

THE HOSPITAL OF LEPERS AT SEAFORD.

BY MARK ANTONY LOWER, M.A. F.S.A.

By the kindness of Lord Amherst, the Committee of the Society are enabled to bring before the members, a document of considerable importance and interest, relating to an ancient Hospital of Lepers, which existed in the twelfth and succeeding centuries, just without the town of Seaford, of the history of which very little has hitherto been known.

A few hundred yards to the northward of Seaford Church, and detached from the town, is a building now known as Cinque-Port Place, and formerly used as the parish workhouse. It occupies a portion of the enclosure called "Spital Field," while the adjoining field eastward is known by the appellation of "Chapel Field." These names sufficiently indicate the site of the Leper Hospital of Saint James *juxta* Seaford.

In the corporation records and parochial accounts of Seaford, the property is frequently referred to under the denominations above mentioned. It has always been supposed to be the fragment of some early religious benefaction, but beyond the few facts below mentioned, nothing, I believe, was to be ascertained, without the aid of the valuable little charter now for the first time copied and illustrated.¹

In the reign of Henry VII., Sherborne, Bishop of Chichester, considerably augmented the foundation of his cathedral church, by the addition of several new prebends, chiefly out of the revenues of churches and other ecclesiastical establishments, which by decay of population, or by the dilapidation of the buildings, had become sinecures. Two of these were Excetes, now Exceit, an extinct parish adjacent to Seaford,² and

¹ The deed is of the exact size represented in the fac-simile. The seal, which is much decayed, is of white wax.

² In the survey made in 1587 by the Deputy Lieutenants of Sussex, for the better defence of the Sussex Coast against the anticipated invasion of the Spaniards,

the church of Excetes is shown as still existing, though the parish had previously merged in that of West-Dean. The foundation walls of the sacred edifice are still traceable, in dry weather, on the arable land to the right hand of the highway leading from Exceit Bridge to Friston.

Bargham, which appears to be identical with the locality under consideration, although the name is not retained. This prebend is estimated in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of Henry VIII. at 33s. 4d. per annum. The prebendal income seems to have been a rent charge, for according to a MS. rental of lands set apart for the jointure of Mary, Countess of Pembroke, *temp.* Elizabeth, celebrated by the famous epitaph of Ben Jonson, it appears that the "Scyte of the Hospitall of St. James besyde Seaforde," with its appurtenant tythes and lands, belonged to that lady, and was worth six pounds per annum. The date of this document, *penes me*, is 157---. A terrier of a later period mentions glebe lands, late of the Chapel of the Hospital of St. James, as then leased to Mr. Elphick, and those lands have for a long series of years been held under lease of the prebend of Bargham, by the Chambers family.

Before citing the charter which has given rise to these notes, I may perhaps be permitted to say a few words in relation to those benevolent institutions, now happily only archæologically known amongst us—the Hospitals set apart for persons afflicted with the frightful disease called leprosy. No intelligent reader will require to be informed, that that dire infirmity which separated the dearest social ties, and made outcasts of the most cherished relatives and friends, was an importation from the East, during the early days of pilgrimages and Crusades to the Holy Land. The only acquisition made by many a devotee and many a soldier of the Cross, in that region, was the leprosy; and so numerous were the cases of the disease that, throughout Eastern Europe, Lazar-houses or Hospitals for Lepers became everywhere but too familiar objects. It is probable indeed, that popular ignorance magnified the evil, and that in many instances cutaneous disorders of a comparatively harmless character were mistaken for the dreadful scourge of the East. The food of our ancestors was highly calculated to aggravate, and even to induce, such disorders, consisting as it did, to a very great extent, of salted meats; and the absence of linen next the skin may be named as another cause. The leper, or as he was oftener called the *lazar*, (from Lazarus, the poor man in the Gospel) was driven from the haunts of men, and shunned like some evil beast or unclean spirit. Hence the necessity of Hospitals for Lepers.

There were several such hospitals in our county, and it is probable, that every large monastic establishment had one connected with it. The writer of the *Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, in enumerating the good works of Abbot Walter de Lucy, who died in 1171 (the very year before the date of our document) says:—"With great pity towards the poor, he allayed their hunger with food, and covered their nakedness with raiment. He especially compassionated the forlorn condition of those afflicted with leprosy and elephantiasis, whom he was so far from shunning, that he frequently waited upon them in person, washing their hands and feet, and, with the utmost cordiality, imprinting upon them the soothing kisses of love and piety."¹

In course of time, the specific disease of contagious leprosy seems to have died out; but the benefactions of pious and charitable founders still continuing, these Lazar-houses were applied to somewhat different, though still kindred purposes. In a statute of 2 Henry V. cap. i. they are referred to as "landes and tenements wherewith to sustaine impotent men and women; Lazars; men out of their wits and mind; and poore women with childe; and to nourish, relieve, and refreshe other poore people."² Hence it appears that these institutions, originally founded *pro animæ salute* of the donors, became most useful in later days for the bodily necessities of the poor and afflicted. They became, in short, the infirmaries, the lunatic asylums, the lying-in-hospitals, and the poor-houses of those old times, when separate establishments, such as those which mark the benevolence and the enforced provisions of the present age were not once thought of, and when such institutions as the Sussex County Hospital, the Hayward's Heath Asylum, and the numerous Union Houses which our county possesses, would have transcended the highest flights of medieval imagination.

With these preliminary observations, I shall now introduce to the reader the interesting little parchment before me. I have thrown aside the contractions, and added a literal translation, as well as such illustrations of the place, and of the persons mentioned in the document, as I have been able to collect.

¹ *Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, translated by M. A. L. p. 148.

² *Rastall's Statutes*, edit. 1603., fol. 228, dorso.

Sciatis presentis et futuri quod ego Rogerus de fraxeto p anime mee salute et p animalibus antecessoribus meis
dedi et concessi et hac carta mea confirmavi. In. actas. terre que vocantur sup. altam. etiam. simul. infra
viam que uenit de blachichona ap. suchoniam. erga australem partem capellano leprosoribus que manent infra sator
dum. filium cum tota alia terra que illi gessit. Salu. X. actas. eadem die qua cecidit illos ab episcopo hulario cecidit si
fieri fecerunt. et hac donationem alfredi uxor mea. et beate filia mea. et perpetua elemosina. sicut cum
alia gessit. huius testibus. Masulfo. iohanne decano. c. Masulfo. iordano. henrico archidiacono. Wobone
pater de husepetho. petro capellano. Radulfo clerico de sassetod. Rogano de blachichona;



“Sciant presentes et futuri, quod ego, Rogerus de Fraxeto, pro animæ meæ salute, et pro animabus antecessorum meorum, dedi et concessi, et hac carta mea confirmavi, septem acras terræ, quæ jacent super altam terram insimul, juxta viam quæ venit de Blachintohona apud Suthonam, erga australem partem, Capellano Leprosorum qui manent juxta Safordiam, similiter cum tota alia terra quam illi concessi, scilicet decem acras, eadem die qua ecclesiam illorum ab Episcopo Hilario Ciscestrensi feci consecrari. Et hanc donationem Albreda, uxor mea, et Beatrix, filia mea, in perpetuam eleemosinam similiter cum alia concesserunt: his testibus, Magistro Johanne decano Cicestrensi, Magistro Jordano, Henrico Archidiacono, Widone presbytero de Biseption, Petro Capellano, Radulfo Clerico de Safford, Pagano de Blachintona.”

TRANSLATION.

“Know all, present and future, that I, Roger Ashgrove, for the salvation of my soul, and for the souls of my ancestors, have given and granted, and by this my charter have confirmed, seven acres of land lying together upon the high ground, by the highway leading from Blatchington to Sutton, towards the south, To the Chaplain of the Lepers dwelling near to Seaford, in like manner as all the other land which I granted him, that is to say ten acres, on the same day that I caused their church to be consecrated by Hilary Bishop of Chichester. And this donation Albreda, my wife, and Beatrix, my daughter, have granted in perpetual alms in like manner with the other; these being witnesses, Master John Dean of Chichester, Master Jordan, Henry the Archdeacon, Wido, presbyter of Bishopston, Peter the Chaplain, Ralph, parson of Seaford, and Pagan of Blatchington.”

In the way of illustration, the first question that arises is: who was the Roger de Fraxeto who thus cared for the souls of him and his, and for the poor diseased bodies of his neighbours? To this I am reluctantly compelled to answer that I do not know. I think the scribe has omitted a mark of contraction over the surname, and that instead of *De Fraxeto* we should read *De Fraxineto*, “fraxinetum” being medieval Latin for a grove of ash trees. I have therefore no hesitation in rendering the name ASHGROVE. No such place as Ashgrove is now known in the neighbourhood, but it is not necessary to assume that Roger received his surname from a locality in this district. That he was of the equestrian order is apparent from the seal appended to the charter. This seal bears a strong general resemblance to the great seal of King Henry II., the

close fitting tunic, the conical Norman helmet, and the kite-shaped shield of the horseman, being common to both.

Roger Ashgrove had at the date of this charter no male issue. He was probably advanced in life; as his daughter and heiress was of age to give her consent to the benefaction; and at the death or marriage of this lady, the name of Ashgrove probably became extinct.

How long an interval had elapsed between the foundation of the Hospital, and this new grant of seven acres of land, does not appear. Roger's original endowment of his chapel with ten acres seems to have been insufficient for the purpose, and this supplementary grant probably followed not long after.

The land conveyed by this deed is identified with a piece which was known a century ago as the "Spital Land," as appears from an old sketch of part of the parish of Seaford in the possession of Mr. W. Figg, F.S.A. This land Mr. F. informs me, was part of the Tenantry Laines of Seaford; but although called seven acres, it really measured only 3 acres, 0 roods, 27 perches, these Tenantry acres being unusually small, containing in this instance only about $72\frac{1}{2}$ perches each, and rarely exceeding 120 perches. It is right, however, to add that a portion of the land originally granted may have been dismembered at a subsequent period.

The date of the document is clearly fixed, by the names of the Witnesses, to the year 1172. John de Greneford was made Dean of Chichester that year, and Bishop the next, Master Jordan de Meleburn, the next witness, succeeding him as Dean. The third witness, Henry, Archdeacon of Chichester, took an active part in the subjugation of Battle Abbey to the authority of bishop Hilary. *Chron.* p. 86. Of the other witnesses it is only necessary to remark, that they all belonged to the locality, except, indeed, that Peter the Chaplain may have been a chaplain of the Bishop or of some monastery.
