



St. Plegmund; and his connection with Cheshire

BY THE VEN. E. BARBER, M.A., F.S.A.,

ARCHDEACON OF CHESTER

(Read 16th February, 1909)

This Paper contains most of the Paper read before the Society by the late Judge Wynne Ffoulkes in 1860, his Paper having been placed at the disposal of the Archdeacon by the Rev. P. J. B. Ffoulkes.



ON November 11th, 1907, an interesting ceremony took place at Plemstall, when an ornamental stone curbing and protection round St. Plegmund's Well, erected at the expense of Mr. Osborne Aldis, was dedicated by myself.

The ceremony at the Well was preceded by a short service in the Church, when I gave an address on St. Plegmund, and the lessons to be learnt from his life. In the course of that address, I expressed my regret that a Paper read before the Society by the late Judge Wynne Ffoulkes, had not been printed *in extenso* in our Journal, and that we only had in our records a brief summary of it.

That expression of my own opinion (in which I am sure all our members will agree) has borne good fruit, for the Rev. P. J. B. Ffoulkes has sent to me

his father's Paper; and this, with some omissions and additions, I shall proceed to give you in the very words of the author, except when otherwise indicated.

“Among the early kings who ruled in this country, there is none who is more justly entitled to the appellation of ‘Great’ than Alfred. Endued with a great and enquiring mind, with brilliant talents, with singular courage and energy, and, at the same time, surpassing in physical activity, he seems to have been an instrument raised up by Divine wisdom to save this country from being swallowed up by the vortex of Danish rapacity and devastation in which she was helplessly eddying round. England's history at this period is Alfred's biography; and it is impossible to overestimate the influence which his reign had on the destinies of this country. But if it is just and right to pay this passing homage to the memory of this truly great man, we may fairly attribute some share of his success to those instruments which it was his wisdom to make choice of to carry out his designs.

“Succeeding to his brother, Ethelred, about the year 872, Alfred found his kingdom, and indeed the whole country, wasted; the religious houses razed to the ground; Episcopal Sees desolated; the people broken in spirit, almost destitute of religious teachers, and fast relapsing into a condition of ignorance and barbarism.

“The keen mind of the King soon perceived that the prime remedy for these evils was to revive learning and religion. For this purpose he assembled around him at his Court all those who were eminent, either at home or abroad, for their piety and learning.

Among them history has handed down to us, as most conspicuous, the names of the following :

Johannes Scotus, an Irishman, the friend and guest of Charles the Bald of France, Alfred's preceptor in languages, and afterwards professor in the Monastery of Malmesbury.

Grimbald, another foreigner, a master of church music, and of exemplary piety (with whom the King had made acquaintance in his youth when on his way to Rome), and subsequently Abbot of Winchester.

Asser, a native, the biographer of Alfred, and, as is said, Archbishop of St. David's.

Werefrid, *Dunwulf*, *Walsey*, and *Werebert*, and last, though the first summoned by the King, *Plegmund*, the subject of our paper.

“ He was born in Mercia, a kingdom extending from the borders of Wales to the eastern shores of England, and embracing Cheshire and all the midland counties; but we are not able to fix the locality of his birth-place. Of his early training we know nothing; but it is most probable that he led a monastic life in his earliest years. When summoned to the Court of Alfred, he was living as a hermit at a place called by the inhabitants Plegmunshaw. It is possible that he was led to adopt this life after the destruction of religious houses by the Danes.”

Here I venture to interpose a few words of my own. The hermit, we must remember, as *Dean Hook* tells us, was not a solitary like the anchorite. The latter never quitted his cell, but was an absolute recluse. The hermit, on the other hand, was a more independent

character. He moved about as occasion demanded. If he had a settled abode or cell, he would go to places of public resort near at hand, and by his preaching seek to benefit the wayfarers. We can thus imagine St. Plegmund, coming in from the place where he had established himself on an isle of Chester, visiting the City, perhaps taking up his position at one or other of its gates (for it was surrounded with its Roman Walls), and instructing out of his laboriously acquired learning those who were willing to pause and listen to his fervid discourse. The anxious enquirer might return with him to his island home, and after further instruction as a catechumen, might receive the grace of Holy Baptism at the very Well which now bears his name.

How and where Plegmund acquired his learning we cannot say. His opportunities would be scanty, as compared with ours; and the books or manuscripts within his reach could not have been very many. It has been confidently suggested that one of his treasures, next to the Bible, would be *Boethius* "De Consolatione Philosophiæ." That he acquired a considerable reputation for learning we may be quite certain, or the King would not have sent for him.

To return to the Judge's Paper:

"The very fact that he was the first of the chosen instruments of Alfred for the reformation and renovation of the State, at once stamps him as a man of no ordinary character; and a more convincing proof of this is furnished by his appointment as Tutor or Preceptor to the King. He was one of four whom the King appointed to read books to him, night and day, when he had leisure. Wherefore the King possessed

a knowledge of every book, though unable to read them himself; and who shall say how much we are *even now* indebted to the wise counsels and sound judgment and teaching of Plegmund, for some of the liberties and privileges with which we, above all other nations, are blessed. He is said to have been a man pre-eminent for his piety. Asser says he was a venerable man, endowed with wisdom, a profound scholar and theologian. Some idea of the esteem in which he was held by King Alfred may be gathered from his always forming one of the council or committee for the promotion of learning and religion.

“In one of Alfred’s Charters, he and Grimbold are designated ‘*carissimi mei*,’ ‘my most beloved,’ an expression which, however in these days it may savour of diplomatic formality and courtesy, when used by such a Monarch as Alfred, in a simpler age, had a more real significance, and spoke out the gratitude and yearnings of the royal heart. Of his life and character at the Court of Alfred, before his promotion to the See of Canterbury, we can glean no more.”

There is, in the library of Corpus Christi College at Cambridge, a copy, the oldest in existence, of the “Saxon Chronicle,” said to have been transcribed by Plegmund, for which assertion there is internal evidence of an indirect nature. It is not unreasonable to suppose that this was one of the works performed by Plegmund at this period.

“In 890, the See of Canterbury, which had been vacant for two years, was offered to Grimbold; and, being declined by him, was then offered by the King to Plegmund, and accepted by him. It is remarkable that he does not seem to have held any office or

professorship at the School of Oxford, which Alfred founded, and where his contemporaries, St. Neot and Grimbold, were Professors of Divinity; and Asser, of grammar and rhetoric. It may be, however, that the personal regard of the King induced him to retain him close to himself, until the opportunity offered of his exaltation to the Archbishopric of Canterbury. His appointment appears to have given the greatest satisfaction, for, in the 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle,' it is said that 'he was chosen of God and of all the people.' He went to Rome in 890 to be consecrated by Pope Formosus, who presented him with the Pall, and invested him with full Metropolitan authority. From that time till 895 we hear nothing of him. He may have stayed at Rome during that period. In 895 we find his signature to a grant to the church by the King, which Alfred declares he makes by the counsel of his most beloved Plegmund the Archbishop and Grimbold the Priest. In the same year, Plegmund himself granted a piece of land to the Church, near the river Romney, in Kent."

We have no doubt that Plegmund cordially seconded the King in his endeavours to reform the Church of England, to encourage the clergy in their duties, and to establish a learned priesthood. In conjunction, they published "The Pastoral Care" of St. Gregory, a copy of which was sent to every English Bishop, with a noteworthy preface by the King, in which the Sovereign acknowledged what he had "learned of Plegmund my Archbishop, and of Asser my Bishop, and of Grimbold my Presbyter, and of John my Presbyter." It is interesting to know that the copy addressed to Plegmund is still preserved, as well as those addressed to the Bishops of Worcester and of Sherborne.

“In 899 the King appears to have consulted Plegmund as to the mode of restoring the City of London, which had probably suffered from the ravages of the Danes. In the following year his royal pupil and patron died; and he was called upon to consecrate his son, Edward, as his successor.”

I pass over with this short summary some references to Plegmund's co-operation with the King in the building and endowment of a Monastery at Winchester, a favoured residence of Royalty. There are various documents and charters, referring to this and other matters connected with that Diocese, from which it would appear that a rearrangement of it, by creating two divisions, may have taken place then. Evidence is also given in them of the care which was taken to restore the property of the Church which had been wrested from it; and also to preserve it from future alienation.

An interesting account was given in the original Paper of the “Bull” or Decree attributed to Pope Formosus, and addressed to the Church of England. The reasons assigned for the threat with which it concluded, were mainly the delay in filling up vacant Sees, and the dispute as to which Bishop should occupy the position of Primate. Some doubt has been thrown by *Collier* and other ecclesiastical historians, on the genuineness of this document on chronological grounds. It may, of course, be attributed to a wrong Pope. If it is genuine, it is clear that it was issued during the episcopate of Plegmund, from the following extract: “It is clear that in the city of Dorobernia (or Canterberie) is the metropolitan and

first See of the realm of the Angles, over which our venerable brother Plegmund is now decreed to preside, and in no manner do we permit the dignity of that See to be lessened." More follows to the same effect; and the document concludes with: "threatening anathemas and excommunications to all who should resist or disobey the authority of that See."

Plegmund paid a second visit to Rome. There is some doubt as to the date and the reason of this. It has been assigned to the close of 908; and *Dr. Hook* says it was necessitated by Pope Stephen having annulled the acts and ordinations of Formosus, owing to some irregularities and indiscretions on his part. If *Dr. Hook's* view is correct, as also his statement that Plegmund submitted to the questionable ceremony of re-consecration, the assigned date cannot be correct, for in 905, at a Synod held at Ravenna, the ordinations of Formosus, on which doubts had been cast, were confirmed.

It is also stated that Plegmund's second visit to Rome was occasioned by his taking the alms of the King and people to the Pope; and that he brought back with him the relics of the Martyr Blasius, for which he had given a large price, and placed them in the Church of Christ at Canterbury. It is interesting to note that Blasius was the Patron Saint of wool-combers; and that his name appears in our Calendar on February 3rd, on which day our own S. Werburgh used to be commemorated. One of my early recollections, of more than fifty years ago, is that of seeing, and attempting to copy, a piece of stained glass on which his likeness appeared, in an old York-

shire farmhouse or hall. In Yorkshire, the seat of the wool industry, he was specially venerated, and various customs in connection with the day were observed at Bradford and other places.

“King Edward and Archbishop Plegmund summoned a council in the province of the West Saxons, and determined that that region should be divided into five bishoprics instead of two, Winchester and Sherborne. In the year 909, in one and the same day, the Archbishop consecrated seven Bishops. They are said to have been: *Fridestan*, Bishop of Winchester; *Werestan*, of Sherburn; *Kenulph*, of Dorchester; *Beornock*, of Selsea; *Athelm*, of Wells; *Eadulph*, of Kirton or Crediton; and *Athelstan*, of Padstow. The two latter represent an extension of the jurisdiction of Canterbury to a district which had not previously accepted it. This event was one of the most distinguishing acts of Plegmund’s episcopacy.”

Considerable attention has been brought to it at the present time, as it is proposed,¹ both at Wells and at Crediton, to celebrate the millenary of it. The following cutting, from a recent newspaper, bears upon this point:

“THE MILLENNARY OF CREDITON.—Considerable interest is being taken in the movement for commemorating next June the millenary of the consecration of the first Bishop of the ancient See of Crediton. The Bishop of Bristol has promised to preach; and the Archbishop of Canterbury, whose intention it is to be present, is taking the keenest interest in the event. The Bishops of Exeter, Crediton, and Marlborough, will also attend; and the help of the Exeter

¹ Since these words were spoken the commemorations have been held, and with marked success.

Cathedral choir has been offered by the Bishop of Marlborough. Invitations will be sent to the representatives of the six other Sees whose Bishops were also consecrated by Archbishop Plegmund in 909, at Canterbury, on the same day as the first Bishop of Crediton. Among these will be the Bishops of Winchester, Bath and Wells, and Salisbury."

We can hardly suppose that any resident of Plemstall, from which place Plegmund was summoned by King Alfred, will be present at this celebration.

Whether he ever visited the scene of his early labours here, it is impossible to say; but the following fancied description of the foundation of S. John's, Chester, by the late Mr. Thomas Hughes, is not without interest:

"First there were Ethelred and Ethelfleda, the joint founders; near them might stand their royal ward Athelstan, the Etheling, heir to his father's throne. Prominent in the group we may suppose there would be Plegmund, the Archbishop of Canterbury, a native of Mercia, and but a few years before a modest recluse at the hermitage in that island of Chester."

Whether this was so or not we cannot say; but that the spot, whether revisited or not, had a grateful corner in the heart of the Archbishop, we cannot doubt.

In 910, Plegmund's name appears in several Charters; after this we lose all trace of him, though he seems to have filled the See of Canterbury till 914. On the 23rd of July in that year he died, and was buried in his Cathedral at Canterbury.

We can have no doubt that, in his conduct of the Archiepiscopal office, Plegmund fully justified the choice of the King and the people; and that he consistently carried out the plans of Alfred, and laboured diligently to secure for the Church a learned Ministry.

“*Collier* speaks of him as a man of extraordinary learning for his time; whilst an early Chronicler sums up his career as Archbishop in few but pregnant words: ‘At this time Plegmund ruled the Church of Christ as Archbishop faithfully, and with a glorious reign: a man to be revered, who shone with the fruits of wisdom, and was endued with these double pillars of strength, justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude.’”

We have no portrait or likeness of Plegmund. “There are, however” (writes *Dr. Hook*, in a letter to Judge Wynne Ffoulkes), “several coins in existence of Plegmund; and as the Archbishops travelled with their moneys, who went with them to convert their plate into coin as their needs required, one is not surprised at the discovery of Archiepiscopal coins in various parts of the country. On the Coins of Plegmund his portrait does not appear. The obverse has his name and his title, except in one instance, where the name of the Mint follows that of the Archbishop. The reverses have invariably the moneyer’s name.” From a Paper by *Mr. Hartwright*, supplied to the late Mr. Hughes, the names of these moneyers were:

ÆTHELVLF, EICMVND, ENSAM,
SIGENHEIM.

The letters “M O,” for Monetarius, generally follow the name. In one instance we have “NOR,” which may be a blunder, and be intended for “M O.”

In his Paper, Judge Wynne Ffoulkes was at some pains to show that Plegmund was connected with Plemstall; and that his cell as a hermit must have been there. For this purpose he brings forward some interesting historical facts concerning the Church and

parish. He instances the various names by which the place was known at different times, as Plemondstowe, Plegmundshaw, and Plegmondestowe. There is no need at the present day to elaborate this point, for it is accepted as without question.

That eminent historian, our late Bishop, *Dr. Stubbs*, speaking before our Society in 1886, said: "In Plemondstall or Plemstall you have the stall or habitation of Plegmund, who has been identified with an Archbishop of Canterbury in the time of King Alfred." But though there can be no doubt of this, we cannot perhaps locate exactly the spot where his Cell was placed. The whole character of the country has changed materially since that remote period. Then it was spoken of as "an island of Chester"; but a careful study of the maps, as also of the nature of the ground, shows that the site of the present Church was once a river or fen island.

A situation of this character would afford protection. *Dr. Hook*, in the letter already quoted, says:

"We should not expect a Church to retain his name, for he went into Cheshire as a Hermit, a Solitary; whereas those who established Churches for safety's sake established a community of Clergy, whether they were seculars or not; these establishments were generally called Monasteries or Minsters. But what does strike one as extraordinary, is that he should have chosen Cheshire for his place of retreat, Cheshire being at that time one of the most disturbed districts of the country. It is not improbable that the hermit acted also as a Missionary."

Plegmundshaw may therefore be a corruption of Plegmundsholme, which would mean "the fenny island of Plegmund," and so be the original name of the place. It may be, therefore, that the Cell was some-

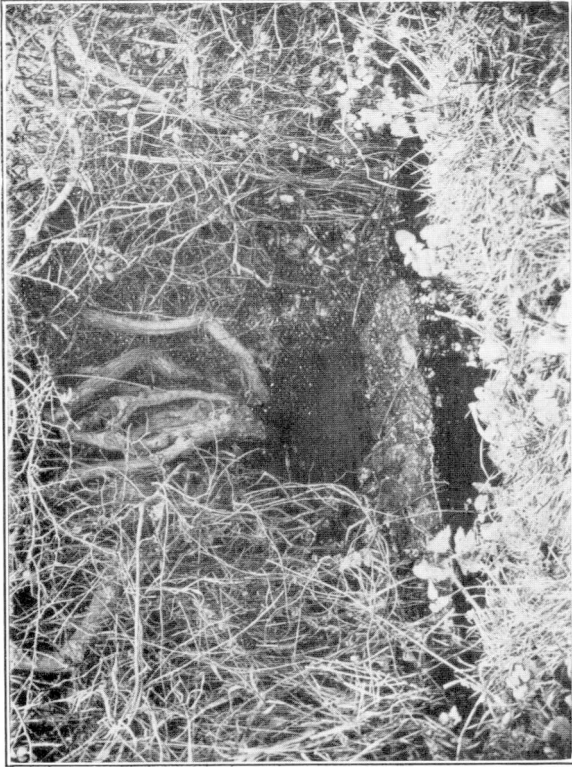
where on the ground now occupied by the Church, and, if so, in close proximity to the Well which bears his name.

I ought to give you here, in his own words, some particulars from the Judge's Paper :

“ Between the inroads of savage invaders on the one hand, and the repeated inundations of the sea on the other, it is not surprising if all tradition of the sight of Plegmund's Cell has perished. I think, however, I should not omit to notice a passage in Henry IIIrd's Charter, wherein the King confirms to the Abbot of Shrewsbury (and that Abbey had the Advowson of Plemstall) the grant by Robert the bailiff of Chester 'of a hermit's dwelling in the wood of Sutton'; and as this immediately follows the grants in Donham and Trochford, and is made by an official of this City, Sutton is most probably Guilden Sutton, the parish next adjoining Plemstall on the west. Whether this wood extended beyond the bounds of the township, or whether the boundaries of Plemstall and Sutton have always been the same as they now are, we cannot now determine; but at any rate, here is a coincidence which should not be passed over.”

It is more than possible that the name, “the wood of Sutton,” might in those times cover a large area, and include the site of the Church; and thus, that the supposition that the Cell of Plegmund was originally there is not by any means a far-fetched one. There was (and is) no township of Plemstall, so that it would be natural for the name of the wood to be derived from an adjoining one.

Supposing then that the Cell was on the site of the Church, or close to it, it is not unreasonable to con-



S. Plegmund's Well, or The Christening Well

E. G. Ballard, Photo.

clude that the Well, round which the curbing has recently been put, is really S. Plegmund's Well ; and that it was used by him for ordinary purposes ; and also that he may there have baptized converts, when he had instructed them as catechumens.

We have instances elsewhere of Wells designated by the name of the saint or holy man who formerly had his abode near them. Thus, we have S. Chad's Well, near Lichfield, of which a description is given by *Leland*, in his "Itinerary" of the date of 1538. Such Wells were often termed holy Wells, and we can call to mind several such ; whilst, as in the neighbouring town in the Principality, it sometimes gave the name to the place. Whether Plegmund's Well was, in his lifetime or subsequently, counted *a holy well* it is impossible to say. As it was in early times not easily accessible, it is probable that it was not ; and this might account for the name of S. Plegmund not being invariably attached to it. I am told that there is a record, in a very early deed (of the time of Edward VI.), of land being purchased near St. Plegmund's Well. This would seem to show that the tradition is an ancient one.

But for many generations the water from the Well has been used for Holy Baptism ; and there are entries in the Churchwardens' accounts, running back over 130 years, showing that an annual payment was made for cleaning the Well, which is called the "Church Well," or the "Christening Well." It is interesting to note that, in the payments to the Clerk, the two Sacraments are linked together, as thus : "The Clerk for Bread for Sacrament and for cleaning the Well, 2/-." Another year the payment was 1/9 ; and another

2/4. The regularity of these payments may be taken as a sufficient proof of the identity of the Well through all those years, as any change would undoubtedly have been noted.

Doubt has recently been cast upon this by an anonymous correspondent in our local newspaper. The assertion that this is not St. Plegmund's Well or the Church Well, is founded upon an early recollection of its condition when the writer was a boy; how many years ago he does not say. Against that you have the evidence of the parish Clerk, responsible for the care of the Well, who, with his father-in-law, carries the history back *at least* sixty years. It is incredible that the Well should have been changed without the knowledge of those really in charge of it. Its surroundings, and therefore outward appearance, have been altered; for the Churchwardens' Accounts make mention of the widening of the road near it, which would bring the Well nearer to the road, and do away with the foot-path which led to it.

We may rest content, therefore, with believing that this is Plegmund's Well; that it may have been used by him for Christian Baptism; and that for many generations the water from it has been used for a like purpose, the font being filled from it. This is a justification for the Latin couplet inscribed on the Stone which Mr. Aldis has placed there:

“Hic fons Plegmundi functus baptismatis usu
Regnante Alfredo, tunc hodieque solet.”

I have ventured to give the meaning of this in the following lines:

“Here, as in days when Alfred erst was King,
Baptismal water flows from Plegmund's spring.”

I have purposely left untouched the general subject of holy wells, and the customs which grew up around them, because I think it requires and deserves separate treatment; and I hope at some future day it may receive it from some member of our Society.

It is not impossible that the ceremony of Well-dressing may be revived in connection with St. Plegmund's Well, on July 23rd, the day of his death. If this should be done, it will not only prove an interesting village festival, but also have the result of perpetuating the memory of the Archbishop, and his close association with Plemstall and the neighbourhood.

