

BUILDING OF WYCOMBE CHURCH IN THE ELEVENTH  
CENTURY—MIRACLES OF ST. WULSTAN—AND HEA-  
THENISM AT WYCOMBE AND BERKHAMPSTEAD.

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William of Malmesbury, in his "Life and Miracles of St. Wulstan," who was the last of the Saxon bishops, and presided over the diocese of Worcester from A.D. 1062 to 1097, records two miracles which he is said to have performed at a town called *Wicumbe*, the identity of which place with High Wycombe is sufficiently established by its situation in the diocese of Lincoln, and on the high road from Worcester and Oxford to London. The only printed edition of Malmesbury's work (in Wharton's "Anglia Sacra," 2 vols. folio, 1691), omits the chapters in which these incidents are related, and supplies their place by a short and incorrect abstract.\* I have, therefore, carefully copied the extracts from the best manuscript (Harleian MS., No. 322), extended the text, and appended an English translation. It will be seen that the stories were taken from the work of Coleman (the same personage who figures in the second story, and was at the same time the chaplain and biographer of the saint), and, consequently, stand at second-hand in the narrative of Malmesbury. In the first story, it is evident that a fortunate escape from serious danger was

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\* Wharton's abridgment is as follows:—Lib. ii., cap. 8, "Miraculum de discrimine incendii Wicumbæ evaso." Cap. 9, "Quomodo Ecclesiam Wicumbæ ab oppidano Spurt Lunser dicto ædificatam, concedente id Remigio Ep. Lincoln., dedicavit: et viri pedissequam ab iniquo morbo liberaverit." The incorrectness of the *Anglia Sacra* has no parallel in the history of letters: it is said to contain an error for every line. In it is also to be found one of the earliest literary performances of a native of Buckinghamshire, William of Wycumbes "Life of Bishop Betun," written in the eleventh century. I hope at some future time to draw attention to this worthy, his profound learning, stern morals, and singular writings.

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immediately invested by the admirers of the good bishop with a supernatural character, and reverently set down as a miracle; and the second story, in its main points, has equally the air of verisimilitude. The wealthy Saxon, building a church, and procuring its consecration at the hands of the holy Wulstan, the license obtained from Bishop Remigius, the sermon and confirmation, the modesty of the matron in the bishop's presence, and the symptoms of an aggravated case of *glossitis*, are related with all the simplicity of Defoe: the cure belongs to thaumaturgy proper, and may be interpreted by the sceptical or mystical theory, as the reader likes. One unlucky fact, however, must be mentioned. St. Wulstan died in 1097, and the date of the consecration of the church is limited, by the bishopric of Remigius, to the interval between the years 1070 and 1092. The celebrated discovery of the head of the Holy Lance was made in the church of St. Peter, at Antioch, during the perilous occupation of that city by the Crusaders, between the third and twenty-eighth days of June, 1098.\* As there can be no reasonable doubt as to the identity of the Holy Lance of the miracle with that of history, this insuperable discrepancy overthrows the authority of the story, unless we take the only alternative left, which the suspicious construction of the last sentence seems to favour, and assume that the account has been slightly embellished by the pen of William of Malmesbury.

“GUIL. MALMESBURIENSIS DE VITA ET MIRACULIS SANCTI WULSTANI, EPISC. WIGORN.—Lib. ii., cap. 8, 9. (Harl. MS., No. 322, p. 94.)

“Lundoniam ad curiam proficiscens, apud villam *Wicumbe* dictam veteris tecti et ruinam minantis hōspitium suscepit. Male autem, cum iter meditaretur corripere, domus crepitare, tigna que cum trabibus deorsum vergere ceperunt. Turbati servientes omnes foras exilierunt, solum dominum intus obliti: adeo considerata formido mentes eorum perculerat. Jam ultra foris positi, memores domini sui inelamant eum magnis vocibus ut exiret antequam edes tota corrueret: nemo eum ut educeret intrare presumpsit. At ille, scuto fidei munitus, stetit immobilis; et virtute viri impendens ruina suspensa est, donec omnibus extractis, sarcinulisque impositis, animalia promoverentur. Tunc vir sanctus pedem domo extulit,

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\* Gibbon's "Decline and Fall," vol. xi., p. 73. Ed. 1815.

statimque horrifico fragore domus tota concussa, parietes et tectum in unum rudera chaos confudit.

“Hic ponit Colemannus miraculum in eadem villa exhibitum, annis quidem posterius sex, veneratione dignum. Erat enim vir quidam Spordignus nomine, opibus affluentibus fortunatus, et in Sancti reverentia pernotus. Hic sumptibus suis construxerat ecclesiam, quam a nullo nisi a Wulstano voluit consecrari. Quod quum inconsulto diocesis illius episcopo fieri non posset, licentiam a Remigio episcopo Lincolnensi impetravit. Dieque statuta venit episcopus, et dedicatione ecclesie sermoni ad populum, confirmationi puerorum, sollicitam curam impendit. Quibus explicitis, domum viri pransurus ingreditur.

“Tum materfamilias verens cum episcopo colloquium serere, Colemanmi auribus dolorem suum exponit. Pedissequam suam gravi morbo thabescere, ut-pote cujus capud infando tumore lasciviat, et lingua extra palati concavum promineat. Linguam ipsam ita protuberare ut magis videatur esse bovis quam hominis; victum ei omnem negatum, et si quid sumatur, esse cibum dentibus conmaticatum, sive potum coleari infusum.

“Colemannus rem Episcopo insinuavit. Habebat ille aureum unum, cuspede Lancee Salvatoris perforatum, quem intinxit in aquam quam eo die prius ad consecrationem ecclesie benedixerat, et muliercule direxit. Bibit, et medicalem potum sanitas matura subsecuta est, sicut matrona eidem Colemanno post aliquot dies et ipsa jurata et testibus nixa asseruit.”

“As he was journeying to the Court at London, he lodged at a town called *Wicumbe*, and slept in an old house whose ruinous appearance threatened a speedy fall. And in the morning, when he was about to recommence the journey, the building began to crack, and the rafters and beams to give way downwards. All the servants jumped out of doors in a fright, so panic-struck as to forget altogether that their master was alone within; but once safely out of doors, they remembered him, and shouted loudly to him to come out before the whole building fell down together; but none was brave enough to go in and rescue him. But he, fortified with the buckler of faith, stood calm and immovable; and by virtue of his sanctity the impending destruction was suspended until the horses and baggage were safely got out and loaded ready for departure. Then the holy man went forth from the building, and immediately the whole house was violently shaken, and fell with a terrible crash, walls and roof, into a chaotic heap of ruins.

“Here Coleman records another miracle which he wrought in the same town (*Wycombe*), though six years after that just described, which is highly to be venerated. There was a certain man named Spording, of abundant fortune, and a well-known admirer of the saint. He had built a church there, at his own costs, which he resolved should be consecrated by no other than Wulstan, but that could not be done without the permission of the bishop of the diocese, so he obtained license to that effect from Bishop Remigius of Lincoln. On the appointed day, the bishop came and consecrated the church, taking especial pains in preaching to the people,

and confirmation of children. After which he goes to Spording's house to dine.

"Now, the wife of Spording had a maidservant who was afflicted with a grievous disease; her head was horribly swollen, and her tongue was enlarged to the size of an ox's, and protruded from her mouth. She could take no food, except a little meat already masticated for her, or drink poured down her throat with a spoon. The matron feared to enter into conversation with the bishop, but told the circumstance to Coleman.

"Coleman acquainted the bishop with the case. The bishop had a piece of gold, which had been pierced with the head of the Holy Lance; this he took, and dipped in the water which he had previously blessed in the consecration of the church, and gave it the girl to drink. This healing draught was speedily followed by a complete cure, as the matron and other witnesses declared on oath to Coleman some days afterwards."

The last sentence appears to me the weakest point in the story. If Coleman saw the matron, and examined her and other witnesses on oath, what could prevent him from seeing the girl herself, and thus satisfying himself perfectly as to the completeness of the cure?

Spording had planted, and Wulstan watered; but the people of Wycombe remained attached to a common piece of Paganism, which Bishop Hugh of Lincoln, a century after, had some difficulty in persuading them to relinquish. St. Hugh, says his biographer, was an implacable enemy to superstition; so was St. Martin; and he proceeds to draw a parallel between the two bishops—

"Superstitiones ritusque sacrilegos longe lateque eliminavit ille: similiter eliminavit et iste. De quibus licet brevitatis gratia superius parce dixerimus, Norhamtonia tamen latronis, Bercamestuda, *Wicumbia*, et alia quædam loca fontium culturam, Hugone acriter decertante, postposuisse noscuntur."—*Vita S. Hugonis*, p. 348.

"\* \* \* We know that Northampton laid aside the worship of a Robber (*i.e.*, some Teutonic hero-deity), and Berkhamstead and Wycombe gave up the worship of springs, through Hugh's vigorous exertions."

I have no doubt that the powerful spring which rises at the east end of the Rye, close to the Roman villa, is the one alluded to. It was called Holy-well through the middle ages, and the adjoining meadow is still called Halliwell Mead.

EDWARD JOHN PAYNE.