

MEMOIR OF SIR WOLSTAN DIXIE, KNIGHT,
LORD MAYOR OF LONDON IN 1585-6, AND FOUNDER OF THE
GRAMMAR SCHOOL AT MARKET BOSWORTH.

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AMONGST the many eminent men whose merits have raised them to the high distinction of the chief magistracy of the City of London, and whose good deeds have established for them a title to be held in lasting reverence and esteem, a prominent place is justly due to Sir Wolstan Dixie, Knight.

The family from which he sprung was one of great antiquity, tradition alleging it to be descended from Wolstan Earl of Ellenden (now called Wilton), who married a sister of King Egbert, the first English monarch.*

The Heralds' Visitations shew that about the reign of Edward III. a Wolstan Dixie was seated at Catworth in Huntingdonshire, and from him descended in the fourth generation Thomas Dixie, of the same place, who married the daughter of ——— Jephson of Hampshire, and had four sons, viz: Richard, John, Walter, and Wolstan. The last was the subject of the present notice, who was born in or about the year 1525.

It was probably on account of his being a *younger* son that Wolstan was sent to London and devoted to the pursuits of trade and commerce, through the ordinary means of an apprenticeship.† He became a citizen and Skinner; he makes mention in his will of a person named Walkedon, as having been his former

* Collins's English Baronetage, vol. iii. part 1. p. 102.

† In a treatise on the antiquity, honour, and dignity of trade, it is laid down, on the authority of Vincent, one of the Heralds, that "mercatura non derogat nobilitati—trade is no abatement of honour." (p. 34.) And Guillim another writer on the Laws of Honour, is also quoted as saying that "if a *gentleman* be bound an apprentice to a merchant or other trade, he hath not thereby lost his gentility." (p. 37.)

master, and a person of that name is mentioned in a Charter of Confirmation granted to the Skinners by Queen Elizabeth in 1560, as one of the wardens of that Company.*

It belonged to the trade of a skinner to deal in furs, an article which was very largely employed in the costume of the period, not only by the noble and wealthy of both sexes, but also by the middle classes, and especially by members of all municipal and corporate bodies. As an article of commerce it occasioned extensive dealings with foreign countries, and many of those who engaged in the trade were general merchants, who by their prudence and enterprise acquired large fortunes, and opened up channels of commercial intercourse which have since become of the highest importance to this country.

The trade with Russia in furs had then been recently commenced, and had become the source of great emolument to the merchants of London in consequence of the privilege of a monopoly. Queen Mary obtained patents from the Czar for the whole trade to Muscovy, to which country the communication had lately been opened by the discovery of the passage to Archangel. The English, encouraged (as Camden and Hume inform us) by the exclusive privileges they enjoyed, ventured further into those countries than any European had previously done. They transported their goods through the Baltic to the River Dwina in Russia, and then, in rough boats hewed out of one entire tree, towed or rowed them up the river, and thus penetrated into the very centre of the country. Not content even with this, their enterprise led them to carry their goods from the source of the Dwina, by a seven days' journey across the country, to the source of the Volga, down which they conveyed them to Astrachan, and there building ships crossed the Caspian Sea, and distributed English productions in Persia.† Such was the character of the trade in which there is reason to believe the subject of this notice was engaged, and which enabled him to realise a very considerable fortune.

* Herbert's *History of Livery Companies of London*, vol. ii. p. 382.

† *Essay on the Life of Sir Andrew Judd, Knight, Citizen and Skinner, founder of Tunbridge School*; Hume's *History of England*; *Pictorial History of England*.

When Sir Thomas Gresham offered to erect a building to serve as a Bourse, or Exchange, for the London merchants to assemble in, on condition that the City would provide a site of ground for the purpose, the members of the different incorporated companies were appealed to to contribute towards the expense of making the necessary purchases, and it appears by an account rendered in 1566, that amongst 40 members of the Skinners' Company, whose aggregate contributions amounted to 74*l.* 10*s.* "Maister Dixie" is set down as giving 3*l.** As there were but four other members of the same company whose contributions exceeded his in amount, it indicates him to have been at that time a person of good position in the company; which is further shewn by the circumstance that he is one of fourteen only whose names have the distinctive epithet "Maister," prefixed to them, which may probably imply that those so named were the chief members or ruling authorities of the fraternity.

A few years after this date he became an Alderman of the City, and in 1575-6 served the office of Sheriff. His colleague in the shrievalty was Edward Osborne, Clothworker, (Lord Mayor in 1583), a name long distinguished in the civic annals, and ancestor of the Dukes of Leeds.†

In 1585, Alderman Dixie attained to the highest distinction which his fellow-citizens could confer, in being elected as Lord Mayor. The Bodleian Library at Oxford contains a very curious tract, entitled "The Device of the Pageant borne before Woolstone Dixie, Lord Maior of the Citie of London, An. 1585, October 29." It was written by "George Peele, Maister of Arts in Oxford," (the celebrated dramatic author,) and is the first printed description of a Lord Mayor's pageant known to exist.‡ The "Speech spoken by him that rid on a Luzern [a lynx] before the

* City Records, Journal, No. 19. p. 12. printed in Extracts respecting the Royal Exchange, &c. p. 19.

† Pennant's London 1790, p. 298; Collins's Peerage, i. p. 235.

‡ Fairholt's History of Lord Mayor's Pageants, 1843, p. 24. The Pageant has been reprinted in Strype's Stow and other Histories of London; in the Harleian Miscellany; in Nichols's History of Leicestershire; the Progresses, &c. of Queen Elizabeth; and in the Works of George Peele, edited by the Rev. A. Dyce, 1828, vol. ii.

Pageant, apparelled like a Moor," contains the following lines pointedly addressed to the new Mayor:—

“ This now remains, Right honourable Lord,
That carefully you do attend and keep
This lovely Lady, rich and beautiful,*
The jewell wherewithal your Sovereign Queen
Hath put your honour lovingly in trust,
That you may add to London's dignity,
And London's dignity may add to yours.”

The sentiment of the last line was realised by his receiving, during his year of office, the honour of knighthood, which was then usually bestowed on the civic chief magistrate.

During the mayoralty of Sir Wolstan Dixie, a conspiracy was entered into by the apprentices, and other ill designing persons of the City, for a general insurrection to be made against foreigners, but especially against those of the French nation; which wicked design was founded upon the same principles with those of Evil May Day in the year 1517; but by a timely and happy discovery the innocent were saved from destruction, and many of the conspirators were apprehended and by the Mayor and other magistrates committed to Newgate.†

In the same year was the conspiracy entered into by Babington and others, of which a notice has been given in our first vol. p. 288.

In consequence of the enthusiastic rejoicings of the citizens on that occasion, the queen honoured Sir Wolstan Dixie with a letter expressing her thankful acknowledgments of their loyalty and devotion, and desired that her sentiments should be “ communicated in some general assembly to her most loving subjects the Commoners of the City.‡ ”

Upon the death of Sir Thomas Ramsey, Knight and Alderman (Lord Mayor 1577), in the year 1590, Sir Wolstan was chosen as his successor in the presidency of Christ's Hospital§, an office

* The “ lovely lady ” here referred to was London, impersonated in the pageant by a female.

† Stow's Annals, A.D. 1586; Maitland's History of London, i. p. 271.

‡ Maitland's History of London, i. p. 271.

§ Trollope's History of Christ's Hospital, 1834, p. 310.

which he held for the remainder of his life. His attachment to the institution was manifested by the bequest which he made in its favour, as will be hereafter shewn.

Sir Wolstan Dixie appears to have been twice married, in the first instance to a daughter of Mr. Walkedon (probably the same who was his master in trade, and who was one of the chief members of the Skinners' Company); and secondly to Agnes, one of the daughters of Sir Christopher Draper, Knight, Lord Mayor 1566-7*. He had no issue by either wife. Dame Agnes, who survived him, is said to have afterwards married Sir William Hickman, of Gainsborough.†

His residence in the City was in the parish of St. Michael Bassishaw, but he had also a house and land at Ealing in Middlesex, which he held on lease for a term of years. He was likewise possessed of several houses in Thames Street and Little Wood Street, and twenty-nine tenements in the parish of St. Gabriel, Fenchurch Street ‡

Sometime previous to his death he purchased of the Earl of Huntingdon the manor of Market Bosworth in the county of Leicester, with the advowson of the church there;§ and by an inquisition taken after his death he was found to be seised also of divers lands and tenements in Bosworth, Gilmorton, Coton, Carleton, Osbaston, Bradley, and North Kilworth, all in the same county;|| besides which he possessed the lordship and manor of Southwick and other estates in several places in Wiltshire.

In the year 1593, intending to establish and endow a free grammar school at Market Bosworth, he built a school-house and laid the foundation of a residence for the school-master, but death prevented his accomplishing his design himself, though he took care to provide for its fulfilment by others.¶

* He had two other daughters married to Aldermen, viz: one to Sir William Webbe, Lord Mayor 1591, and another to Sir Henry Billingsley, Lord Mayor 1596.

† Collins's Baronetage, iii. part 1. p. 103. ‡ Will of Sir Wolstan Dixie.
§ Nichols's Leicestershire, iv. p. 495.

|| Esch. apud Guildhall, London, 12 Nov. 36 Eliz.; Nichols's Leicestershire, iv. p. 497.

¶ Nichols's Leicestershire, iv. p. 495; Statutes of the School; Report of Charity Commissioners, No. 32, part 5, p. 186.

His disposition towards the promotion of learning had been previously manifested by assisting in the building of part of Peter House, in the University of Cambridge;* and by a benefaction of 50*l.* towards the erection of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, founded by Sir Walter Mildmay in 1584.† His will affords other strong proofs of his being a generous encourager of sound learning, as well as a most liberal benefactor for other good purposes.

Sir Wolstan died on the 8th of January, 1593-4, aged 69 years. The immediate cause of his death is not known, but, as the plague was raging in London about that time, it is not unlikely that he fell a victim to it. He had made his will on the 15th of May, 1592, and attached a codicil to it on the 21st of August in the same year; but, as if from fear of not living to perfect the foundation of his grammar school, with which he was then occupied, and the scholarships and fellowships connected with it, he executed another codicil on the 21st of December, 1593, expressly providing for the fulfilment of his intentions in that respect. By this act, which occurred within three weeks of his being removed by death, he secured the ultimate accomplishment of a design which might otherwise never have been realized.

Sir Wolstan was buried, according to his desire, in the parish church of St. Michael Bassishaw; "but," as Mr. Collins says, "without any other monument erected to him than his good works;‡ though the tomb of Sir Christopher Draper (his father-in-law), in the church of St. Dunstan-in-the-East, bore, amongst several inscriptions to the memory of Sir Christopher and his family, one to Sir Wolstan Dixie and his wife Agnes.

By his will Sir Wolstan gives directions that, as he has no children (which he mentions with something like a feeling of regret, though he expresses a pious submission to the divine will), his property should be divided into two parts, according to the custom of London, one half of which should go to his loving wife Agnes, together with her jewels, bracelets, and other

* Will of Dr. Perne, 1588, quoted in Bearcroft's Account of Sutton, founder of the Charter House, 1737, p. 15.

† Stowe's Survey of London by Munday.

‡ Collins's English Baronetage, iii. part 1, p. 102.

articles to which she was entitled by custom, and the other half to be appropriated as set forth by him.

He leaves a variety of legacies and bequests to his relatives and friends, including one of his brothers, several nephews, nieces, god-children, and other connexions: amongst others is a legacy of 100*l.* to his "brother," (*i.e.* the husband of his wife's sister,) "Henry Billingsley, Alderman, to buy him a chain of gold."* He appointed as the executors of his will his wife Agnes and two of his nephews, Wolstan Dixie and William Fermedoe; and as the overseers or supervisors thereof the before-named Henry Billingsley, Alderman, Stephen Slany, Alderman, Cornelius Fish, and Thomas Lane; and he requested to co-operate with them Sir Edmund Anderson, Chief Justice of the Common Pleas, for whose character as an able and upright judge he professes the highest esteem, and to whom he leaves a legacy of 100*l.* and a gold ring, and Mr. Justice Perren, on whom he bestows a legacy of 100 marks and a gold ring.

The will and codicils were proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, on the 28th January, 1593-4, by his wife and his nephew Fermedoe, the other nephew Wolstan Dixie being at that time only about 18 years of age.†

His charitable bequests were very numerous, and included the following, *viz.*:

To three score poore men who should attend his funeral, each a gown of cloth. To the poor of the parish of St. Michael Bashiaw, on the day of his burial, 10*l.* To the poor of the parish of Ealing, on the same day, 4*l.* To the Hospitals of St. Bartholomew and St. Thomas, 50*l.* each. To the poor in Bridewell, 20*l.*, and in Bedlam, 10*l.* To poor prisoners in Newgate 20*l.*, in Ludgate 10*l.*, in Poultry Compter and in Wood Street Compter, 10*l.* each. To the four prisons in Southwark, 20*l.* 13*s.* 4*d.* For 100 poor maids' marriages 100*l.* To the poor strangers of

* Billingsley, afterwards Sir Henry Billingsley, Lord Mayor 1597, had been educated at Oxford, was a skilful mathematician, and is famed as being the first translator into English of Euclid's Elements of Geometry. He also founded three scholarships at Trinity College, Cambridge, and left money for one at Emmanuel College.

† Family pedigree in Nichols's Leicestershire, iv. part 2, p. 506.

the Dutch and French Churches in London, and poor Italians and Spaniards, fugitives on account of religion, 50*l.* Towards the expense of building a pesthouse for the poor infected with the plague, if the Corporation of London should undertake such a work, 200*l.*

In addition to the foregoing were several valuable public benefactions designed to be of a more permanent character, and which have been the chief means of preserving his memory. These are as follow:—

1. *The Grammar School at Market Bosworth.*—He had begun the foundation of this establishment in his lifetime, but, dying before its completion, he left the sum of 700*l.* to the Master and Wardens of the Skinners' Company to purchase lands of the value of 30*l.* a-year for the maintenance of the school, for the bringing up of fifty or three-score poor scholars, and for paying of the school-master, &c.; and he desired that the Master and Wardens, with the advice and assent of the bishop of the diocese in which the school was situated, and the Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, with the liking and assent of his executors, should make such ordinances for the school as by their discretion should be thought meet and convenient, praying them to have such a care thereof that their good dealing therein might encourage others to do as he had done; but he added a proviso that in case the parties named should become negligent in the performance of the trust, as he hoped in God they would not, and did not make amends after monition by his executors, or his heirs, then application should be made to the Lord Chancellor to deprive them of the trust, and to transfer it to the parties complaining.

The Skinners' Company neglected the fulfilment of the trust for several years,* until at last Mr. Wolstan Dixie, the great-nephew of the testator and one of his executors † on whom he

* The unwillingness of the Company to undertake this trust was probably owing to the litigation and expense in which they had been involved a few years previously in carrying into execution the trusts of the will of Sir Andrew Judd, the founder of Tunbridge School. (Vide "A concise Account of Tunbridge School, 1827, pp. 25-27.)

† He was eldest son of his nephew John, who was son of Sir Wolstan's elder brother Richard. (Pedigree in Nichols's Leicestershire, iv. pt. 2, p. 506.)

bestowed the estate of Bosworth, and who appears to have been his heir-at-law, upon complaint to the Court of Chancery obtained an order dated 5 June, 1600, for the legacy of 700*l.* and the trust accompanying it to be transferred to him, who accordingly taking upon himself the performance thereof, at his own costs and charges, obtained letters patent dated 11th May, 1601, to enable him to complete the foundation and endowment of the school, and to make statutes for its government. The statutes were made by this gentleman, (who in 1604 received the honour of knighthood, and in 1608 took up his residence at Market Bosworth,) but were not completed until 21st July, 1630. By the charter and statutes the government of the school and the management of its revenues is vested in trustees chosen from the inhabitants of the parish, who are incorporated by the name of "Governors of the Grammar School of Wolstan Dixie, Knight, in Market Bosworth, in the county of Leicester, and of the possessions, lands, revenues, goods, and chattels of the same school," but the appointment of the Master and other patronage belongs to the heirs of the founder, or, on his default, to the Bishop of Lincoln.

The affairs of the school have at various times and for many years together been the subject of litigation in Chancery, and many thousands of pounds have been expended in law proceedings. Its revenues have, however, greatly increased, and it is no longer an exclusively classical school.

2. *Fellowships and Scholarships at Emmanuel College, Cambridge.*—Sir Wolstan Dixie by his will gave 600*l.* to Emmanuel College to purchase lands of the clear annual value of 30*l.* for the purpose of founding two fellowships and two scholarships for *students in divinity, to be filled by persons nominated by the Skinners' Company, London, from amongst those of his own kindred, or of such poor scholars as had been educated at his school at Market Bosworth.*

An estate was accordingly purchased, and, the Skinners' Company refusing the trust, a decree was made in Chancery in the reign of James I. (18 Jan. 1605 *) which gave the nomination to the founder's great-nephew and his heirs, and an indenture made in the same reign confirmed this decree.

* Report of Charity Commissioners, No. 32, pt. 5, p. 186.

After much litigation between the College and the Dixie representative a new decree was issued A.D. 1700 by Sir Nathan Wright, Lord Keeper. By this decree the fellowships are to be increased to 30*l.* a year each, and the scholarships to 10*l.* a-year each, and when the funds will admit two new scholarships are to be made of 10*l.* a-year each, and then the future surplus is to be applied to the purchase of advowsons, to which, first a Dixie Fellow, if qualified, is to be nominated, then one of the Foundation Fellows, and so on alternately. The alternate nomination to these livings is vested in the heir of the founder, the College having no power to refuse the nomination either in this case or in the case of a scholarship or a fellowship.

Candidates for the scholarships and fellowships were to be related to the founder or have been educated at Market Bosworth School.

3. *Christ's Hospital*.—By his will Sir Wolstan Dixie devised to the Mayor, &c. of London, for the relief of the poor children in Christ's Hospital, his lordship and manor of Southwicke, with the appurtenances, in the county of Wilts, and all other his lands, tenements, and hereditaments, in Southwicke, North Bradley, Trowbridge, Kevell Road, and Tebiford, in the said county, which manor and other premises were of the clear yearly value of 42*l.* besides all charges and reprises. The hospital received a rent-charge only of 42*l.*, which was regularly paid out of the manor and lands at Southwicke up to the year 1799, when the governors sold the rent-charge under the Land Tax Redemption Act to Walter Long, Esq. the owner of the property, for 1000*l.*

4. *Skinners' Company. Loans, &c.*—Sir Wolstan bequeathed 500*l.* to the Master and Wardens of the Skinners' Company, to be lent from time to time for periods of three years to poor thrifty young men free of the company, (with a preference to any that had been his apprentice or were his kindred) viz., 200*l.* in sums of 50*l.* each to four young men free of the Merchant Adventurers, and 300*l.* in sums of 30*l.* each to ten young men using the art or arts of Skinners or Linen Drapers; good and sufficient sureties for repayment to be given in each case, and interest paid at the rate of 3*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* per cent. per annum.

The proceeds he directed to be applied as follows:

To the four Wardens of the Company for their pains in well ordering the premises, per annum, 1*l.* To the Clerk of the Company and the two Beadles for their pains, each 6*s.* 8*d.*—1*l.* To the poor of the parish of St. Michael Bassishaw 5 marks in coals or money, to be divided by the order and discretion of the Master and Wardens of the Company, 3*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* To the Master, Wardens, and Assistants, for their recreation, to make them a dinner for their pains to be taken in considering of and overseeing the sureties put in for the loans, &c., 11*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* The Charity Commissioners in 1822 reported that the Company pay annually 3*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* to the poor of the parish of St. Michael Bassishaw, but no loans are made as directed by the will of Sir Wolstan Dixie.*

5. *Parish of St. Michael Bassishaw.*—Besides the annual sum of 3*l.* 6*s.* 8*d.* for the poor as mentioned above, Sir Wolstan gave to the Master and Wardens of the Skinners' Company an annuity of 10*l.* issuing out of his capital messuage and other tenements in the parish of St. Michael Bassishaw, which 10*l.* should be given and employed yearly for and towards the maintenance of a lecture of divinity so be read two days in every week from the Feast of St. Michael the Archangel to Easter, or longer, in the church of St. Michael Bassishaw, or otherwise as should be appointed by his executors. The sum of 10*l.* per annum continues to be paid by the Skinners' Company to the lecturer of the parish.†

Such are the particulars which have been gathered of the life and actions of Sir Wolstan Dixie, Knt. Well might Fuller in his *English Worthies* ‡ say of him, "He was a man made up of deeds of charity," and Burton, the historian of Leicestershire, that "his many good works do justly challenge for ever to be remembered.§" Equally just also is the remark of Mr. Nichols, who observes, "Sir Wolstan Dixie, who was a friend to his country and to mankind, deserves to be remembered for his exemplary character as a magistrate, and his extensive charities;

* Report, No 8, p. 377.

† Reports of Charity Commissioners, No. 4, p. 133-137, No. 8, p. 377.

‡ Vol. ii. p. 106.

§ Burton MS. quoted in Nichols's *Leicestershire*, iv. pt. 2, p. 495.

and his descendants have more reason to boast of having such an ancestor in their family than of the tradition that the founder of it was allied to King Egbert.*”

A portrait of Sir Wolstan Dixie exists amongst other family portraits at Bosworth Hall,† and another in the Court Room at Christ’s Hospital, London.‡ From the latter an engraving was published by Mr. Richardson in 1795, and an impression from the plate is introduced in Nichols’s Leicestershire. Other engravings have also been published at different times.

The name of Sir Wolstan Dixie has been borne by some member of his family in almost uninterrupted succession since his days. His great-nephew and heir was the first who followed him. He was knighted and became a considerable man in the county of Leicester. In 1614 he was its Sheriff, and in 1625 its representative in parliament.§ He was succeeded by his son, another Sir Wolstan, who distinguished himself as a strong partisan of royalty in the Great Rebellion, and was a considerable sufferer in consequence. He was the first of the family who was made a Baronet, a title which has been preserved down to the present time through a succession which will be found recorded in Collins’s English Baronetage, and other similar works.

* Nichols’s Leicestershire, iv. pt. 2, p. 495.

† Ibid. p. 500.

‡ Malcolm’s Londinium Redivivum, iii. p. 368.

§ Nichols’s Leicestershire, i. 456, 461.