

OBITUARY NOTICES.

NOTES ON THE LIFE OF DR. BICKERSTETH, DEAN OF LICHFIELD.

By R. GIBBS, F.S.A.

LATE years have made sad havoc amongst the founders and earliest supporters of our Society. Of the original vice-presidents not one is now left to us. Dr. Bickersteth was the last survivor, and we have now to chronicle his decease. "The Architectural and Archæological Society for the County of Buckingham" was instituted in November, 1847, when a number of gentlemen met in the vestry of Aylesbury Church to consider the best mode of forming a society bearing this title. That was the nucleus of the Society.

The Rev. J. R. Pretyman, the then vicar of the parish, presided at the meeting, and about fifty members were enrolled. Mr. Pretyman manifested uniform interest in the progress of the Society, and watched over it during its infantine years with kindness and ability; he retired from his incumbency in 1853, when he was succeeded in the living by Dr. Bickersteth. The Rev. Edward Bickersteth, D.D., was second son of the Rev. John Bickersteth, M.A., and nephew of the first Lord Langdale; he was born at Acton, Suffolk, in 1814. He entered at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1832, and graduated B.A. at Sidney Sussex College, 1836, when he was 24th Senior Optime. He had previously obtained the Taylor's Mathematical Exhibition. He afterwards entered as a student in theology at Durham University, where he gained the first prize for a Theological Essay in 1837. He was ordained deacon at the end of that year, and priest in January, 1839. He served as curate to the Archdeacon Vickers at Chetton, Shropshire, during 1838

and part of 1839, when he was appointed to the curacy of the Abbey, Shrewsbury. Having occupied this position for nine years, he was promoted by the Earl Howe, in 1848, to the incumbency of Penn Street. He was appointed Rural Dean of Amersham, by the Bishop of Oxford, in 1853, and in the same year, Vicar of Aylesbury and Archdeacon of Buckingham.

At the period of the induction of Dr. Bickersteth to the living of Aylesbury, the restoration of the interior of the church was in the main accomplished; still the flooring and the seating had to be provided, nor had the exterior of the building been touched. The new vicar had, therefore, still a considerable task before him, in putting the finishing stroke to the general restoration of the building. In 1854 he exhibited much archæological taste in the removal, from the south entrance of the building, of an unsightly porch, an excrescent of comparatively modern times, of no claim to architectural notice, and possessing no relation whatever to the ancient structure. This removal not only brought to light a very handsome doorway of the Perpendicular type, but also materially improved the approach to the principal entrance to the building.

In taking up his residence at Aylesbury, Dr. Bickersteth at once identified himself with the Archæological Society, of which he was appointed one of the Vice-presidents. Prior to this time no Proceedings of the Society had been published. In the first volume of the RECORDS is a detailed report of an opening address by the new Vice-President at an annual meeting held in 1854, in which address he observed—"Archæology comprises the pursuit of all that tends to illustrate history or to increase our knowledge of the habits and manners of our forefathers. There are portions of our history still resting in much obscurity, and which offer, therefore, a wide field for research. Anything, for example, which tends to illustrate the period between the Roman and the Saxon domination is of peculiar value, as exhibiting the influence exerted upon our forefathers by their first conquerors. We live in an age in which these relics are rapidly disappearing. The disturbance of soil caused by the general enclosure and cultivation of waste lands, by the formation of railways and by other circum-

stances, while they mark the onward march of improvement, have a direct tendency to sweep away what I may call the 'materialism of antiquity.'

"All those relics which time or disaster have spared to us, come within its province; and even words, and names, and proverbs, and popular traditions, are of the numbers of those things with which it is conversant. The Society may be of eminent service in rescuing some of these memorials, in reviewing and imparting light respecting them, and in treasuring up facts which may serve to enrich the pages of some future historian of the county."

In the second volume of the RECORDS appears the substance of a lecture by the Vice-President, on the ruins of St. Peter's Church at Quarrendon, with illustrations; and the same volume contains, from his pen, a brief historical sketch of Aylesbury, of 14 pages. In this sketch we have an engraving of the ancient window at the King's Head Hotel, which is still existing, also of the ancient Town Hall, as it existed in 1738; it is to this engraving we owe the preservation of the representation of this antiquated building.

To the third volume of the RECORDS Dr. Bickersteth contributed "A Lecture on the English Language," also on "Gothic Architecture," and a description of Fleet Marston Church. At the annual meeting of 1870 he was prepared with papers on the subject of the "Ancient Characteristics of the River Thames," and on the traces of the Roman roads in Buckinghamshire. Also in the fourth volume is an interesting paper "On the Poets of Buckinghamshire." Indeed, he was a very frequent contributor to most of the volumes of the RECORDS.

To say that he was present at this or that meeting of the Society would not be doing him justice, when the fact is that he was rarely absent from the regular meetings, or the committees; during his residence at Aylesbury he was the mainstay of the Society, always evincing the greatest interest in its prospects and management, sparing neither time nor effort to further its success. He left Aylesbury for the Deanery of Lichfield in 1878.

From 1864 to 1880 he was Prolocutor of the Lower House of Canterbury. He was singularly unfortunate in

the matter of patronage. It is said that his preferment was delayed for ten years by the imprudence of his friends, who memorialised the Queen, asking that some signal mark of Royal favour might be conferred on him for his labours in Convocation. He is spoken of as a model Dean, and he did much in remedying Church abuses and developing Church life. His books, charges, and pamphlets ran through many editions. At Lichfield he devoted himself earnestly to the work of the Cathedral, and through his instrumentality a complete restoration of the west front was effected.

Although the Dean was much broken in health for a year or more before his death, his final departure from Lichfield was somewhat sudden. He reached his new abode at Leamington on Tuesday, the 4th of October last, but was not able to leave it again. On the Thursday he appeared in his late usual health, slept well on that night, but on the morning of Friday he was found in a comatose state; it was evident he was rapidly sinking, and he expired in the afternoon of that day. On the following Tuesday the interment took place in the Leamington Cemetery, and was of the quietest possible character. Dr. Bickersteth was a supporter of the Funeral Reform Association, and desired that his burial should be a practical illustration of its principles. He, therefore, left instructions that he should be buried in the most unostentatious manner possible, in the place where he died.

THE LATE MR. ROBERT GIBBS, F.S.A.

IN quick succession, the writer of the previous notes on the life of Dr. Bickersteth has passed away, and it falls to the lot of another to record the worth and valuable service of one whose memory is entitled to special regard by the members of our Society. It is not intended in this obituary notice of Mr. Gibbs to attempt to give any general sketch of his life, but to confine the attention of the reader to his archæological labours, as the subject most suited to these pages.

Robert Gibbs was one who by nature associated

himself with an archæological society. Retiring and reflective, he dwelt much on the past, and his literary researches, assisted by a retentive memory, all tended to bring to light bygone events, which he narrated simply and clearly to his readers. He had acquired from his father, as a journalist, stores of information bearing on his locality, and more especially on the county town, and what he had acquired he turned to excellent use. He possessed a spirit of independence and honesty of purpose, which for so many generations has characterized the men of Bucks, and this spirit, no doubt, quickened his interest in every incident in the life of Hampden, and in the other distinguished men connected with the county at the time of the Commonwealth. Two of the earliest of his papers in the RECORDS are, the one on "The Cause of the Death of Hampden," and the other on "The Regicides of Buckinghamshire." Both are subjects eminently suited for the pages of the Society's publication, and to both he had given—at the time he was writing the papers and subsequently—much attention. A paper appeared in Vol. VI. of the RECORDS from the pen of Mr. Gibbs, on "Jordans," the humble and secluded, but most interesting shrine of the Society of Friends, where lie the remains of Governor Penn and other prominent founders of the Society, whose homes clustered round Chalfont St. Giles and the neighbouring towns. His last paper in our Society's publication was a collection of the returns, the result of surveys, and of a visitation made by Williams, Bishop of Lincoln, in 1637, of the state of the Buckinghamshire churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Besides papers on archæological subjects, Mr. Gibbs also gave valuable obituary notices of prominent members of the Society; but he will be chiefly remembered from his "History of Aylesbury." This volume was the result of a singularly comprehensive collection of facts gleaned from various sources, owing its origin to Mr. Gibbs' father, and augmented by himself. As it will be remembered that the volume was reviewed in these pages, it will be only necessary to remind the reader that much has been done in this history of a very ancient town to bring to light its claims to our attention. The very name of the town

is alone worthy of special inquiry. Perhaps, however, those parts of the book which give it its real value are those which we should expect from a faithful chronicler—namely, the characteristic facts connected with Aylesbury, having regard to its early ecclesiastical associations and its ancient manor. And more especially is Mr. Gibbs on his own ground when he treats of Aylesbury as the ancient borough, and dwells on the vicissitudes attending its Parliamentary elections, as well as when he considers the subject of his history in the light of an assize town—in this way bringing to our view the punishments of the criminal as well as the condition of our gaols in former times. On the same principle on which he compiled his “History of Aylesbury,” Mr. Gibbs brought out other publications, such as those entitled “Local Occurrences,” “The Bucks Miscellany,” and “The Worthies of Bucks.” Here, too, we find varied and important information which a Buckinghamshire man may seek in vain from other sources. It is true we may discover, in turning to these latter volumes that here and there revision would be desirable, yet it must be borne in mind that these publications professed to be nothing more than compilations; and when we remember that at least two were given to the public in Mr. Gibbs’ declining years, we may feel it to be a matter of congratulation that we are now reaping the fruits of his efforts. These historical and archæological labours to which we have called attention were suitably rewarded by the election of Mr. Gibbs as a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in the year 1888. He felt, at his age, he could not expect to reap the advantages of his election, but he fully appreciated the distinction it conferred on him, and it gave no little pleasure to his many Buckinghamshire friends to know that he was enrolled amongst the fellows of that learned Society. Not only as a contributor to the pages of the RECORDS did Mr. Gibbs prove his interest in the Bucks Archæological Society, but as Curator of the Museum, and as organizer of some of the Society’s excursions, on which he expended no little trouble, he gave to the Society very valuable assistance. And the writer of this brief notice has every reason to recall his unremitting correspondence when matters of importance to the Society were uppermost in

his mind, and to acknowledge some instances of his kind assistance in connection with the work of editing this publication. It was Mr. Gibbs who originated the idea of perpetuating the memories of the worthies of Bucks, and in his ideal temple we may well reserve a niche for himself as one who so unobtrusively yet so usefully served his county and, more especially, the town with which he was so long associated. Mr. Gibbs died on the 6th of August of this year, and his remains lie in the old churchyard of Stoke Mandeville. We may express a hope that a memorial recording his worth and his deeds may be placed in that churchyard, or at some other suitable spot, by the many who knew and esteemed him.—Ed.
