

ESCOMBE CHURCH.

BY W. H. D. LONGSTAFFE.

THE position of Escombe, near Auckland, up the Wear, apart from any old main road of much use, and its subjection as a parochial chapelry to the parish of St. Andrew, Auckland, have occasioned, in the absence of any proper notice by our writers, an entire oversight on the part of archaeologists of the only perfect example of a Saxon church now existing in Bernicia. For the pre-Norman period we have divers towers, a chancel at Jarrow, a remarkable west end at Wearmouth of very early and superior workmanship, and a fine crypt at Hexham composed of small ornamental Roman stones. But at Escombe we find a church Saxon from end to end, and here the ruins of Vinovium formed a ready quarry, much more accessible in ancient times than now, the river having materially changed its course and thrown much of the intervening district to the other side of the water.

The history of Escombe, as it has for some centuries been called, commences with its name Ediscum. We may perhaps fairly consent to the proposition that the final syllable of that name refers to the low part of the township, or rather perhaps to its banks and ancient configuration, than to its more elevated portions. On the whole of the very difficult subject of the meaning, or rather meanings, of the word *comb*, Dufresne's Glossarium of Low-Latin, Bosworth's Dictionary of Anglo-Saxon, and Halliwell's Dictionary of Archaic, words may be usefully consulted. It extended all over the west of Europe, and had some sort of signification sufficiently precise to justify its employment in charters as devoting private property outside of the forest. Of course, under such circumstances, it is no index to either race or date. The first part of the word Ediscum seems to have a personal reference. It is spelt exactly in the same way as the commencement of Edisbrig, the name of an estate near Muggleswick, in the conventual inventory of 1464. This name at the bridge over the Derwent there is now called

Eddysbridge, but the old spellings, Edyedsbridge, Eedesbrige, and Eedeedsbrig, throw a doubt on the propriety of the pronunciation. In Cheshire there is an Edesbery, or Eddesbury, which was built in 914 by Æthelflæd, lady of the Mercians, and which, when in ruin, was called The Chamber in the Forest.

Supposing that Ediscum was the *comb* of some male or female Eda or Ede, no light is thrown upon its history by such an interpretation. In 801 Edwine, who was also called Eda, formerly a *dux* of the Northumbrians and then an abbot, was buried in his monastery of Gainford. But the name was common. On a single leaf of the Surtees Society's print of the Durham Book of Life we have Eda, Ida, Æda, and Ede. The abbreviation of the name may have taken place when Bishop Pudsey granted to Humphrey the Charioteer six acres in Edescumb. Yet in the celebrated Boldon Buke of the same prelate we have, as to this estate, the contracted form of Escumb. It must be confessed that the later copies of Boldon Buke, to which we are driven, vary provokingly. Thus we have both Edmansley and Edmondsey. The former is unquestionably the real name, as, in the miracles of St. Godric, we find "a woman, Eda by name, of Edemanneslaye." This occurrence shows how careful expounders of names should be that they obtain the early orthographies.

The story of the building up of the eventual palatinate presents many difficulties which cannot be effectually discussed among these remarks. In whatever way "Ediscum" came to the church, its first appearance is in the Oxford additions to the venerable History of St. Cuthbert's stores. There we have an enumeration of various estates, practically the modern parishes of Gainford and St. Andrew's Auckland, including, *inter alia*, two Alclits, Bynceastre, and Ediscum, lent or mortgaged by Bishop Aldhun and the Congregation "to these three, Ethred eorle, and Northman eorle, and Uthred eorle," with a curse upon any one who should abstract anything in respect of them from St. Cuthbert. Of these four individuals Bishop Aldhun changed the see from Chesterle-Street to Durham in 995, and erected two successive churches of stone there. "Ethred and Northman nowhere occur as earls of Northumberland, nor are they so described in our text. They were probably Danes, who exercised authority during the usurpation of Sweyn, to whom earl Uctred refused his allegiance, as we know their countryman Yric did under Cnut."—(Hinde.) Next, according to the same history,

Cnutæ gave to the church Staindrop and an Aclit and some other places not previously named, which seem principally to compose the modern parishes of Staindrop and St. Helen's Auckland. The substantial truth of the old historian's statements is supported by the independent evidence contained in the Durham Book of Life as to "Northman eorle" *syling*, i.e., selling, not necessarily for any pecuniary consideration, into St. Cuthbert "Ediscum." How the rest of the parish of St. Andrew's Auckland was recovered does not appear. That it *was* recovered is plain. That Gainford was lost is also plain. Symeon, who seems, even at his early period, to have felt the perplexities of the Durham history, after noticing some specific grants to the church of lands in the Darlington district, says, that there were other landed properties "which Bishop Aldhun, compelled by the pressure of the times, transferred for a period to the earls of the Northumbrians; but *nearly all* of these were alienated from the church by the violence of their successors in the earldom. Some of them are here [he says] specified by name." Then he gives the old historian's list of places, spelling our *locus in quo*. "Ediscum" as before, and ends with:—"All these were once the property of that church which, while she sought to benefit those who were in necessity, thereby endangered her own interests."

It is singular that our information should be so scanty, but we may infer that Escombe was returned to the church separately from other places which were, eventually, returned, and that the particulars of the return of the main portion of the parish of St. Andrew's Auckland, in which Escombe settled down as a township, prebend, and parochial chapelry, was unknown to our first reliable authorities. The oldest historian records the curse upon any tamperer with the reversion or equity of redemption; the life-promiser records the surrender by Northman, a titular earl of Ediscum, and Symeon's "nearly all" must mean something or other. The character of the documents put forward as the early charters of Durham Cathedral is lamentable, and all that we can do is to be thankful for the generally firm ground on which we stand when we arrive at the episcopate of Bishop Pudsey, by the time of which the civil and ecclesiastical arrangements of the recovered and acquired estates would appear to have been tolerably well made in an altered form not much different from that which subsisted until a recent period.

In his Boldon Buke of 1183, *non obstante* any error of MS. detail, the history of Escombe emerges. Matters had been brought to some bearing. A Heghyngtonshire, in which one or two Thickleys (the name of Thiccelea being found in Aldhun's mortgage or loan, and Canute's grant) appear, had arisen. And Acletshire and West Acletshire had arisen with mills for each. All the independence of Escombe, which must have existed when it alone had been returned to the church, had disappeared. Its villans worked as those of North Aclet did. This would probably only mean what is now known as "the custom of the country." A collier found coals, mineral or made from wood, for the making of the ploughshares of Coundon. West Auckland had to do works between Tyne and Tees; and then to some extent West Aclet, like Escumb, had ceased to be independent. "All villans of Acletshire, to wit, of North Aclet and West Aclet, and Escumb and Newton, at the Bishop's great chases," did certain works. "Besides, all villans and fermors go in *rahunt* at the Bishop's summons, and to the working of the mills of West Acletshire."

Escombe is a somewhat picturesque village, its main buildings surrounding a small God's-croft, occupying the centre of a quasi-town's-green. Some, many of us, must remember the beauty of the churchyards of England in our boyhood, with the footpaths, the sheep, the wild geraniums, the unlettered graves, the undestroyed and undisturbed tombstones high or low, railed or unrailed, and the solemn lessons now but little taught. The God's-croft of Escombe, whatever may have been its former state, differs. Its sepulchral purposes have ceased, and Flora reigns supremely. There is something about the old enclosure of Escombe and the ancient church within it which should be treated and helped by loving hearts within the earldom of Northumberland, including, of course, the so-called counties of Norham, Hexham, Durham, and Sadberge, with divers other franchises within that princely successor of the Linea Valli and of the subsequent Bernicia.

The church possesses that cyclopean masonry familiar to us by reason of the lower part of the north wall of Ebchester chancel, which is built within the walls of a station on or near to Iter I.; and, at first sight, that at its angles might be taken for long-and-short work. It is, however, good quoined work. Too much has been made of supposed chronological masonries. As far as long-and-short work is concerned, that

portion of Whittingham tower of which the custodiers of the fabric have suffered the existence is, probably, the only, or almost the only, example of such building in our diocese. Bloxham noticed the absence of it in the church of Brixworth, which he considered to be "perhaps the most complete specimen existing of the early Anglo-Saxon era," and in the chancel of Jarrow Church, which all authorities admit to be of Saxon date. Whether the remains at Jarrow are a portion of the main church of St. Paul, built shortly after the erection of that of St. Peter at Wearmouth, is a question. From the absence of the baluster shafts, which are found *in situ* at Wearmouth, but only existed as building materials in another portion of Jarrow Church, the negative suggests itself. It forms, therefore, no portion of the plan of this paper to discuss a confessedly difficult point as to the precise period at which the later Saxon works were constructed, separated as they are from our early Norman works by documentary evidences and "sermons in stones."

It may be premised that the lights in the south side and the west end (the distinction between a side and an end of a church or a table should always be observed in words and acts) of Escombe Church closely resemble those in Jarrow chancel, and that the chancel arch, tall in proportion, reminds one of that at Brigstock Church and of the tower arch at Corbridge. The next noticeable point is the considerable height of the church in combination with an exceptionally short chancel. The general pose of the building may, to some extent, be gained by Parker's cut of the church of Bradford-on-Avon. But the chancel of Escombe is proportionally still shorter than that at Bradford, and any exterior ornament is furnished not by panelling but by the broaching or cross-hatching and other conventionalisms of the Romans. In the walls for most of their height we observe large stones, many of which large stones are so treated. Their hickety-pickety occurrence shows plainly that they came from an earlier settlement. One unbroached stone presents CV upside down, possibly having no connection with *Civitas* or *Vinovium*.* Another has a pellet within an annulet in relief. We are all of us familiar with the small ornamental and plain stones on the direct line of the Roman Wall and at Chesterholm and Hexham.

* It appears from a later account of the church by Mr. Pritchett that this stone presents LEG VI. In the south wall of the church is one presenting "a serpent or eel-like fish."

But the startling size of the stones at Escombe, ornamented and plain, mural and corner, leads, like the Ebchester evidence, to much thought as to the structural differences between the line of the Wall and Iter I.

There is another peculiarity about the walls at Escombe. At their tops there are a few courses of smaller stones. Our first idea was that the thrust of the roof had displaced its support, and that this portion of the building had been rebuilt. The masonry of the angles forbade the notion of an independent addition to the height at a later period, and it may at once be observed that, judging from Bradford-on-Avon Church, the timbers of the roof at Escombe seem to represent very fairly the original pitch of it—neither very high nor very low. The first idea had to be abandoned, because one of the Jarrow-like lights occurs *in situ* among the smaller stones in the western gable. Two solutions present themselves. Either the Roman quarry failed, or the Escombe Commissioners were unpleasantly reminded by some Earl of Binchester of the eighth commandment. The recent excavations at Vinovium may aid in determining the point in favour of the latter surmise. The fact that a portion of a Saxon cross lies at the northern springing of the eastern gable of the nave does not help us. It may have been placed there at any time, and, so far as can at present be judged, it seems to be of a period earlier than that of the present church, early though it be, and reminds one of the Hexham School of Art. And here is opened that question which has long exercised us—the relation of the dedications to the ancient diocesan systems. St. Andrew's Auckland, with its piece of a Saxon cross of the Aycliffe type, is not the only place having a church dedicated, as was a church at Hexham, to St. Andrew. And what is the history of that St. Wolfrid's acre at Escombe whereof Sir Ralph Eure died seized in Cardinal Langley's time? The idea at the present day is that Escombe Church is dedicated to St. John.

The one bell of 1577 is in substance, or by substitution, to the fore. There are two elegant "shouldered" early English lights, one lowered internally for sedilia, a simple semicircular piscina of the same date, and square-headed windows and a square-headed doorway on the north side of the nave. This doorway is in the centre of the nave, as is the doorway at Bradford. Finally, the font is of an oblong octagonal form, as if to suit immersion, and there is a miniature Norman gravestone with two rosettes tied to the cross.