

Eccles by the Sea.

COMMUNICATED BY

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THE seaman or traveller who before this last January, 1895, may have been in the habit of coasting along the Norfolk shore, from the port of Gt. Yarmouth to the northward, cannot fail to have noticed, unless custom had dimmed his interest in the objects which met his eye, a tall and lonely structure, washed by the ocean waves, on Eccles beach, which upon enquiry he found described as "Eccles Steeple"; a strange and weird place indeed to find such an ecclesiastical ruin.

This tower, one of the round ones which furnish so marked a feature in this locality, was in fact the only part usually visible of the parish church of St. Mary at Eccles, which, however, is still a rectory in the gift of the Rev. Henry Evans Lombe, but I need hardly state is now practically a sinecure, of the value of £58. 10s., the few remaining inhabitants using the neighbouring church of Hempstead, for which action, indeed, they require no excuse, as it is impossible for the parson of Eccles, or his flock, to use a church which is non-existent.

That a very different state of affairs existed in earlier times is evident, for upon the occasion of the gale of October, 1893, displacing a large quantity of the sea



REMAINS OF ECCLES CHURCH, MAY, 1869.

beach sand, the foundations of the church were again after the lapse of many years bared to the view. The edifice was shewn to have consisted of the usual Early English church arrangement with one aisle to the south of it, probably added in consequence of an increased demand for church accommodation at some early period of its history.

On this being mentioned to Capt. H. King, R.N. (one of the corresponding members of our Society) he gave the writer much valuable information on the subject. Having been Coastguard officer for the district for the years 1858 to 1863, he was well acquainted with it at that time, and he lent our Society the two sketches which illustrate this paper, which he himself took in May, 1869.

Captain King wrote (1894), "My first sight of Eccles Tower was in February, 1858. It then stood on the edge of the marram. In December, 1862, occurred strong easterly gales and high tides, which washed away the sand and exposed the original level of the village of Eccles.

"On referring to my notes made on the 27th December, 1862, I find the following entry:—'To the north of the church considerable remains of cottages are laid bare: the very roads and ditches are visible. I thought that the latter might have been channels formed by the washing of the sea; but I found a hole or drain in the churchyard wall to let the water run through into one of these ditches, which remain tolerably perfect from having been covered up so constantly with sand. The old tower stands now clear of the sandhill in which it was imbedded.'

"On the 1st May, 1869, I made a careful study of the church [Plate I.] At that time the foundations were perfect.

“On the night of the 19th October, 1869, occurred a north-easterly gale and high tide [sketched in Plate II.] On that occasion the *eastern foundation* of the church was undermined and turned over on its side.

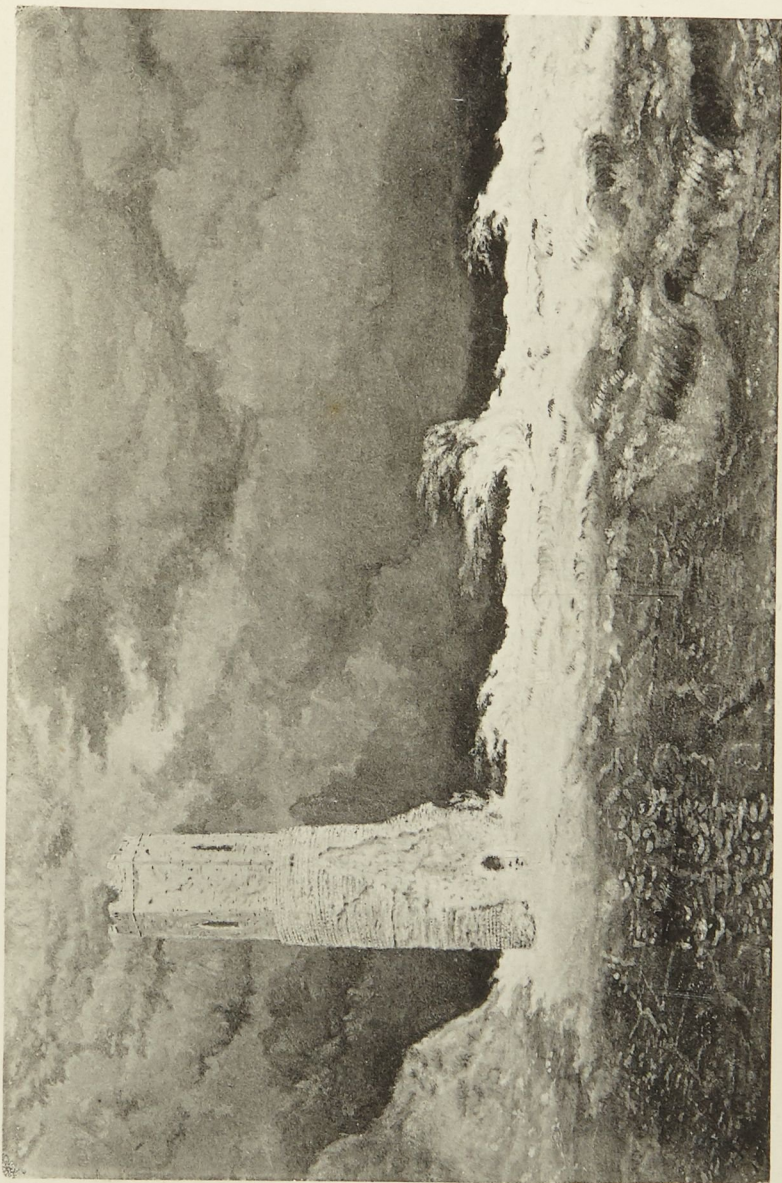
“Since that period further dilapidations have taken place.”

With regard to the township itself, it may be here stated that it lies nine miles east by south of North Walsham, and was formerly a hamlet of the great lordship of Hasburgh or Happisburgh, two miles distant (once the site of a Roman station), held in Saxon times, with the adjoining lands, including Eccles, by Edric the Dane, who is said to have “seized on them.” He held at the Conquest, when he was deprived of his estate by the Normans.

From the earliest times it is clearly shown by the records of past ages how much and how often this district has suffered from what old Manship calls “the great rage of the sea:” thus since the days of Edric the villages of Shipden, Keswick, Clare, and Whimnall have utterly disappeared, and the greater part of several other townships, of which Eccles is one, have followed suit.

The earliest record as to this is to be found in *Bartholomæi de Cotton, Monachi Norvicensis, Historia Anglicana* (edited by H. R. Luard, M.A., and published under the direction of the Master of the Rolls), p. 168, and reads as follows:—“Anno gratiæ MCLXXXVII die Dominica proxima ante festum Sancti Thomæ apostoli in Novembri,¹ circa mediam noctem audita sunt tonitrua, et die Mercurii proximo sequente facta est inundatio maris magna. In cujus inundatione seu immensa tempestate in villis de Horseye, Waxtonesham, Martham,

¹ So in Cotton, but St. Thomas' Day is December 21st.



ECCLES TOWER IN A STORM, OCTOBER, 1869.

Hikelinge, et in villis adjacentibus ce homines submersi sunt. In villa vero de Gernemuta centum homines sunt submersi. In magna vero Gernemuta prostratus est murus lapideus cimiterii per inundationem maris spatio lx pedum. Et prostratus est murus prioris pronus in terram, et ita flumen accrevit quod ultra magnum altare in dicta ecclesia transcendebat." We cannot well doubt but that Eccles was one of these adjacent villages.

A more detailed account of this inundation, in which, among other incidents, 180 persons perished at Hickling, will be found in the Chronicle of John de Oxenedes (*Rolls Series*), p. 270.

Passing to another part of its history, the manor (also now held by the Rev. Henry Evans Lombe), is worthy of special remark.

Many valuable privileges are, or were, enjoyed with it. Thus we find² in 33rd Edward I. (1305) William le Parker as lord was entitled to wreck of the sea, lagan, and resting-geld, customs, and other profits upon sea and land; and of every crew of a ship or boat washing their nets in the village after Michaelmas to Martinmas, an hundred herrings; and also a fee for goods, chattels, &c., coming to land by sea without the help of the said William or his servants, or resting upon the land one day and one night; and if the said William or his men, &c., immediately after imminent danger, or after shipwreck, should do their endeavour to save such things, he shall have a third part of them or the equivalent value, unless of his good will he will remit something, but he must not be asked.

Returning, however, to the ravages of the sea, it may be remembered that much of the damage here has arisen from the fact that from time immemorial persons have

² *Blomefield*, ix. 294.

been allowed to take whatever sea-beach materials they required for domestic or other purposes, without molestation or the exaction of any fee, and unfortunately the increasing demand for this induced individuals who were deputed by the lords of the manor to officiate in their stead, to apply for permission to charge so much per freight or load; which being granted, a large income has been realized from the hundreds of loads of sand and stones removed annually. So severely had the parish suffered from this and the other causes referred to, that in 1605 the following petition (now in the library of Pembroke College, Cambridge) was presented to the Queen's Commissioners:—

1605. The certificate of y^e Ruynated Estate of the
Town of Eccles.

Whereas a greate parte of y^e houses & lande lyinge within y^e sy^d towne of Eccles & all y^e church of Eccles by reason of y^e contynuall breaches of y^e sea be swallowed up y^e sea, and where y^e same towne hath bene a good fysher towne lxxx were householders & in lande xiiii C acres, yere is nowe not remaynyng above fourteen houshoulds & of lande not above iii C acr[es], y^e rest being all eaten upp with y^e sea, all yis notwithstanding y^e sy^d towne standeth still chargeable with so muche taxe³ as w[hen] it stood in his best estate, & ye vicar of y^e sy^d towne with as muche.

Y^e humble petition of y^e Inhabitants of y^e sy^d towne is yat y^e sy^d taxe may be moderated as yt seemeth good to yo^r honorable considerations.

Jo. Norwich. Will. Paston. W. Scamble.

In conclusion it may be remarked that every remaining vestige of Eccles denotes antiquity. Ancient

³ See note below, p. 310.

stone walls are from time to time exposed by the action of the sea, removing lofty sand-hills, and the peasantry have picked up silver and copper coins of great antiquity on its beach. But a still stronger evidence of a remote period may be traced in the wells constructed with large unburned bricks, formed in a mould wider at one end than at the other, to adapt them to the true circumference of the well itself, and it seems clear that these wells had been filled up with earth, and ceased to be used before the abandonment of the place, since near to every one is a stone well, built with mortar similar to that of the church.

The foregoing brief notes, which were originally read to the Yarmouth branch of our Society in February, 1894, were suggested by the anxiety which had long been felt with regard to the safety of the old steeple. Through the kind interest of the Rev. H. Evans Lombe, assisted by Mr. Francis Hornor and Mr. George Wilkinson of Holt, some steps were taken during 1894 to ensure the preservation of the structure, at least for some time. The base was cemented in order to arrest the progress of decay through the action of the weather or an occasional inroad of the sea or the still more destructive hands of thoughtless visitors.

The notes were already passing through the press, when a new and unexpected interest was added to them. The dreaded catastrophe had taken place. The last ten days of December, 1894, brought with them a series of north-easterly gales of unusual violence, accompanied by high tides which almost threatened to repeat the experiences of 1287. The base of the tower was

submerged, and the waves at times dashed half way to the summit. The danger passed; but only for a time. On Wednesday, January 23rd, 1895, another gale of equal violence sprang up, driving before it a tide of abnormal height. A neighbouring resident, Mr. Clements, jun., of the Manor Farm, states³ that at six o'clock, when he left the spot, "the sea was breaking furiously against the tower, at times the spray of the breakers going over its summit." At seven o'clock, when he returned, the tower had disappeared. "It had fallen in a north-westerly direction, in the very teeth of the gale." Thus one more of the coast churches of Norfolk has become a thing of the past, and perhaps some day a "Church Rock" will alone mark, at low tides, the spot where Eccles Church once stood.

NOTE.—The "tax" from which the inhabitants of Eccles petitioned to be relieved (p. 308) was settled in 1334 at £3. 12s. 0d., as entered in the "Norfolk Assessment" given in this volume (p. 267). It appears also that the place had no share in the abatement allowed to "decayed towns" in 1449, therefore it must be presumed that its decay had not set in at that date.

A plan of the foundations of Eccles Church, as laid bare in October, 1893, was made by Mr. James Teasdel of Gt. Yarmouth, and shewn at the annual meeting of the Yarmouth branch of the Society in January, 1894.

³ See *Eastern Daily Press*, January 26th, 1895.