



#### ST. CUTHBERT'S RING.

THE ring, represented in full size by the accompanying engravings, was found in St. Cuthbert's coffin in the year 1537. Harpsfield, Archdeacon of Canterbury, describes the occasion and circumstances of the discovery. He lived at the very time, and was then a Fellow of New Hall, Oxford. His words are—"When, at the order of King Henry VIII. (A.D. 1537), the shrines of the saints were plundered and broken to pieces in every part of England, and their holy relics were cast into vile places; the wooden chest, which was covered with white marble, was also broken. And when he whose task it was to destroy and break the tomb, had broken the coffin with a heavy blow, the stroke fell upon the body of the saint, and wounded the leg; and of the wound the flesh soon gave a manifest sign. As soon as this was seen, as also that the whole body was entire, except that the tip of the nose, I know not why, was wanting, the circumstance was laid before Cuthbert Tunstall, at that time Bishop of Durham. He was consulted as to what he might order to be done with the body; and, at his order, a grave was dug, and the body was replaced in that spot where its precious shrine had been before. Not only the body, but also the vestments in which he was robed, were perfectly entire, and free and clear of all stain and decay. *He had on his finger a gold ring, ornamented with a*

*sapphire*, which I once saw and touched, and which, as a holy relic more precious than any treasure, I earnestly laid hold of and kissed."<sup>1</sup>

The ring came into the possession of Thomas Watson, the Catholic dean appointed when Horne, the Protestant dean, was dismissed. Dean Watson gave it to Sir Robert Hare. He gave it to Anthony Brown, created Viscount Montague by Queen Mary in 1554. This nobleman gave it to Dr. Richard Smith, bishop of Chalcedon *in partibus infidelium*, and Vicar Apostolic of the Northern District, whom he had for a long time sheltered in his house from the persecution. Bishop Smith gave the ring to the monastery of the English Canonesses of St. Augustine at Paris, Rue Fossée St. Victoire. He was the founder of their house, spent the last 13 years of his life with them, and deceased there in 1655, esteemed and beloved for his piety and learning.

The ring is above the ordinary size; and though evidently a pastoral ring, would now be considered heavy and rude. It is massive, of dark coloured gold, with a large sapphire in it. For exactly 200 years it has been in the keeping of the English nuns at Paris, highly valued by them—"because," as the reverend Mother wrote me in October, 1848, "it came to us from our holy and venerated founder, as a legacy to his dear children, and as such we treasure it doubly." A few months ago, however, they consented to part with it, and it is now the property of St. Cuthbert's College, Ushaw, Durham.

A question may naturally be raised—Is this the ring that St. Cuthbert received at his consecration, and with which he would be buried at his decease in 687? We do not find mention of a ring, but we may not doubt his being buried with one. Anglo-Saxon bishops wore the ring, and were buried with it. For in the three Anglo-Saxon pontificals now in France—(two at Paris and one at Rouen)—the pontifical ring is especially mentioned by the rubrics at the consecration of a bishop. And at the beginning of the 13th century, when the grave of a bishop, supposed to be St. Birinus, was opened in Dorchester church, near Oxford, among other things a ring was found.

Or would this ring have been put upon the body of St. Cuthbert, when it was dis-interred eleven years afterwards, *i. e.* A. D. 698, at the time of his canonization? A new robe was on this occasion put on the body in the place of one removed, but there is no mention of a ring: at the same time they took away the face-cloth from off his head, cut off a portion of the hair, and exchanged the sandals on his feet for others of greater value.

<sup>1</sup> Hist. Eccles. Angl., p. 105.

Or again, might not this ring have been put into the coffin of St. Cuthbert, when it was opened and the body examined on the occasion of its translation into the new cathedral at Durham, A.D. 1104? Though the hands were examined at the re-interment, no ring is spoken of.

It can only be a matter of conjecture whether this ring had been worn by St. Cuthbert during his life time, or had been buried with him at any of the dates named, *i. e.* A.D. 687 or 689 or 1104. Some have been led to suppose that the rings of Anglo-Saxon bishops were graven to be used as seals. And the Anglo-Saxon pontifical at Rouen, and St. Dunstan's at Paris, both have—“*cum annulus datur hæc oratio dicitur: “Accipe ergo annulum discretionis et honoris, fidei signum, ut quæ signanda sunt signes, et quæ aperienda sunt prodas &c.”* Arguments may be advanced in favour of each of these dates.

In all probability, it will ever remain an open question—whether this ring was received by the Saint when he was consecrated bishop, or was worn by him during his life time, or was made or procured for his burial in the year 687, or for either of the interments in 698 or 1104. An opinion, without any very satisfactory reason to back it, can be of little value; but, if I were to form an opinion, it would be in favour of the date A.D. 698.

C. E.