

THE HOSPITAL OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST AT WYCOMBE.

BY JOHN PARKER, ESQ.

MR. JOHN PARKER, F.S.A., accompanied the members of the Bucks Archæological Society on their visit to and inspection of this Hospital, on the 3rd of August, 1882, and gave, from memory, the substance of a Paper he had read before the Society of Antiquaries on a recent occasion, which had been illustrated with excellent drawings by Mr. G. C. Richardson.

Mr. Parker reminded the members that in consequence of the erection of the new Grammar School buildings, and the contemplated removal of the old school buildings, it was doubtful, whether the remains of this Hospital, which were part of or were surrounded by the old school, would be preserved, and that much interest had been taken by the Society of Antiquaries, and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Monuments, in these most valuable relics. The following are the points on which Mr. Parker called the attention of the Society.

The situation of the Hospital was in Easton Town, or Estynton, a separate hamlet, having formerly a fair of its own on the day of St. Thomas-the-Martyr; this hamlet was afterwards connected to the town of Wycombe, and formed a Ward of the Borough, called Easton Ward.

The Hospital originally was bounded by the river, from which it is now separated by Easton Street. The Rye Mead then stretched along the opposite side of the river, and was thus connected locally, as it is to this day by title, with the Hospital, as an appurtenant of the foundation.

An exchange of lands, in the last century, between the then Lord Shelburne and the Corporation of Wycombe, altered the boundaries of this ancient Mead.

Prior to the incorporation of the borough, the Rye Mead was the common pasture for the tenants of the ancient demesne of Wycombe. After the incorporation the burgesses entered into the rights of the tenants. The moots or gemotes, when the Saxon was in the

ascendant, were held here ; and it was here that borough election days and law days were afterwards held, and leases were renewed in the presence of the burgesses.

With regard to the origin of the Hospital, it has been popularly supposed to have belonged originally to the Templars, and afterwards to the Hospitalers, in consequence, it may be supposed, of the dedication of the Hospital to St. John-the-Baptist. But there is some plausibility for the supposition, as it is well known that the Templars had considerable property in the hundred of Desborough. They had a manor at Wycombe, still known as Temple Manor, and Temple End and Temple Farm are familiar names in the locality. On the dissolution of the Templars and the confiscation of their lands, the Hospitalers for the most part, succeeded to their properties, hence the presumed connection of this Hospital with these orders, which were accustomed to have, as is well known, houses for brethren and sisters.

This Hospital was, no doubt, originally founded by the Sokemen, who occupied the slopes of the valley, first, probably, for pilgrims and travellers, and afterwards for those of the community who were in destitution or sickness. Subsequently the foundation consisted of a master (in holy orders), and brethren and sisters, appointed by the burgesses on the ground of poverty and sickness, and they took vows of chastity and obedience ; and there is very good ground for concluding that they were under the rule of St. Austin. Whether in this country, or on the continent, there are abundant evidences that houses, founded for the reception of the needy and sick, were commonly under this rule.

The building itself consisted of a hall and chapel, or refectory ; the hall is supposed to have been erected in 1175, it is about 62 feet in length and 16 feet wide between the pillars. The side aisles were 3 feet wide. It stands north and south, and in this is proved its peculiar value and interest as a relic of the past, inasmuch as it is amongst the very few remains of Norman architecture in this country devoted to *secular* purposes. On each side of the hall were three pillars, alternately round and octagonal, supporting four plain semi-circular arches, 13 feet in diameter. The capitals of the pillars are ornamented with foliage and shells, and on one of them a

dragon is sculptured. Of the six pillars four remain, they are $8\frac{1}{2}$ feet in height. The western aisle has disappeared. Portions of the entrance porch, with four transitional Norman pillars, are preserved; and one of the greatest curiosities of the hall is the oven which still exists. It reveals the domestic life of the brethren and sisters. The hall was their abode night and day; the sleeping quarters would be the aisles—one aisle would be parted off for the males, the other for the females.

The chapel or refectory—which stands east and west—was about 24 feet in length by 21 feet in width. This building is of more recent date; portions of the original roof remain, and the north wall. In this wall are still preserved one lancet and one decorated window of the original building.

In the history of this Hospital from its earliest days, everything points to one conclusion, namely, that it was essentially a public institution. After the incorporation of the borough, dating back, it is believed, to the reign of Henry I., the mayor and burgesses became the patrons of the foundation. To this day one of its principal estates is known as the Town Farm. Its connection with the Rye Mead, the ancient place of public resort of the townfolk, is also another proof of the position it occupied.

Benefactions have from time to time been made by the wealthier burgesses to the Hospital, and several original deeds containing grants of lands still exist. The records furnish a scanty list of the masters,* commencing with Robert X., 1265, and ending with Christopher Chalfont, who was the last master, and resigned in 1553.

After the dissolution the Hospital, in the second year of Edward VI. reign, passed into private hands; but in the fourth year of Elizabeth's reign, the mayor and burgesses asserted their ancient rights as patrons, and in order to make it a royal foundation, they granted the Hospital and all its lands to the Queen. Three days afterwards the Queen made a regrant to the mayor and burgesses and their successors for ever, for the purposes of establishing a Grammar School and Almshouses. The

* See Parker's "Early History of Wycombe," p. 141.

governors of the Wycombe Grammar School and Alms-house foundation now administer this important charity; and the Rye Mead is still used by the burgesses for the depasturing of cattle, and for purposes of recreation, and is highly valued by the inhabitants of an increasing town.
