

FREDERICK G. GURNEY

By the death of Mr. F. G. Gurney, on 9th August 1947, the Society has suffered a very grievous loss, for, although many members have specialized knowledge, there is perhaps none with such antiquarian erudition, firmly based upon a lifelong devotion to the records of past centuries, as Mr. Gurney possessed.

His interest began with Saxon charters, and rose through the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. It waned somewhat in the sixteenth century, with the seventeenth he had little sympathy, and for the eighteenth something like contempt. Where heraldry, and particularly where heraldic seals were concerned, his knowledge was profound. One occasion he accompanied the present writer to Doddershall, and his instant recognition of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century seals, his familiarity with the life-history and marriages of their users, made a great impression on those present, who knew that he had never before seen the particular charters which bore them.

His own family had originated, or settled, at Bishopstone in the latter part of the fourteenth century, as substantial yeomen, and continued there for long; so that much of the mastery of Bucks genealogy which he acquired arose from his pursuit of his own ancestors, in which his interest never flagged.

Had he not been incredibly unworldly and modest, he might well have made himself known in a wider circle. As a young man he published a book of verse, through Elkin Matthews; he was a musician, and as a draughtsman his touch was as sure and as delicate as that of a mediæval artist working on a missal or psalter. Members will recall his exquisite drawings of the seals which face p. 260 of the last volume of the *Records*; such delicate accuracy towards the very close of his life, when his eyesight was troublesome, is exceptional.

Languages presented no difficulty to him, even some quite out of the way, like the earliest Welsh or Basque. Within the last year he raised a point in Hebrew syntax in one letter, and in another, during the recent war, asked for Dutch books, as he thought he would like to know more of that tongue.

The time which he must have spent amongst the wills at Somerset House and in the Public Record Office, if aggregated, would make an imposing figure, and it left him with a skill in palæography such as few specialists could surpass. He could copy mediæval script, and even illegible notes, with great fidelity, and his unfailing advice to a tyro was: "Make your own alphabet," whenever faced with an unfamiliar hand. His own handwriting was always so beautiful that perhaps his copies were involuntarily made more clear than their originals.

His was the widespread yet deeply founded learning such as made Thomas Hearne famous, but he entirely escaped the acerbity of the Oxford antiquary. To

give of the abundance of his knowledge to less well-informed students was, or seemed to be, a real pleasure to him; even ignorance he instructed with patience. A genuine need of information was all Mr. Gurney required to see in order to afford it. So easily, modestly, and unaffectedly did he carry his learning, that perhaps it hindered him from publishing much for which we should have been grateful. To the Bedfordshire Historical Records Society he contributed a notable paper on the "Tenth-century Bounds of Chalgrave and Linslade"; to the *Antiquaries' Journal* of April 1940, he contributed, jointly with Mr. C. F. Hawkes, a paper upon an early Iron Age burial which he had found at Egginton. For our own *Records* he sent all too few papers; the first, in 1913, gave a wonderful little picture of "Fifteenth-century Neighbours in Edlesborough." Two other contributions were little more than transcripts; then, in 1945, came the very important and brilliant paper upon the Mursley-Dunton Agreement of 1345, which not only throws new light on the method of changing from the two- to the three-field system of cultivation, but goes far towards establishing the identity of our best early writer on agriculture—Walter of "Henley." It is satisfactory to think that he was able to give us that, one of the best articles which ever appeared in the *Records*. Until satisfied that he had exhausted the possibilities of his subject, nothing would induce him to permit its appearance in print.

The present writer is only one of many who owe much to his unflagging generosity in imparting knowledge. He hopes to print some of the many hundreds of letters which he received from Mr. Gurney during the last quarter of a century. However sad the task, it would, if carried out, form some small memorial to the gentle scholar, who was undaunted by ill health and eyesight troubles which were begotten of long years spent in deciphering faded and obscure documents.

G. E.