

THE DESTROYED AND DESECRATED
CHURCHES OF BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

BY REV. W. H. KELKE.

A ruined edifice of whatever description is an interesting object. But of all ruined buildings a Church in ruin is the most interesting—the most affecting—the most incentive to serious and varied reflection. There is something in Gothic Architecture which renders such a ruin singularly striking, and imparts to it a peculiar beauty that belongs to no other kind of dilapidated structure. But it is not the picturesque beauty of its Gothic Architecture—it is not the pointed arch, or the foliated tracery, or the clustered pier, and the groined capital, seen peering through surrounding trees, or mantled over with "burnished ivy"—it is not the mournful appearance of sculptured fragments, the tabernacled niche, the elaborate moulding, the plumed finial, and the delicate cusp, left unheeded in the rubbish of the mouldering pile—it is nothing of this sort that invests a ruined Church with its chief interest; it touches far deeper feelings, and awakens far graver associations than those connected with mere Architectural attractions. These, indeed, are not unworthy of notice. They deserve careful examination. They may well repay the attentive study of the Architect and the Sculptor, the Antiquary and the Historian. But a Church in ruin claims attention chiefly by the deep and plaintive notes of its associations. It carries back the mind to other days and other scenes. It leads one to think of the benevolence of its pious founder—of the holy devotions once offered within its walls—of the Christian dead entrusted to its hallowed keeping—above all, of the sacred act of its consecration, which, in the most solemn manner, conveyed it to Almighty God, devoutly presenting it to Him as a free-will offering, to be perpetually devoted to His service. While these considerations flash into the mind, the scene of desolation before us fills us with wonder, indignation, and woe. We feel at once that common justice to the

undoubted rights of others has been violated, the sacred acts of Religion sacrilegiously profaned, and Christian sepulchres invaded with a barbarous impunity that would have been punished with death by ancient Pagans.

These, and such like reflections, will throng the pensive mind whenever a ruined Church meets the eye, or when the spot where one once existed is knowingly approached. Perhaps it will be thought that such cases are very few and far between, or that such sacrilegious destruction has only been committed in times of civil war or popular tumult, or when the whole country was undergoing some extraordinary revolution and excitement. But a very slight research will dissipate these notions. It will be found that the instances of destroyed and desecrated Churches are not so few as is generally imagined, and that their destruction has often been gradual, and the mere result of parochial negligence, or of the profane covetousness of some private individual.

Not fewer than forty consecrated Houses of Prayer have been destroyed or permanently desecrated in this county. Most of them have been entirely swept away—not a vestige has been left to indicate their size, their style of Architecture, or even to mark the hallowed spot whereon they stood. A few, unheeded and desolate, are still to be seen, like the beautiful Chapel at Quarrenden, in mouldering ruin. Others have been converted into dwelling houses, or domestic offices. At Widmer, in the parish of Great Marlow, an ancient Chapel, a good specimen of Norman Architecture, has had its nave turned into a brew-house, and its crypt into a beer-cellar. Sometimes portions of destroyed Chapels may be seen in the walls or other parts of existing buildings; or found buried in the earth, or among heaps of rubbish in the neighbourhood of their ancient sites. In one instance, after making various enquiries in a large hamlet for relics of its demolished Chapel, we at last found part of its carved roof forming the roof of a malting-house, and another part the roof of a barn. On leaving the barn, we observed, on the opposite side of the farm-yard, the Gothic door of the ancient Chapel, with fine massive foliated hinges, used as a gate into an adjoining garden. In another instance a summer-house was built on the site of a demolished Chapel; and some letters of a celebrated

lady are still extant, in which she jestingly tells her friends that they were written on consecrated ground dedicated to St. Leonard.

Of others we learn, that, in the progress of their desecration, they were converted into barns, into dove-cotes, into cow-sheds, into pig-sties, or to any other purpose that suited the convenience of the possessor. The account of one especially is painfully interesting. It was the only Church in the parish, but having been seriously injured in the civil wars, it was allowed to fall more and more into dilapidation. Eventually the Manor-house, to which the Church was supposed to belong, became occupied by a Quaker, who, having obtained permission from his landlord to pull down the dilapidated Church and apply the materials in constructing farm-buildings, eagerly commenced the sacrilegious undertaking. The sacred edifice was quickly demolished—the materials used in building a cow-shed and other farm offices—the font was taken as a cistern for the use of his kitchen—the Church-yard fence was rooted up, and the sacred resting-place of the dead thrown open to the adjoining field. The work of desecration, however, was scarcely finished, when, riding over the desolated Church-yard, his horse stumbled over the remains of a grave, and threw its rider headlong from the saddle. He fell on his head, broke his neck, and instantly died. Such is the account given by Browne Willis, who at the time of the fatal accident was living not far distant from the spot where it occurred.

The cemeteries connected with these Houses of Prayer were not treated with more respect or decency. Some are used as farm-yards, others as corn-fields and cottage-gardens, and others have been taken into the pleasure-grounds attached to mansions. In most instances human remains are dug up and treated with great indecency whenever there is occasion to disturb the soil of these places. In one instance the Proprietor of one of these desecrated cemeteries boasted that he had dug up several stone coffins, and scattered abroad over his fields many thousands of human bones.

Thus have Christian temples and cemeteries been profaned in this Christian land. The work of desecration, however, was generally gradual, and begun under the

authority of Legislative enactment or Episcopal sanction, obtained by the specious pretext of persons interested in the destruction or abandonment of a Church. Sometimes the services and endowments of an old parish Church ere removed to a conventual Church for the convenience of the priests who served it, and to enlarge the income of the monastery; in which case the old Church, as at Chetwode, was pulled down or allowed to fall into ruin. Sometimes it was deemed expedient to unite two parishes, as Tyringham and Filgrave, and abandon one of the Churches in order to make one good benefice; or a Chapel of ease, as at Elstrop in Drayton Beauchamp, was suffered to fall into ruin, because it was difficult to supply its services, or to keep it in a state of repair. Far the greater number of desecrations, however, were the consequence of the commission* for the suppression of Chantries and other superstitious institutions, by Henry VIII. and Edward VI. Heylyn states, in his History of the Reformation,† that no fewer than two thousand three hundred and seventy-four free-chapels and chantries were seized in the King's name, and sold or otherwise converted to secular purposes. These Chapels were of various kinds, and it must be allowed that by far the greater part of them were never used or intended for public worship. Free-chapels are generally supposed to have been of royal foundation, and consequently were exempt from episcopal jurisdiction, and independent of the incumbent of the parish where they were situated. Long before their dissolution very many of them had ceased to belong to the crown, and had been devoted to some family or hamlet at a distance from the parish Church, but they still retained their original privileges.

Chapels of ease were similar to those still bearing the same name, being built for a hamlet at a distance from the parish Church, to which they were more or less in subjection, though they generally had separate endowments and were perpetual curacies. When the right to administer the Sacraments and burials was granted them they constituted Churches. Oratories were built by license from the diocesan, for the benefit of one or more

* The Injunctions for this Commission are given in full in Burnet's History of the Reformation, vol. II., page 152, folio edition, 1683.

† Vol. I., page 103. Edition of Ecclesiastical History Society,

families living a mile or more from the parish Church. The Sacraments were not to be administered in them, nor the rite of sepulture. They were generally attached to manorial residences, and served by a private chaplain. Chantries were for the most part merely portions within a parish or other Church, or small Chapels attached to the edifice, and appropriated to the performance of services for the dead, for which there was generally a special Priest and a separate endowment. Some Churches had many of these Chantry-chapels—in St. Paul's Cathedral there were no less than forty-seven. Other Chapels, called Chantries, were often distant from their mother Churches, and served the purpose of chapels of ease to hamlets or houses near which they stood, but obtained the name of chantries, either from being first founded for chantry purposes, or because they subsequently received their chief endowment from a chantry being connected with them.*

It is only of the destruction of these latter chantries that I shall here speak. As a faithful son of the Reformed Church of England, I consider the suppression of chantry services as necessary as that of other Popish superstitions. But, surely, the services might have been reformed, and the sacred edifices and consecrated burial places scrupulously preserved. Some allowance, however, must be made for kings and bishops, who, often being obliged to act through the representations of others, have no means of obtaining an impartial view of the case, and still less of regulating the operations of those who have to carry the measure into effect. Doubtless their intentions were usually for the good of the Church, and the furtherance of true religion, and they expected the work would be effected with due regard to humanity and decorum. But sacrilege, or wilful desecration, like a predatory war, continues as it proceeds to harden the feelings, to sear the conscience, and to stimulate the cupidity of those engaged in it. The real question, then, for consideration appears to be this:— Is the preservation or destruction of a Church to be regarded as a mere matter of expediency?

* For further information on these several kinds of Chapels see Burn's Ecclesiastical Laws, vol. I., pages 273, 284 ; Heylyn's History of the Reformation, vol. I., pages 102, 103, 124, &c. ; and Kennett's Parochial Antiquities, pages 585, 591, where the subject is elaborately discussed.

Surely it ought to be viewed in a far more serious light. We will, therefore, say nothing of such Churches as are needed for the surrounding population. The most frigid utilitarian, if a churchman at all, will admit that such should not have been destroyed. But let us look at the case of those which are no longer absolutely required for the celebration of Divine Service, or for the purpose of Christian sepulture.

In the first place then, be it remembered that all these destroyed Churches, before their consecration, were duly and legally conveyed over for sacred purposes by those who possessed full right so to dispose of them. Now, on what ground is this conveyance to be regarded as less obligatory and inviolable than the title by which any landed proprietor holds his estate? Is not the seizure of such property, against the consent of its legal trustees, a manifest robbery? Laws may be enacted to legalise such a procedure—plausible arguments may be adopted to gild over its grossness—but plain honest common sense will still view it in the light of plunder.

Secondly, all these Sanctuaries were duly consecrated, and a bare glance at the import of the Consecration Service should, one would think, be sufficient to convince any person that they were thus solemnly separated from secular purposes, and devoted to the service of the Almighty. They were indeed, for the most part, like all our old parish Churches, consecrated according to the Roman Catholic ritual. But this increases rather than diminishes the importance of their consecration; for the Romish form, not only contained stronger expressions of dedication than those used by our Reformed Church, but also maledictions against those who should dare to profane the places thus consecrated. I am not, however, disposed to base any argument on the stronger portions of this service, but only to urge its acceptance so far as our Reformed Church admits it. And it is evident that she admits it, just as she admits Baptism and Ordination by the Church of Rome. She considers the act as effectually performed, although disapproving of portions of the mode of performing it. Did she not admit the efficacy of such consecration, she would have re-consecrated all those which had been only thus dedicated, for in

law, no building is held to be a Church till it has been properly consecrated.*

Passing over, then, the peculiarities of the Romish service, and those stringent expressions which have only been used by a few bishops since the Reformation,† I will notice only those particulars in the Form of Consecration which were agreed upon by the Convocation A.D. 1712, and is now generally used. Before the Bishop begins to consecrate a Church or Churchyard, he requires the previous possessors of them to relinquish unreservedly all future claim to them as ordinary property, and to acknowledge their desire to have them henceforth devoted to the service of God. He then calls on the congregation present to join with him in separating them from ordinary uses, and consecrating them to the future service of God, beseeching Him to bless and hallow them, and to grant that they may henceforth be held in reverence, and no more used for profane or ordinary purposes. Amongst the sentences which the bishop alone uses occurs the following :—

"Grant that this, place, which is here dedicated to Thee by our Office and Ministry, may also be hallowed by the sanctifying power of Thy Holy Spirit, and so FOR EVER CONTINUE through Thy mercy, O blessed Lord God, who dost live and govern all things, world without end."

So likewise when a Churchyard is consecrated, this petition is used :—

"O God, who, by the example of Thy holy servants in all ages, hast taught us to assign peculiar places where the bodies of Thy saints may rest in peace, and be preserved from all indignities, whilst their souls are safely kept in the hands of their faithful Redeemer; accept, we beseech Thee, this charitable work of ours in separating this portion of land to that good purpose, &c."

Immediately after closing the devotional part of consecration, the bishop, or his chancellor, reads aloud a document, entitled the "Sentence of Consecration," in which occurs this, or a similar declaration :—

"Dedicamus, et sic dedicatam, consecratam, et assignatam esse, et in futuris temporibus perpetuis remanere debere, palam et publice pronunciamus et declaramus."‡ (Anglice.) "Having dedicated this place, we now openly and publicly pronounce and declare that it

* Jacob's Law Dictionary, on the word Church. Burn's Ecclesiastical Law, vol. I., pages 29, 68.

† Bishop Laud's Form consisted of maledictions and other observances of a Romish character. Burns, vol I., page 299.

‡ As I could not find any modern Form containing the "Sentence of Consecration," I have made this extract from the Form used by Arthur Lake, Bishop of Bath and Wells in 1654 ; and given in Hearne's Edition of Leland's Collectanea, vol. IV., page 384.

is so dedicated, consecrated, and assigned, and ought so to remain perpetually throughout future ages."

Now, taking the lowest possible view of the act of consecration, can it be considered as less than the dedicating and solemnly delivering over to God the ground and place consecrated? Whatever may be the difference of opinion as to the effect of consecration on the consecrated object, there can scarcely be two opinions as to the complete and perpetual disposal of it by such deeds and expressions as those used at the time of consecration. All alike must acknowledge that it has been truly and expressly surrendered up and devoted to God. Yea, more, God has been entreated to take part in this solemn act of consecration, and to confirm and seal the deed and intention of his servants. Now, after Churches and Churchyards have thus been consecrated to God, it must be a very serious matter, on any pretence whatever, to treat them as if no such solemn dedication had ever taken place. To appropriate such consecrated places to secular purposes for the sake of gain can be nothing less than sacrilege. In this opinion I am supported by high authority. Hear Hooker on this subject:—

"The main foundation of all, whereupon the security of these things dependeth, as far as anything may be ascertained amongst men, is, that the title and right which man had in every one of them *before donation*, doth by the act, and from the time, of any *such donation, dedication, or grant*, remain the proper *possession of God till the world's end*, unless Himself renounce or relinquish it. For if equity have taught us that every one ought to enjoy his own; that what is ours, no other can alienate from us, but with our own deliberate consent; finally that no man having passed his consent or deed, may change it to the prejudice of any other, should we presume to deal with God worse than God hath allowed any man to deal with us?"

Thirdly, all these consecrated places, with the exception of about half-a-dozen out of the forty alluded to, have been devoted to Christian sepulture; and is it not revolting to the common feelings of humanity, to say nothing of Christianity, to find them now heedlessly used as corn-fields, vegetable gardens, or pleasure grounds? Is it not belying the very words of the Consecration Service, which professes "to set them apart as peculiar places where the bodies of the faithful may rest IN PEACE, and be PRESERVED FROM ALL INDIGNITIES?" These wanton violations of the appointed resting-places of the dead are, in my opinion, so unchristian, so barbarous, and so revolting, that I will not trust myself to say more on the subject.

Those three points, then—the legal conveyance of the ground, its consecration to God, and its solemn assignment to the purposes of sepulture—are, in my opinion, such strong reasons for the sacred preservation of Churches and Churchyards, that they ought to be held inviolable, except where it can be clearly shown that their removal is absolutely necessary for the safety of the living. And if Churchmen generally are found to sanction their removal or alienation on any less cogent motive, it will soon have the effect of bringing the rite of consecration into utter contempt; of brutalising those finer feelings of human nature which have always respected the appointed resting places of the dead; and of greatly injuring the future prosperity of the Church, by necessarily exciting the apprehension of charitable persons lest any bounty bestowed on a Church or Churchyard may, ere long, only serve to increase the ill-gotten wealth of some covetous and profane worldling.

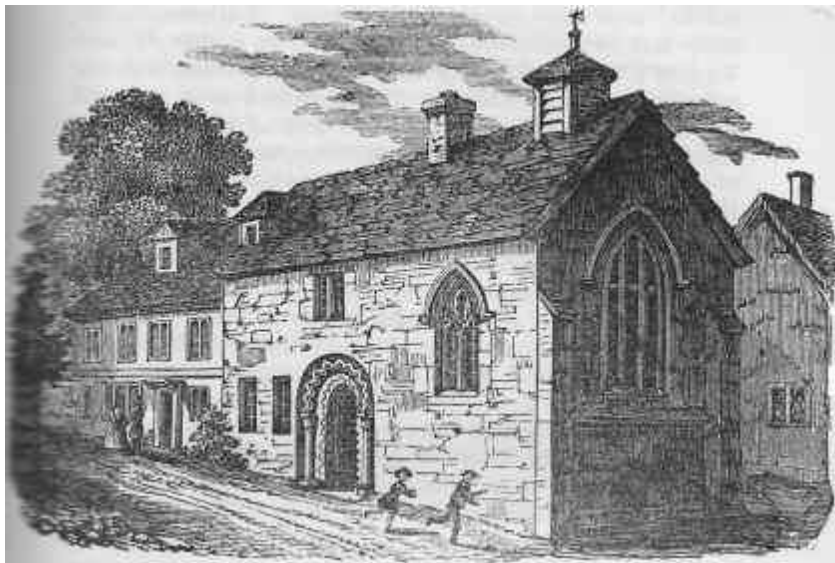
Having taken a general view of the subject, I now purpose to give a specific notice of each consecrated Sanctuary alluded to, in the order of their Deaneries.

DEANERY OF BUCKINGHAM.

BUCKINGHAM.—In this parish three Chapels have to be noticed:—

1. The building, now used as the Grammar School, was originally a Chantry Chapel, dedicated to St. John the Baptist and Thomas of Aeon, and founded by Matthew Stratton, who was Archdeacon of Buckingham from about A.D. 1219, till his death, A.D. 1268. Apparently he was not buried here, for in his will he directs his body to be buried in Oseney Abbey, in Oxford.

This chapel, having become dilapidated, was rebuilt or restored by John Ruding, Archdeacon of Bedford, and Prebendary of Buckingham from A.D. 1471, till his death, A.D. 1481. He also built, or restored the Chancel of Buckingham Church, "as appears," says Browne Willis, "by his arms in divers parts of the Chancel, and in the panes of the glass windows. He gave a folio Latin Bible, now in my possession, to the Church; in which are his arms painted, and this inscription written in it: Hunc Librum dedit Magister Johannes Rudyng, Archi.



[St. John's Chapel, Buckingham, now used for the Grammar School.]

Lincoln : Cathedral. In principali disco infra Cancellum Ecclesie sue Prebendal de Buckingham, ad usum Capellanorum et aliorum in eodem Studere volentium quamdiu duraberit. The motto of his arms, as drawn in the book, was, All may God amend."

He also rebuilt, about A.D. 1467, the Chancel of Biggleswade Church, in Bedfordshire, in which he was buried, having died in A.D. 1481. Browne Willis says, "he erected his own monument, the inscription of which may be seen in the survey of Lincoln Cathedral." A plate of his tomb is given in Gough's Sepulchral Monuments. The brass containing his effigy had been torn off before A.D. 1813, but his arms were then still to be seen under the seats of some ancient wooden stalls in the north aisle.*

Browne Willis gives from a drawing in his possession the following description of St. John's Chapel:—"Over the altar, on the boards of the ceiling, was depicted an holy lamb bleeding, and on each side two angels or

* Lysons Beds, p. 57.

monks, with cups to catch the blood. Underneath the lamb was St. John the Baptist's head in a charger, and Ending's motto, All may God amende; which was remaining till 1688, when it was destroyed as a relict of Popery by the school-boys. The rest of the work was decorated with crescents and escallops, as were the panes of the windows and the back of the master's seat, being Kuding's arms, as in Buckingham Chancel windows." There was belonging to this Chapel a small house adjoining to the Cross Keys Inn, and a tenement and two acres of pasture at the north-east end of the town.

The following is* the return made of this Chantry, 2 Edw. VI. 1548: "The revenue thereof is lxix shillings; and Thomas Hawkins is Incumbent there, and hath yearly the profit thereof for his salary, over and besides 37s. 4d. which he receiveth yearly of ----- by reason of the late house of Sir Thomas Acon, in Westcheap, London, as it is said: the ornaments thereof be said to be worth £2 8s. 4d. Also there is a chalice with an image of Christ, the foot gilt, weighing 12 ounces."

After the Chantry Services were suppressed, this Chapel was converted into a school-room, and was endowed with £10 8s. 0¼d. a year by Edward the Sixth, from the property belonging to St. Thomas Aeon's College in London, which was then dissolved. It is still used for the same purpose, and has obtained the name of the Free Grammar School. As it is too near the sites of the old and present Churches to be needed for divine service, it perhaps could not have been converted to a better purpose; but its consecrated precincts, especially as they have been used for sepulture, should have been more respected. It was evidently used as a cemetery, for human remains are frequently found a few feet beneath the surface, both in the garden and the courtyard of the building. The original boundaries of the cemetery should have been preserved, and this sacred resting-place of the dead not have been used for ordinary purposes. Had it not been for this violation of the rites of Christian sepulture, I should probably not have included it amongst the desecrated Chapels of the county. It is, however, an interesting specimen of early architecture. The doorway is Norman, though much mutilated. Tysons says "the ancient pews of the Chapel still remain;" but this is a

curious mistake. When the old parish Church fell down in 1770, all the materials were sold; and from the general wreck about eight or nine bench ends were purchased by the then master of the Grammar School, and placed for ornament's sake in the boy's school-room. Two of these are of good design; the rest are probably of little value. These bench ends are doubtless what Lysons mistook for "the original pews" of the ancient Chapel. The Rev. H. Roundell, the present Vicar of Buckingham, to whose kindness I am indebted for the preceding information, also states that "the building probably originally served the double purpose of a Chapel and a dwelling house, being divided by a partition. The upper part is certainly a modern erection, and most likely an addition." It is remarkable that Lipscomb does not mention that this building was originally an ecclesiastical structure, although he gives a wood-cut of it from which the accompanying illustration is taken.