

ENQUIRY AS TO THE NAME OF
ST. MARY AXE.

BY

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WE learn from Stow's Annals that "In St. Marie Street (now St. Mary Axe) had ye of old time a parish Church of St. Marie the Virgin, St. Ursula and the eleven thousand Virgins; which church was commonly called St. Marie at the Axe, of the sign of an axe over against the east end thereof." This is somewhat vague, but in "London past and present" Mr. Wheatley tells us that "Stow is not quite correct in this. The Church derived its particular designation of St. Mary Axe from a holy relic it possessed—'an Axe oon of the iij that the xi^{mill}. virgines wer be hedyd w'.'" Is it not just possible that so far from the axe having given the name to the church—the name itself had first suggested the holy relic? Take, for instance, the name of the town of Maidenhead. In the sixth volume of Nicholls' "Collectanea Topographica et Geneologica," the Rev. Mr. Gorham, in his "Account of the foundation of Chapel, Chantry and Guild of Maidenhead in the County of Berks" says: "There is a silly tradition that the name of this town was derived from the Head of a Maiden, a British Virgin, who, it is said, was held in great veneration in this place and who was one of the

11,000 belonging to the Company of St. Ursula, murdered in Cologne on their return from Rome. This notion is mentioned so far back as 1538 by the justly celebrated antiquary Leland. He reports that the town 'toke the name of Maidenhead of a Hedd that they say was one of the xi thousand Virgines to which the offering there was made in a Chapell.' Leland's testimony as to this custom rests merely on vulgar and probably ignorant report; certainly not on personal observation, for the popish services of Maidenhead Chapel were discontinued in 1535, three years before Leland visited the place. If, however, any such custom ever obtained in Maidenhead, it assuredly was not the occasion of the name of the town, but must have originated in a foolish play upon the name which had previously obtained currency; for, it is certain, from Antient Records, that the appellation Maydenhuth, or Maydenheth or Maydenhythe were in use during the 14th and 15th Centuries, while the corruption Maidenhead was altogether unknown until the time of Henry viij."

May it not be quite as likely that the name of St. Mary Axe has as little connection with the holy Relic as has that of the Town of Maidenhead with the memory of the holy Virgin whose decapitation was said to have been effected by it?

On the other hand—looked at from a different point of view—is there not a significance in the words themselves connecting them with the Church of St. Mary, or its altar? Or possibly some older church and shrine on the same spot? "Atte Axe" transposed gives "Axe Atte," words as yet common with the *old people* in Berkshire, to whom "ask" is a

foreign word, and "ax" the common mode of expression for an enquiry or request.

Now we have the Anglo-Saxon word "æt" or "at," "of," and "acsian," "to ask," also the old English "atte," "at" and "axen," "to ask," *i.e.*, to offer up a petition "atte" (St. Mary's shrine or to St. Mary).

In his most interesting paper—"The last ten years of the Priory of St. Helen's, Bishopsgate" (in the second volume of the London and Middlesex Archæological Society's Transactions) the Rev. Thomas Hugo refers to two documents, the first being of the period of Henry III, *viz.*: A licence to the Nuns to stop up a lane or passage known as "Seinte Eleyne Lane," the second, of the period of Edward I, in which the right of their having done so is disputed. I find the roadway in question is described in the first deed merely as "that Lane in London which is between the land of the same Prioress and Nuns at either End"; whilst in the second it gives it as "it extended itself in length from Bisshopesgate Streete to the highway of St. Mary attenax and containing on the east end 18 feet and more (*extendebat se in longitudine a Bishopsgatestrate usq; ad viam regiã Scē Marie atte Nax.*) And again it is called a highway "from the gate of St. Helens to the street of St. Mary attenax (*in reg̃ via et extendebat se in longitudine a Bisshopesgatestrete usq; ad viã Reg̃ Scē Marie attenax* ").

Now this term "Nax" seems to do away with any reference to an axe as a chopping implement, and equally so to "axe" as used in a petition, but Stow says the Church of St. Mary was also known as "St. Marie Pelliper of a plot of ground lying on the

north side thereof, pertaining to the Skinners," and the idea intrudes itself whether "Nax" may not be "nacs," and an abbreviation of "nacnes," the old English word for "strips," and Skinners would be strippers.

On this question I appealed to the Rev. Prebendary Earle of Oxford, who very kindly gave it his consideration. Whilst he could not entertain the idea of "nax" being a corruption of "nacnes," he explained that Attenaxe might be written At-ten-axe; and he approved of the suggestion of "axe" as a petitioning. He remarked: "This connection strikes me as not impossible, there was A.S. *æsce* = enquiry, and *æsc-stede* = place of enquiry, which by metathesis would become ax. If there is anything in this it suggests an old heathen seat of divination, an oracle, which was superseded by a Christian Church." Professor Earle was also good enough to add: "It is the only suggestion I ever met with that I could entertain" (*i.e.*, as to the origin of the name St. Mary Axe). He would not hazard a positive opinion, but thought it well worth the consideration of those who had made this subject their special study.

There is not, of course, a trace, nor, so far as I can learn, any tradition of a heathen shrine where the Church of St. Mary once stood; but the proximity of this site to the Ermine Street and the old Roman Northern Gate, the foundations of which have been unearthed in Camomile Street (Loftie's London), would lead one to regard this as by no means improbable.

Besides what Stow gives us, we have but little record of the Church of St. Mary Axe. In "London past and present" Mr. Wheatley tells us that this

Church, "Sancta Maria de haegs," was given in 1562 to the Spanish protestant refugees for divine service." This was the year in which the parish was united to that of St. Andrew Undershaft. By the kindness of my friend, Mr. Arthur Rivington, the present Vestry Clerk of these United Parishes, I have examined the deed in which Queen Elizabeth confirms the Act of the Bishop of London uniting the two parishes. The reasons of this union appears to have been the inability of St. Mary's parish, owing to its poverty, to maintain its Rector, and the sufficiency of space in the new church of St. Andrew Undershaft to accommodate, for divine worship, the inhabitants of both parishes.

In Nicholls' "Collectanea Topographica," Vol. V, are the names of Pilgrims from England to Rome entertained at the English College at Rome; at page 72 occurs the following: "1506-7 Mes Junii Domin⁹ Johannes Evans Rector Scē Marie de Ax London: venit 12 Junii," giving the name of the Rector at this date.

Amongst the parish documents of St. Andrew Undershaft there is a record that in A.D. 1634, a permission was obtained from the Bishop for the Rector and Churchwarden of St. Andrew Undershafte to repair the lower part of the Church of St. Mary atte Axe, which had been used for secular purposes and fallen into decay, by tiling the floor and building a room over it; together with an upper room, which upper room was to be utilised for the purposes of a grammar school. The lower room was let for a warehouse, of which in the year 1697 Jeffry Jefferies, Esq., was the tenant, and paid £8 a year.

Is it merely an accident that the parishes of St. Andrew Undershaft and St. Mary the Virgin are involved in the legend of St. Ursula and the 11,000 Virgins, whilst Maidenhead Chapel, dedicated to St. Andrew and St. Mary Magdalene are also associated with the same legend?

In conclusion, I venture to hope that this suggestion as to the origin of the name St. Mary Axe, may be of sufficient interest to some of those competent to deal with the question, to induce them, as Professor Earle has said, to give it their consideration.
