

NOTICES OF THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF BROWNE WILLIS, ESQ., LL.D.

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BY THE VEN. ARCHDEACON BICKERSTETH, D.D., V.P.

BROWNE WILLIS deservedly holds a high reputation amongst the antiquaries of Buckinghamshire, and indeed I may say, of England. He was not born in Buckinghamshire, but at Blandford, in Dorsetshire, September 14, 1682. His great-grandfather, Thomas Willis, of St. John's College, Oxford, lost his life in the King's service at the siege there, in 1643. His grandfather was a physician of high repute, who died in 1675, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. His father, Thomas Willis, Esq., of Bletchley, married a Dorsetshire lady, the daughter of Robert Browne, Esq., of Frampton. This will probably explain the fact of Browne Willis having been born in that county, and not in Buckinghamshire. Browne Willis received the first rudiments of his education at the Endowed School at Beachampton. Three or four years afterwards he was sent to Westminster School; and it is believed that his visits to Westminster Abbey first inspired him with the love of architecture, just as the beautiful church of Hillesden, near Buckingham, is said to have been the source of inspiration to our great living Buckinghamshire architect, Sir Gilbert Scott, as by the favour of the Queen we are now glad to call him. From Westminster School, Browne Willis removed in due time to Christ Church, Oxford, where he entered as a gentleman commoner at the age of seventeen. He left Oxford without taking his degree, probably on account of the death of his father, which appears to have taken place during his first year's residence at Oxford. His mother died of grief, not long after the death of his father; and they both lie buried in the chancel of Bletchley Church. Before he left Oxford, Browne Willis gave a convincing proof of his growing interest in the pursuits of archæology, by copying out the whole of "Leland's Itinerary," which he had

borrowed for this purpose from the Bodleian. In 1705 he was elected M.P. for Buckingham; but parliamentary life did not possess any charms for him, and in three years he gave up this post of honour, and settled down to the pursuit of the more congenial studies of archæology. The family possessions, to the greater part of which he succeeded upon his father's death, were principally at Bletchley, Whaddon, and Bow Brickhill. He built a house called "Water Hall," in the parish of Bletchley; but his chief residence was at Whaddon Hall. In 1705 he married a lady of good family, daughter of Daniel Elliott, Esq., of Port Elliott, in Cornwall, with whom, according to Lipscombe, he had a fortune of £8000. She died October 2, 1724, leaving a family of five sons and five daughters, and was buried at Bletchley. From the time of his giving up parliamentary life until his death, he devoted himself to antiquarian pursuits, and spared no pains to obtain accurate information. As an instance of his industry, it may be mentioned that he visited every cathedral in the kingdom, both English and Welsh, excepting Carlisle, taking their actual measurements and dimensions, copying the monumental inscriptions, and inspecting the libraries. He also obtained a record of all the living dignitaries of the cathedrals, and a vast amount of information besides, relating to these and other foundations. This was a great labour, and speaks much for his zeal and industry. The amount of information that he gathered together on these and other subjects, may be in some degree estimated by the fact that it fills no less than fifty-eight folio volumes, forty-eight quartos, and five smaller volumes of MSS., all of which are now carefully preserved in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Browne Willis was also a great collector of coins. His cabinet contained a large series of tradesmen's tokens, ranging from A.D. 1649 to A.D. 1672. He had also amassed a large number of early English and Saxon coins, and gold and silver of a later date. All these coins Willis gave to the University of Oxford. It is, indeed, on record that the University thought it right to pay him the value in weight of the gold coins, and that he actually received £150 for 167 English gold coins. But the other coins were his free gift to the University. This cabinet of coins is still to be seen in the Bodleian, labelled "Numis-

mata Willisiana," with the coins catalogued in his own handwriting.

But Browne Willis was not merely an antiquarian. He was a liberal benefactor to the churches with which he was connected. Bletchley Church, which contains the remains of his father and mother, he largely embellished both internally and externally. He is said to have expended upon this church alone upwards of £1200. We may feel thankful that under the liberal hand of the present rector,* assisted by higher architectural skill, some of the "eccentricities" of Browne Willis's work have been removed, and the Church, one of the finest in the neighbourhood, has undergone a thoroughly satisfactory restoration. Still we must not forget to make allowance for the age in which he lived, or to recognize in him one of those who helped to keep alive the spirit of zeal for the Houses of God at a period when it was almost dormant. We may smile at his taste. But we must consider our advantages compared with his. Had Browne Willis lived in the middle of the nineteenth century, he would have been in the foremost rank of our ecclesiologists and antiquarians.

Within the old parish of Bletchley is the hamlet of Fenny Stratford, now converted into a separate ecclesiastical district. As early as the fifteenth century this hamlet possessed a Chapel, with an endowment for the daily celebration of the Mass. Even at that early period it was a place of some importance. It was on one of the ancient highways of the kingdom, close to the site of the old Roman station of *Magioventum*, to which it may be indebted for its renown. One of the old records states that it had at that time a population of 230 "houceling" people, which may mean either dwellers in houses, or more probably, "hosteling" people, that is, communicants. With this Chapel there was connected a Brotherhood, or Fraternity of St. Margaret's. But the Act for the "Dissolution of Monasteries" dissolved this establishment; and in 1550, or soon after, St. Margaret's was pulled down.

Another church was built on the same spot, but this fabric perished in the Civil Wars; and in the early days of

* Rev. W. Bennett, M.A.

Browne Willis, Fenny Stratford was still without a Church. It was just the case to attract the sympathies of Browne Willis; so he resolved to rebuild the Church there, and for this purpose he first possessed himself of the site on which St. Margaret's had stood. He then spent six years in efforts to raise the needful funds for the building. The plan of the little Church was furnished by a country builder, named Wing, resident at Aynhoe, near Brackley; and it must have been a curious design. The builder was anxious to ornament the roof externally with what he called a "kupalo on a hexagon;" but with this Browne Willis dispensed. He also altered the builder's plans in other important respects; and between them they at length produced what was then considered, no doubt, an elegant structure. It consisted simply of a nave and a tower; to which was added a small south aisle in 1823. The Church built by Browne Willis and dedicated to St. Martin, was consecrated May 27, 1730. In building this Church the worthy antiquary had designed not only to provide for the convenience of the inhabitants of Fenny Stratford, but also to furnish a suitable memorial to his grandfather, a celebrated physician, Dr. Willis, whom he commemorated in the following lines:—

In honour to thy Memory, Blessed Shade,
Was the Foundation of this Chapell laid,
Purchased by thee,—Thy Son and present Heir
Owe these three Mannores to thy Art and Care;
For this may all thy Race Thanks ever pay,
And yearly celebrate Saint Martin's Day.

Browne Willis considered the erection of this Chapel "his chiefest and most real worldly comfort and happiness;" and he provided that the event should be commemorated every year on St. Martin's Day, November 11, with Divine Service, and celebration of the Holy Communion. The ceiling of the Church was ornamented with the armorial bearings of benefactors to the building. During the incumbency of the present vicar, Rev. G. W. Corker, this little unique building has undergone great changes and improvements. Under the direction of Mr. W. White, the architect, the small south aisle, added in 1823, has been removed, and in its place has been erected what is now the nave and chancel, to which the original building of

Browne Willis now serves as a north aisle. In this part of the Church are retained all the interesting portions of Browne Willis's work; such as the ceiling with its painted panels, the east window, now placed on the north side near the tower, and the marble slab erected to the memory of the antiquary himself, no longer on the floor, where stood the communion-table of Browne Willis's Church, but placed against the wall at the east end. Upon this slab is the following inscription, which would seem to have been, in part at least, prepared beforehand by the antiquary himself:—

Hic situs est
 Browne Willis, Antiquarius,
 Cujus Avi æternæ memoriæ
 Thos. Willis, Archiatri totius Europæ celeberrimi
 Defuncti die Sancti Martini, A.D. 1675
 Hæc Capella exiguum monumentum est.
 Obiit 3 Die Februarii, A.D. 1760
 Ætatis suæ 78.
 O Christe Soter ac Judex
 Huic Peccatorum primo
 Misericors et propitius esto.

In addition to this his "chief work," Browne Willis promoted the rebuilding of the spire of Buckingham Church, and the restoration of the Church of Bow Brickhill, which after a disuse of 150 years, had become ruinous. The former effort was not successful. It may be taken as an evidence of the want of ecclesiastical oversight a hundred years ago, that when Browne Willis contemplated the repair of Bow Brickhill Church, the patron and rector had just agreed together to take it down and dispose of the materials. Browne Willis also took much interest in the cause of education; and in this and his other good works he was warmly supported by his friend Dr. Martin Benson, Rector of Bletchley, who afterwards became Bishop of Gloucester. Willis and he were great friends, Willis always calling him St. Martin. It was said that if Willis had been Pope, he would certainly have canonized him. In January, 1759, the health of Browne Willis, never very strong, was shaken by a severe cold caught by the overturn of his carriage when at a distance from home; and after sinking for about twelve months, he died, February 5, 1760, in his seventy-eighth year; and was buried with much honour in the Church of Fenny Stratford.

Like other men, Browne Willis was not without his

defects. He was somewhat irritable, an infirmity to be traced, perhaps, in some degree to his warm feelings, and to his tastes and pursuits which found little sympathy in the age in which his lot was cast. But he was no doubt an eccentric man. He was very peculiar in his dress, and very slovenly. According to the traditionary account of him, he generally wore three or four old-fashioned coats fastened round him by a leather strap, and over all an old blue cloak lined with black fustian. His head-dress was a large slouched hat, over a weather-beaten wig, and his clumsy shoes had been mended until little remained of the original leather. He was not very cleanly in his person. Yet with these drawbacks he had many virtues and excellences. He was remarkably sober and temperate in his habits. He was earnest and regular in his religious duties. He daily assembled his household for family prayers, and seldom omitted to retire to his own chamber in the course of the day for private devotion. He was a regular attendant at Divine Service, both on Sundays and on week days, when opportunity offered; and a constant communicant. He was greatly respected and esteemed by those who knew him well; and in spite of his peculiarities, he left behind him a character for real goodness, which the instinct of mankind seldom fails to recognize where it is really deserved.

His history and character suggest one or two lessons which may not be without their use to us.

I. Though Browne Willis had not the power of a masterly arrangement of the knowledge which he acquired, he has at least earned the great merit of thorough honesty, industry, and accuracy. He was never satisfied with secondhand information, but took pains to verify his facts, and to go to the best sources for this purpose. So the student of archæology may learn from him the great importance of honest industry and painstaking; and of applying the most searching tests to the knowledge gained, before it is accepted as a genuine addition to the common stock of information. It was this habit of patient industry, rather than his clearness of arrangement, or his mastery of his subject, that made Browne Willis what he was.

II. The second lesson to be learnt from the life of our Buckinghamshire antiquary, is that of love and veneration

for our parents and progenitors. This excellent virtue was pre-eminent in Browne Willis. His memorial Church at Fenny Stratford was really an obituary to his distinguished grandfather; and the monumental slabs in the chancel of Bletchley Church, mark his deep affection for his father and mother, and his grief at their departure. They show also how he mingled with these pious feelings his devotion to the common Father of all. On the slab over his father's resting-place, we read—

Browne Willis Thomæ filius primogenitus
 Dum erga Deum et Parentes pietatem ostendere
 conabatur
 Et monumentum optimis Parentibus
 haud indignum
 Erigere voluit Templum hoc
 Quo eorum ossa sunt recondita
 Anno Salutis reparatum
 MDCCV? exornavit.

I believe that family affection tends, in a great degree, to constitute the moral strength of the English people, and to enhance our national renown. If we learn from the life of Browne Willis the great value of patient industry, and of affection for our parents and progenitors, we shall not have pondered it in vain.
