able to point out the different styles of building. It will be observed that the lower part, as high as the ledge which projects beyond the superstructure on two sides, is of very much better work than what has been built upon it. This we take to be the original building of the Cluniac monks or of the canons of Darley Abbey. The stones are large and well-chiselled, and much better

joined than the more recent work which they support. This latter is of the Cromwellian period; we know this because there is the date of its erection carved on the lintel over the entrance. The date, though much weathered, is plainly 1652, though



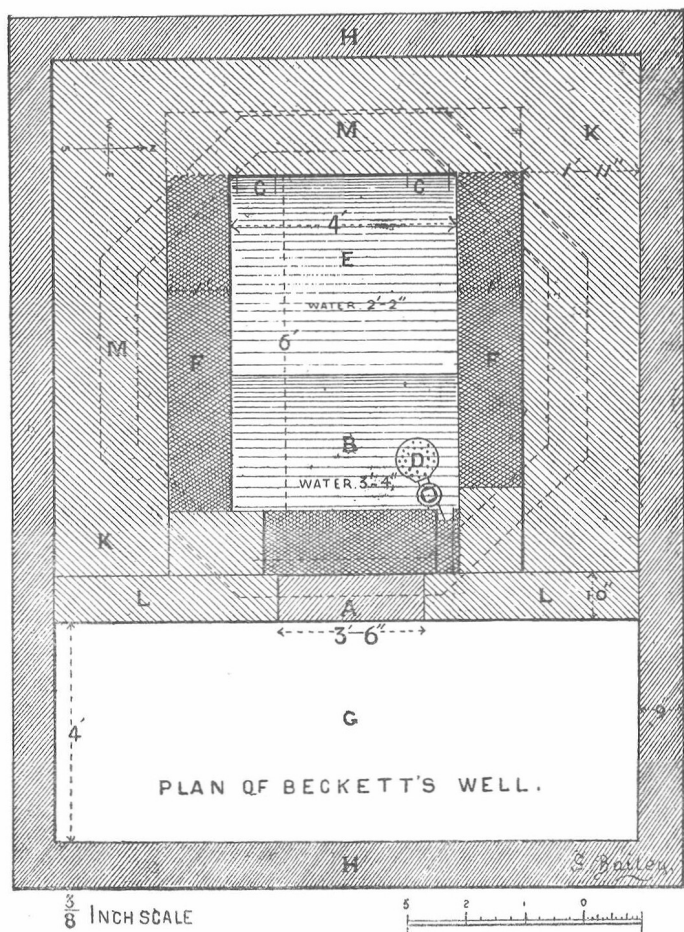
a writer in the *Derby Mercury* of August 28th, 1889, says it is 1632. We, however, took a rubbing of this date so have no hesitation in stating that the former is correct. Besides the date, there are on each side of the door various initials in panels, namely, on the right I T · R B, and on the left side R P · I B. Doubtless these are initials of names of those who had to do with raising this part of the structure, what had been there before having altogether disappeared.

Being a holy well, it would probably have a building over it, possibly a small chapel. There is a beautiful little conduit chapel, St. Mary's, at Lincoln, date early 16th century. Might not Becket's chapel have been over or near the well? Simpson is not at all clear about it: he seems only to have known of it by hearsay; at any rate, wherever the site of the chapel may have been, nothing whatever now remains. We may mention here

that the Rev. C. Kerry, who examined the stonework before the well was again covered, thinks that the date of the lower part is not later than *circa* 1250; and he arrives at this conclusion from the character of the markings on one side of the stones, which "had distinctive markings of the mason's axe—most of the stones were chiselled *diagonally*, after the medieval fashion."

The floor of the well is of two levels, and the water originally found its way into the well by means of two inlets on the west side, and issued from it by an outlet on the east side. (See plan, page 50.) At the present time there is but one inlet, the other having been built up. The depth from the top of wall to the ledge or seat is 4 feet, and from it to the floor at inlet 4 feet 8 inches, and to the lower floor at outlet is 5 feet 10 inches. At the deep end the water standing in it at the time we measured it was 3 feet 4 inches, so that there is still a good supply of water. It is most likely that this water supplied the monks of St. James's. Afterwards there was a tap in St. James's Lane which was used by the inhabitants up to the time that the new street was made. Still more recently a large pump stood in the centre of the Market Place, which also derived water from the same conduit. This pump was indeed a very useful adjunct to the Market Place. During this period, the water of Becket's Well was used as a kind of reservoir, and could be turned on or off as desired. When the well was recently cleared out, the old turn-cock was found: it was 6 feet 5 inches in length, and the handle 2 feet 2 inches. The dimensions of the walls, etc., will be better understood from the sketch-plan. The entrance of the well being below the level of the ground, it must have been approached by means of a flight of steps, but there are none now. At the present time there is a small court in front of the entrance, which is 9 feet deep from top of wall, and 4 feet 2 inches wide. The walls to this inclosed space are of modern brick, and it appears these walls were at no distant date continued entirely round the well, and the whole was enclosed within a covered shed. This, however, had been removed, as being an interference with the rights of someone; but the foundations of the walls were left, and plainly visible—

they are shown on the plan, H. H. Certainly they seem to favour the idea of a chapel as previously suggested.



The ground in which Becket's Well is found, or land close to it, formerly belonged to All Saints' Church. In the parish records it is written that in 1510, "John Warde holdeth a gardyn att begette Welle, and payeth yerely xijd."; and again, 1577, one garden "beinge nyghe beckett well adjoininge to a lytle brooke

one on the south & est parte and the land of Thomas Brookhouse of the west parte, and the land of Charles Ward of the north pte. . . . ijs.”; and further, in 1592, Robert Brookhouse was one of the bailiffs of Derby;* and besides these, in 1620, in “A note of landes and tenemets belonging to All Saints,” made by the then churchwardens, is the following “Item, one garden lying neare Becketwel lane, in the tenure of Robert Brookhouse and adjoining to the land of the said Robert Brookhouse yeldeth p. annum, o . 3 . 4.”

The land has passed out of possession of the church, and is now held by Lord Scarsdale. The well is town property, and it is in contemplation to build a wall with palisading round it, and to make a proper approach to it; but this is at present in abeyance, until the time arrives for widening the lane. Its present condition is far from satisfactory, and it is hoped that a way may be found to complete the work. It is interesting on the ground of antiquity and old associations, besides having fulfilled a useful work in supplying good water to a large district of the town. We may say here that we are far from thinking it a wise thing to fill up and destroy all our old wells; no adequate reason can be given for so doing. How to supply the steadily accumulating crowds that flock together in towns with water will in no distant days be as much a *vexatio questio* as is what to do with the sewage. This, however, is not a question bearing on our present subject, which is how to preserve some monuments of antiquity for the pleasure and information of those who are to come after us. We again venture to hope that all persons who read these pages will make notes of all names of old wells in the towns and villages of this county, so that a record of them may be kept in this Journal for future reference.†

In conclusion, we are sorry not to be able to arrive at anything

* “Chron. All Saints,” pp. 15, 16, and 205.

† The following occur to us—St. Alkmund’s, Bath Street; The Pilgrim’s Well, Normanton Road, now destroyed; The Virgin’s, Abbey Street; St. Peter’s, near the church, now filled up; St. Thomas’ (? Becket) and St. Anne’s, at Repton; and the Mary Well, Allestree, now a pump.

satisfactory as to the initials carved on the well front; perhaps some documentary evidence may be eventually found. The most likely name so far is that of Brookhouse; three of the names begin with B. Unfortunately none of the dates so far agree with that on the well, so that the matter is uncertain at present; but doubtless the names belong to men who had a desire to preserve an old landmark, and so we should like them to be known and honoured as all such deserve to be.

“ And there was, too, within a little dell,
 A limpid fountain named the “ Holy Well,”
 Where pilgrims came to drink the sacred wave
 That heal'd their wounds, and snatched them from the grave.
 Those times, those customs, now have passed away;
 Those pilgrim feet no more a-near them stray;
 But still the waters bubble as of yore,
 And yield a grateful offering to the poor.
 Oh! when on earth we've lived our transient day,
 And clay has mingled with its native clay,
 Some small memorial may we leave behind,
 That we have sought to benefit mankind.”

“ The Trent,” J. J. BRIGGS.

[My friend, Mr. Bailey, has asked me to add some notes of mine to his interesting paper and careful drawings. I have not much to say. That the chapel at Derby of St. Thomas Becket was over or close to the well that bore his name, seems to me a happy and most probable suggestion. I have made much search, both personally and through agents, at the Public Record Office, to learn anything with regard to this chapel, but all in vain. The fruitlessness of such a search is not, however, the slightest proof of the non-existence of the chapel. Unless it was endowed with lands, no record of it is likely to be found. None can be found of St. Anne's, Buxton. The fact is that these little well chapels, of which many remains still exist in Wales, Shropshire, and Cornwall, had but intermittent masses sung in them, namely, when visited by pilgrims with a priest in their train, or when a more wealthy patient was therein cured.

On another point I am quite in accord with Mr. Kerry and

Mr. Bailey, namely, as to the probable date of the lower and earlier masonry of the well. From personal observation, I have no doubt that the older stonework is medieval, and most probably of the thirteenth century.

With regard to the original naming of this well, the idea occurs to me, and it has been confirmed by an eminent Kentish archæologist, that the not infrequent St. Thomas Becket wells may have been thus called by the pilgrim bands who paused to use these waters on their journey to the shrine at Canterbury. Mr. Bailey notices above the nearness of this Becket Well to the old main Roman road, which confirms my surmise. The ingenious theory that Becket Well was only Bucket Well must, of course, be instantly dismissed in the face of the evidence quoted by Mr. Bailey from sixteenth century documents ; to say nothing of the fact that this water was emphatically not a bucket well, but merely a turncock reservoir !

As to other wells of the county, I have already written a little elsewhere on that of St. Alkmund, Derby, and on the curative wells of St. Martin at Stoney Middleton, and St. Anne at Buxton. In addition to those named by Mr. Bailey, there were also holy wells, with recent superstitious usages attached, at North Lees (Holy Trinity), and Dovebridge (St. Cuthbert). I have also come across documentary evidence of the following Derbyshire wells in medieval charters or chartularies :—St. Helen, Derby ; St. Osyth, Sandiacre ; St. Chad, Wilne ; and St. Thomas Becket, Linbury, close to the main Roman road.

Most cordially do I support Mr. Bailey's suggestion that the members of our Society should endeavour to collect the names of any wells, together with legends or uses that may pertain to them, in their respective localities. I shall be glad to receive even the briefest memorandum of their character, and all that is thus contributed can be arranged and printed in the next issue of the Journal.

J. CHARLES COX, EDITOR].