

Weyborne Priory.

COMMUNICATED BY

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As to the original foundation of this Priory, that is a subject which, like the origin of most religious houses in Norfolk, is involved in very great obscurity. A critical examination of the old monastic cartularies of Norfolk monasteries has yet to be made, and ought to be made. I have myself just touched the margin of this subject, and the conviction that is growing with me is that the origin of more than one or two of the Norfolk religious houses is much earlier than has generally been supposed. I have a suspicion that more than one of these monasteries date from a period before the Conquest, but that these houses were in a condition of sore decay, and in fact ruinous and untenanted before the Normans came. I think it not improbable that this was the case with this little Priory of Weyborne.

At the time of the Survey (1086) there is no mention of a church. That proves nothing,—the Survey only occasionally, under peculiar circumstances, ever does mention the churches. But at *no time* is there any mention of any church, except that of the Canons. The whole parish at the Conquest was made over to the Conqueror's nephew, who was created Earl of Chester. Under him a family which came to bear the

name of Mainwaring, held the estate. It was a poor little worthless bit of property, and assuming, as I think we may fairly assume, that a church existed here deserted and unserved in the eleventh century, I think it probable that in Henry II.'s reign a small band of Canons who bound themselves to live by the recently reformed rule of St. Augustine, volunteered to serve the Church and to live the life of deep poverty and self-denial which had to be faced in those days if men were going to live a devout life at all. It requires to be said at this point—what can hardly be repeated too often in the present condition of historical knowledge in England—that the Canons of Weyborne were not monks, *i.e.*, men who only lived to save their own souls, and who kept themselves apart from the wicked world, but they were *Canons, i.e.*, men who lived together in society under a rule of discipline, and who did not separate themselves from the world to the extent or in the manner that monks did, but who lived and laboured to make the wicked world less wicked than it was. I believe it will be found that the Canons of the twelfth century were in the country parishes what the Friars in the thirteenth century were in the towns, *i.e.*, the evangelizers, who came to act as shepherds to the sheep that were in the wilderness, all deserted, forgotten, and astray.

Bye and bye these Canons got many friends, and at last one of the Mainwarings made over the old church and certain acres of land, &c., to the Canons, who, by this time, had received a kind of charter of incorporation from the Bishop of Norwich or the Pope. As to who the exact founder was, and when he *founded* the priory, I do not think anyone will ever know, and I doubt whether any one could ever have told us. However, the good Canons, for a time, lived at Weyborne here holy and zealous lives. It is simply inconceivable, it is simply impossible that a corporation composed of worldly, vicious, and hypocritical persons, pretending to be earnest, zealous, and devout, and being quite

the reverse—I say it is simply inconceivable that such a corporation should have grown rich through the voluntary offerings and real sacrifices of the neighbouring people continued in a constant stream of gifts for one hundred or two hundred years or so. You may just as well try and make me believe that the ministers of the Wesleyan body during the last one hundred and fifty years have been merely and covetous hypocrites, and that their success as evangelizers is due to their having cajoled and frightened their deluded hearers.

The testimony to the labours and self-denial of these early Canons appears in these buildings here—you have a few fragments of their handiwork. Just as it is now so it has been in old times. Now, when a zealous, active, and enthusiastic clergyman comes into a parish, the first thing he sets about is to beautify his church. Now, when a really zealous and devout Nonconformist settles down in a place, he begins to do something for his chapel. So it was in the old days. When the monks or the canons, or the country parsons, were sluggish, selfish, vicious, the buildings were neglected, the churches told tales—they always will tell tales. That church tells a good tale for the Weyborne Canons for two or three hundred years at least; but after the middle of the fourteenth century there is nothing in these walls to show that the Canons of Weyborne were alive, or that the old spirit of earnestness and true godliness was moving among them with the old divine pulsation; and it so happens that what the walls of that church there tell us, certain fragments of old records tell us, which have by strange good fortune fallen into my hands.

On the 14th August, 1494, Bishop James Goldwell made a visitation of this Weyborne Priory. He was received at the western gate with a solemn procession, with ringing of bells from yonder tower, the Canons chanting a litany, and one bearing a banner with the cross upon it went before him.

The Bishop advanced to the high altar yonder, and then gave his blessing, and we read that thence he proceeded to the chapter-house and commenced his visitation and enquiry. The notary sets down that a certain Clement was prior of the house, who appeared and presented to the bishop a balance sheet of his accounts signed by himself and the other members of the fraternity. Next it appeared that one of the canons named Robert Coke or Coker, served the cure of East Beckham, and that the church of Weyborne was served sometimes by the prior and sometimes by one of the canons. Moreover it appeared that there were only the prior and three canons in the house, and that all the canons had in the way of pocket money was 20s. a year ; but one of these same three unfortunates complained to the bishop that the prior was a hard man, and would not pay him, Rev. Robert Williamson, the 20s. that were his due. The bishop took his leave after this, after laying upon the prior and canons certain strict injunctions for their future behaviour, which injunctions most unfortunately Time, the devourer, has swallowed down into his capacious maw.

Less than forty years after Bishop Goldwell's visitation of Weyborne the monasteries were suppressed, *i.e.*, the monks were deprived of their property and turned adrift. When the Commissioners came to make their report upon the condition of the house they found it to be one of the very few in Norfolk of which and of its inmates they were compelled to report badly. There were then only two canons here. Two priests they report "of slanderous name, as it is said, and they require dispensation ;" *i.e.*, they were ready to make the best bargain they could for themselves. The house was in decay, the sum total of their household furniture was estimated at no more than 62s. 2d. They had evidently wasted their substance and their land. The lead on the roof and the bells of the tower were valued at £60, and they had three persons living with them, two of whom had paid a lump

sum for their board for life. The gross total of their annual revenue was set down at £24. 19s. 6*d.*, exclusive of the land, which the Canons farmed themselves. Of this £15. 2s. 8*d.* was derived from the tithes of Weyborne, Sheringham, and East Beckham, the rest from rents in and about Weyborne itself. They appear to have had little elsewhere. The two members of the brotherhood, who at this time shared this income between them in very unequal proportions, were John Bulman, the prior, and a single canon, John Frost. These two worthies were ready enough to renounce the supremacy of the Pope, in August, 1534, and to assent to the new doctrine that Henry VIII. was the supreme head of the Church in matters spiritual and temporal. On the 4th August, 1537, the Commissioners came down to Weyborne. The prior and his canon had had a long time allowed them to make preparations for the inevitable, and they did not fail to make good use of it. When the commissioner came there was absolutely nothing to rob. Bulman and Frost had between them managed to make a clean sweep of everything, except a hay stack, which sold for 66s. 8*d.* Everything else was cleared off. No plate, no vestments—no cattle, sheep, horses, or swine. Mr. Thomas Pigeon bought the hay stack, and everything else was gone. There seems to have been no remark made; it was all fair play, and there was nothing more to be said. Bulman, the prior, fared better than many another, he got a pension of £4 a year for the rest of life, and died Rector of Egmere; and Canon Frost received a pension of £3 nominally, of which only 40s. it appears was actually paid. Prior Bulman's sister or niece, too, received a pension in lieu of her annuity and free quarters in the house, for which she had doubtless paid money down; her pension was equal to the prior's, being £4 a year. As to the house and church and all lands and patronage, these were handed over to Richard Heydon, 20th June, 1537. This Heydon's son parted with the estate, and it has changed

hands again and again since then. Somehow the property has never done anybody much good. The canons had five acres of wood in the parish, and I suppose there must be a great deal more than five acres now. If Weyborne ever becomes a prosperous place—the watering-place of the future—it does not require any very far-sighted prophet to see that it can only become so by making the House of God a very different place from that which we see it to-day. A dreary, God-forsaken place, with only a crumbling ruin dedicated to the worship of the Most High, can never, never, never, be a flourishing place of resort. Account for it in any way you please, the fact remains incontrovertible all the world over, that there is no surer way of bringing decay upon a district than by making the Sanctuary of the Heavenly Father desolate. People run away from any place where there is no temple wherein to worship decently the One Lord of all, and they will not be tempted to return to it till some new awakening has arrived and a new reform set in.