

EARL ROGER DE MONTGOMERY AND THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS.

BY PHILIP MAINWARING JOHNSTON.

ANY facts or conjectures relating to a Sussex Worthy—although such a title may not be very literally taken in the case in question—must be of interest to Sussex archæologists. I therefore make no apology for calling attention to a very remarkable painting recently uncovered in a church in Shropshire—the Church of Claverley, near Bridgnorth.

That powerful baron, Roger de Montgomery, held large estates in Shropshire, as well as in Sussex—his share of the spoils divided by the Conqueror among his adherents: and a great part of his newly-acquired wealth went to the building of churches and the endowment of religious foundations. In this respect, at any rate, his name, and that of his good Countess Adeliza, have been honourably perpetuated in both counties. Among other churches they built, or re-built, that of Claverley, and made it a member of a college of secular canons, that took its name from the neighbouring village of Quatford, where Montgomery had built a castle. Parts of this eleventh century church remain in the greatly extended building. It was enlarged by the addition of an aisle in the first half of the twelfth century, and a tower was added on the south side about 1170. At this date also the church appears to have been elaborately decorated in colour. In particular, a long strip of decoration has been brought to light on the wall above the north arcade, which it has been my good fortune to be entrusted with the task of preserving and copying.

The peculiar interest of this strip of painting lies in the fact that it represents a deed of valour performed by

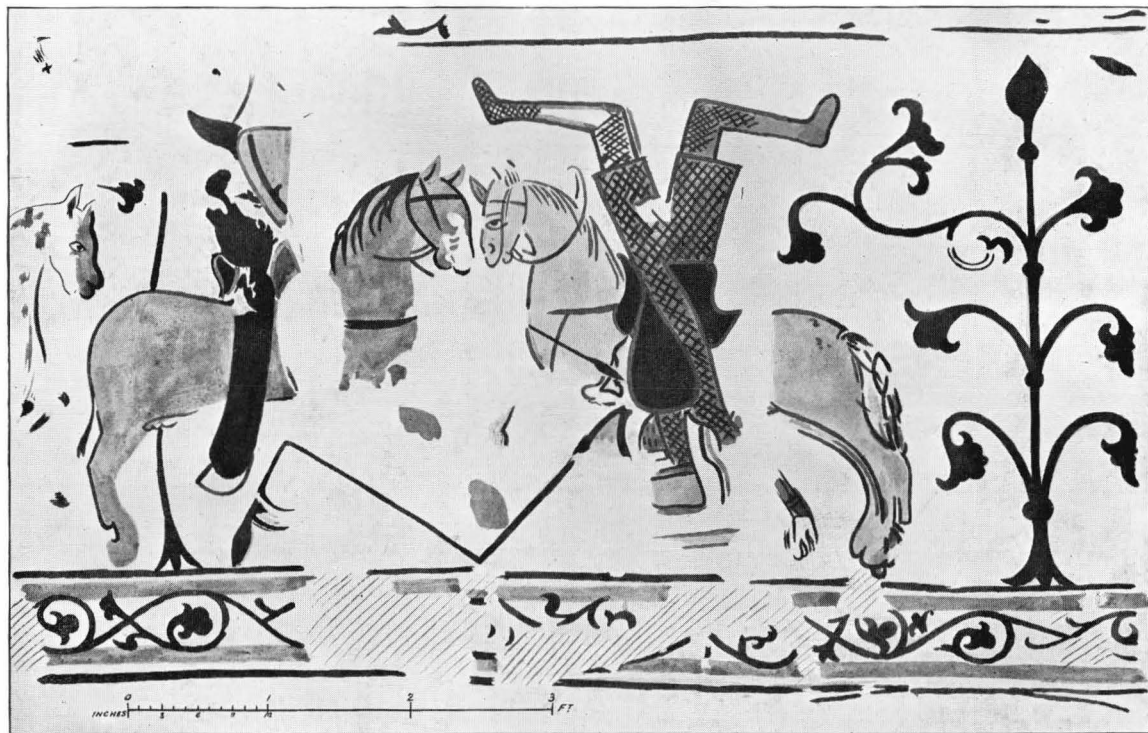
Roger de Montgomery at the Battle of Hastings,¹ where, according to the *Roman de Rou* of Master Wace, he slew a gigantic Englishman, who had caused something like a panic among the Norman knights. The passage in Wace, translated, reads as follows :

The Normans were playing their part well, when an English knight came rushing up, having in his company a hundred men furnished with various arms. He wielded a northern hatchet, with the blade a full foot long, and was well armed after his manner, being tall, bold and of noble carriage. In the front of the battle, where the Normans thronged most, he came bounding on, swifter than the stag, many Normans falling before him and his company. He rushed straight upon a Norman who was armed and riding upon a war horse, and tried with his hatchet of steel to cleave his helmet: but the blow miscarried, and the sharp blade glanced down before the saddle-bow, driving through the horse's neck down to the ground, so that both horse and master fell together to the earth. I know not whether the Englishman struck another blow. But the Normans who saw the stroke were astonished and about to abandon the assault, when Rogier de Montgomeri came galloping up with his lance set, and heeding not the long-handled axe which the Englishman wielded aloft, struck him down and left him stretched upon the ground. Then Rogier cried out, "Frenchmen, strike! The day is ours!" And again a fierce *melée* was to be seen, with many a blow of lance and sword: the English still defending themselves, killing the horses and cleaving the shields.

Mr. Freeman, who accepts the view that Earl Roger fought at Hastings, embodies this incident in his account of the famous battle (*Hist. of the Norman Conquest*, Vol. III., p. 494). He says,—“This account (Wace, 13387—13423) is worth notice.” Our learned Hon. Member, Mr. J. H. Round, is neutral upon the moot point whether or no Roger was present at the battle, but Sir Henry Howorth took the opposite view in a controversy with Mr. Freeman in the *Academy* many years ago, and I have reason to believe that he remains of the same opinion, taking his stand upon certain statements in Ordericus Vitalis.

It is beside my purpose to rest anything upon the disputed fact of Roger's presence at Hastings. Where such learned doctors disagree it would indeed be folly to be wise. Nevertheless, it is quite conceivable

¹ William's host was in three divisions: the left, Bretons and Poitevins, under Alan of Brittany; the right, mercenary French, Boulogne and Pois, under Roger de Montgomery; and the centre, the flower of the Normans, under Duke William.—Freeman's *Norman Conquest*, Vol. III., p. 459.



PORTION OF PAINTING ON NORTH WALL OF NAVE,
CLAVERLEY CHURCH, SHROPSHIRE.

*Reduced from Tracings in fac-simile
by P. M. Johnston.*

that, as in the case of a certain exalted personage, who, from much talking, persuaded himself that he had taken part in the Battle of Waterloo,—so Earl Roger may have come to believe that he fought at Hastings; or others, willing to do him honour, may have credited him with deeds of valour performed at a fight that he actually was never present at.

Whichever view we may elect to take, the circumstantial account in Wace would be *accepted as true* by most people who lived when his *Roman de Rou* became generally known, and would be quite good enough “history” to warrant the depiction of such an incident as Roger’s deed of valour upon the wall of a church of which he had been the founder.

Anyway, the painting at Claverley is of late twelfth century date, and bears a striking resemblance to the famous Bayeux Tapestry.² It is about 50-ft. long by 5-ft. broad, and contains within scroll borders fourteen figures of knights, mostly wearing masled or quilted armour and carrying pennoned lances, swords and short kite-shaped shields. The combatants, who are fighting in groups of twos and threes, are divided by conventional trees, and one of them is shewn in the act of bearing to the ground with his lance a gigantic figure, legs in air and head downwards, whose lance is broken with the shock of his fall. No figure of saint or angel occurs to give a religious significance to this strip of painting, although, in marked contrast, the spandrils of the arcade below are painted with nimbed saints and angels. A full account of this remarkable painting, with coloured illustrations by myself, will be found in the *Journal of the Royal Archæological Institute*, March, 1903.

Since the above was communicated to our Hon. Editors, Mr. W. H. St. John Hope, Assistant Secretary to the Society of Antiquaries, has read a paper upon these paintings before the Royal Archæological Institute,

² It is noteworthy that the celebrated needlework was originally made to be hung round the *nave* of Bayeux Cathedral.

which paper has been published in the latter part of the same volume (LX.) of the Institute's *Journal* as my own appeared in. In this paper Mr. Hope (who has not seen the actual paintings) disputes the probability of an event in secular history being represented upon the walls of a church, and proposes, as an alternative explanation of the subject, "The Conversion of Saul." In so doing, Mr. Hope ignores the fact that a *succession* of combats is going on all along the strip of wall on which the paintings appear, only a part of which is represented on my drawings. And he does not touch the weighty fact that the Bayeux Tapestry itself was wont to be hung round the nave of the Cathedral on certain high days—thus giving a very good precedent for a like painting of secular character appearing on the wall of an English church.³

P. M. J.

³ In the inventory of the ornaments of the Cathedral of Bayeux, taken in the year 1476, the famous needlework is thus referred to: "*Item*.—Une tente tres longue et étroite de telle à broderie de ymages et escripteaux faisans representation du conquest d'Angleterre, laquelle est tendue environ la nef de l'église le jour et par les octaves des Reliques." [At this date the feast of the Relics was kept on the 1st July.] Mr. F. R. Fowke, in his work, *The Bayeux Tapestry*, considers that Odo, Bishop of Bayeux and the Conqueror's half-brother, "who, as bishop, alone had power to display a profane history in a sacred edifice," was the donor of the actual tapestry.
