HISTORIC SITES OF BERKSHIRE:

(i) Cumnor Place.

Lecture by Mr. H. J. Reid, F.S.A.

ON Monday evening, February 11th, a Lecture in connection with the Berkshire Archæological and Architectural Society was delivered at the Athenæum, Friar Street, Reading, by Mr. HERBERT J. REID, F.S.A., on "Cumnor Place and its Traditions." Mr. CHARLES SMITH presided, and amongst those present were the LORD CHIEF JUSTICE of England and Lady COLERIDGE, the Mayor of Reading (Mr. G. W. PALMER), the Rev. J. M. GUILDING, the Rev. P. H. DITCHFIELD, Mr. W. F. BLANDY, Mr. H. B. BLANDY, Mr. S. S. STALLWOOD, Mr. F. W. ALBURY, Mr. C. O. FULLBROOK, Mr. J. A. BRAIN, Mr. W. W. WILLIAMS, Mr. J. HARRIS, Mr. R. HART, etc.

The CHAIRMAN expressed the regret of the Members that the President of the Society, Sir GEORGE RUSSELL, was unable to be present, and stated that they were to be favoured with a Paper by Mr. REID—a gentleman who was well acquainted with Berkshire and its history.

Mr. REID opened his subject by remarking that a Benedictine Abbey was founded, as is well known, at Abingdon in the seventh century, and to this rich and powerful Monastery Cumnor appears from the very first to have belonged. Its earliest mention is found in the "Chronicles of the Monastery of Abingdon," in which "the Book"—probably a register or cartulary—is repeatedly referred to. Considerable doubt exists respecting the authenticity of the earlier charters given in the Chronicle, but none at all as to the account

given of the foundation of the Abbey itself. Briefly, this is as follows: —Lucius, a certain mythical British King, having been converted to Christianity by the ministrations of two missionaries, Faganus and Daveanus, sent at his own request by Pope Eleutherius, subsequently granted the greater portion of Berkshire to an Irish monk, Abbenus, whereupon he founded a Monastery, called after himself—Abbendun. These transparent fabrications were formerly gravely accepted by, among others, Archbishops Parker and Usher, Bishops Godwin, Lloyd, and Stillingfleet, but have long since been discarded. The more probable, indeed the accepted, tradition of the Monastery gave Cissa, Ceadwalla, and Ina, successive Kings of Wessex, as the founders; and this now meets very general acceptance, the actual foundation being assigned to Cissa and his nephew, Heane, first Abbat of Abingdon, the succeeding kings making, as very generally happened, additional grants and gifts to the Monastery. The Chronicle relates the vision of a certain Hermit of Cumnor, who is moved to relate it to Heane. He informs the Abbot that he dreamed he saw certain men removing every night the stones and masonry of the Abbey which after much labour was erected by day; and upon remonstrating with these persons, they replied that the site chosen for the Abbey being unpleasing to the Almighty, they were constrained to impede its construction. Heane, acting upon the Hermit's hint, selects another and more acceptable site; no more visions are heard of, nor any obstructions, all progresses favourably and with rapidity. (Cott. M.S. Vitell. A. xiii.)

Cumnor, according to Dugdale, is derived from Cumanus, second Abbot of Abingdon, who died *circa* 784; but Dr. Buckler, author of "Stemmata Chicheleana," and Keeper of the Archives of Oxford University, who was Vicar of Cumnor for twenty-five years, suggests St. Coleman or Cuman, an Irish or Scottish saint, who lived in the sixth or seventh century. As early as the year 689 Colmonora is mentioned in the Latin deed in Abingdon Chronicle, twenty hides of land there being conferred upon the Abbey by charter of Ceadwalla; and again in a similar deed, being a charter of Kenulph, dated 851, in which is an illuminated portrait of that King. An Anglo-Saxon, or preferably an English boundary, attached to Eadred's Confirmation Charter to Abingdon in 955, mentions Cumnor, as does also a subsequent charter of Edgar, 968, which also has a carefully-defined boundary attached to it, and the "Biography of St. Ethelwold," who re-founded the Abbey after its destruction by the Danes, 240 years from the original foundation of

Abbot Heane. It is very improbable that these documents are authentic. They may possibly be copies, but are more probably forgeries, made for various purposes in later years, based, in many instances, no doubt, upon the fabulous History of Geoffrey of Monmouth, who died about 1154, leaving what was professedly the translation of a work in the British tongue, made at the request of Walter, Archdeacon of Oxford. It contains, perhaps, a modicum of fact, but is not dependable; it has been largely drawn upon by later so-called historians and romancers. Nevertheless, there is every reason to believe that Cumnor from the very earliest times belonged to Abingdon Abbey, its name in early documents being written *Cumenoran*, and the Church is known to have been one out of but three spared by the Danes when they ravished the district around, and destroyed Abingdon in the reign of Alfred the Great.

The Norman Conquest has left us more certain and dependable records. From the Survey of Domesday we ascertain that Comenore, in 1086, contained thirty hides of land, having been rated, *tempore Regis Edwardi*, at fifty hides. It will be remembered the early English charters gave twenty hides as its extent, so that the Manor had by this time been either added to or the hidation varied, possibly both. The Manor maintained sixty villans and sixty-nine bordars, or freemen, with four servi or bondsmen. The Church is mentioned, as also two fisheries of the value of forty shillings yearly. Sevacoord, or Seacourt, and Winteham—probably Wytham—were a portion of Cumnor, which is the first manor mentioned in Domesday Book belonging to the Abbey of Abingdon, and, in evidence of ancient right, it is expressly written there, "Semper fuit de Abbatia." Cumnor Church is again alluded to in a Papal Bull dated 1152, but there are now no visible traces of this edifice. The present Church, which underwent thorough restoration some forty years ago, having previously suffered by injudicious alterations at various times, is of the Transition Period, the most ancient portion being the tower, according to the dicta of ecclesiastical architects, not erected before the year 1250. Many objects of great interest to the archæologist are yet preserved in and about the Church, despite the more recent restorations; among others, are two stone coffins, enclosing the remains of former Abbats of Abingdon, two piscinæ, and, of yet more recent date, the tomb of Anthony Forster, of whom I shall have something to say presently. Some of the stone carvings within the Church are of great delicacy, being remarkably fine examples of fourteenth-

century work—in the shape of two corbels, the capitals of three columns, a window, and the portion of an arch.

In the chancel are some poppy-heads, carved upon both sides: on one is the sacred monogram I.H.S. upon a shield; upon another the five stigmata, *i.e.*, the pierced feet, the hands and heart of the Saviour, also a cross. Upon the reverses are also carved the Crucifixial emblems, viz., the ladder, spear, and reed or staff, to which is affixed a sponge; there are also the hammer, pincers, and three nails. Upon the upper shield are the vestments, the crown of thorns, and bag of money.

A letter referring to Cumnor Church during the Civil Wars, written by a member of the Pecock or Peacock family, is printed in "Mercurius Academicus." This family held the Manor at that period, Richard Pecock compounding for his estate by paying the considerable sum of £140. Many of the family lie buried in Cumnor Church, and the School is mainly supported by the legacy of a Mrs. Peacock.

The letter refers principally to the conduct of certain soldiers, who, finding nothing worth removing, took down the weathercock, "that might have been left alone to turn round," and did much other damage; it is worth reading now:—

"Thursday, Feb. 26, 1644.

"To present you with as honest men as those of Evesham, (in a note surprised by Sir W. Wallers horse in June, 1643), and honeste you will not deeme them to be when you heare they came from Abingdon to a place called Cumner in no smaller a number than 500. When their chieftain view the church goe up with the steeple and overlook the country as if they meant to garrison there, but finding it not answerable to their hopes and desires they descend but are loath to depart without leaving a marke of their iniquitie and impiety behind them. Some they employ to take down the weather cock (that might have been left alone to turn round) others take down a cross from off an isle of the church (and this you must not blame them for, they are enemies to the cross), others to plunder the countrymens houses of bread, beare and bacon, and whatsoever else was fit for sustentation."

There is also copied in a late seventeenth-century M.S. volume, in the British Museum (Harl. 6365, 536), an epitaph which, I believe, may yet be seen in the Church; it is rather quaint, and may be worth my reading, or rather worth your hearing:—

Epitaph in Cumnor Church.

"The body of JAMES WELSH lyeth buryed here,
Who left this mortall life at fourscore yeere.
One thousand and six hundred twelve he dyde
And for ye poor did cristianly provide.

According to ye tallents God had lent
5 pound he gave of real and good intent.
The fruit makes known the nature of ye tree,
Good life the Christian, even so was he,
Whose time well spent unto his soul did gain
The heavenly rest where holy saints remain.
This memory a loveing wife unto her husband gave,
To show her heart remembers him tho' death enclose his grave.
The gift he gave unto ye poor she hath enlarged ye same
With 5 pound added to his 5, unto her Cristian fame
Hath placed them both to ye Church, men here no wise to be delay'd
But yt yearly to ye poor of Cumner be a mark of silver pay'd.
Which is ye full appointed rent of ye whole bequeathed summe
And so for ever shall remain until ye day of doom
In Cumner for ye poors relief MARGARY WELSH doth still,
The charge of this when she is dead may be performed still."

From the same M.S. (Harl. 6365, Plut. XLIX. G) I copied a description of Anthony Forster's monument:—

"In ye chancell against ye north wall a great marble monument with pillars of marble. On a plate of brass faced to it ye picture of a man in armour kneeling before a table upon a book. At the foot thereof his helmett, at ye sides his gauntletts, over against him his wife kneeling, as her husband. Behind her three children, between them this coat: 3 bugles, qr. 3 phœons, points upwards, with mantling and crest, which is a stag, lodged, and regardant. Gu. charged on ye shoulder with a martlett, or, and pierced thro' ye neck with an arrow, ar. Behind the man this coat, 3 bugles, qr. 3 phœons, points upwards, impaling 2 organ pipes in saltire between 4 crosses, paty. Then follow the quarterings. Behind ye woman is this coat. Williams, az. 2 organ pipes in saltire between 4 crosses paty. Quarterings as before described. Under these both a great brass plate, on ye part of it under him the following verses——'

These I will spare you. Being in Latin, they will be found in Ashmole, and also translated in most editions of Scott's "Kenilworth." Suffice it, they record his many accomplishments and virtues (it relates he was wise, eloquent, just, charitable, learned in the classics, in literature, music, architecture, and in botany), but not the date of his death; his burial, however, is recorded as taking place November 10th, 1572, by the Parish Register, which cannot err. He is therein mentioned as "A. F., *gentleman*," the last word being written over an erasure; and it has been thought by some that an epithet not so complimentary had previously been placed there, but erased, and "gentleman" substituted. I see no reason for such a suggestion. Possibly, some Latin term may originally have been written—*e. g.*, "miles"—and "gentleman" thought more appropriate. At any rate, Anthony Forster was buried at Cumnor, November 10th, 1572; and I will ask you to bear this date in mind.

Cumnor Place, Forster's residence, was an early fourteenth-century house, used as a residence by the Abbots of Abingdon, and also as a place of removal, or sanitarium, by the monks, particularly during the plague, or Black Death, which decimated England under Edward III. At this period it served both as Rectory and Manor House, where tithes and rents were paid, and Manorial Courts held, and where tenants were bound to attend to do suit and service for their lands to their superior lords. Such was Cumnor Place until the desolation of the monasteries by Henry VIII. In 1538 it was granted for life by the Crown to Thomas Pentecost, or Rowland, last Abbot of Abingdon, in consideration of his having willingly surrendered the Abbey and its possessions to the King. Rowland either died the following year or ceded Cumnor Place to the King, who seems to have retained possession for seven years, when by patent, dated Windsor, October 8th, 1546, the lordship, manor, and rectorial tithes of Cumnor, with all its rights and appurtenances, particularly the capital, messuage Cumnor Place, and the close adjoining, called the Park, and three closes, called Saffron Plottye, &c., were granted to George Owen, Esq., the King's physician, and to John Bridges, Doctor in Physic, in consideration of two closes in St. Thomas' Parish, Oxford, the site of Rowley Abbey, and the sum of £310 12s. 9d. cash. William Owen, son of Dr. Owen, married April 24th, 1558, Ursula, daughter of Alexander Felliplace, the estate being then settled upon him. Shortly afterwards Cumnor Place was leased to Anthony Forster, and it was in his occupation when occurred the tragic incident which forms the concluding scenes in Sir Walter Scott's "Kenilworth,"—the death of Amy Robsart, wife of Sir Robert Dudley, afterwards Earl of Leicester. In the following year Anthony Forster purchased the property from Owen, and seems to have greatly enlarged and otherwise improved the mansion. Dying in November, 1572, he devised the estate to Dudley, subject to a payment of £1,200 to Forster's heirs. These conditions, it seems, the Earl accepted, but retained possession for a single year only, as is proved by a document among the Longleat papers, purporting to be a record of the sale of Cumnor by the Earl of Leicester to Henry le Norris, ancestor of the Earls of Abingdon, which bears date 15th February, 16th Elizabeth, 1575.

From this time Cumnor seems to have gradually fallen into decay. Possibly, the sad end of Lady Dudley may have contributed to this; at all events, rumours were spread among the villagers that her ghost haunted the locality, and a tradition is even

yet received by them that her spirit was so unquiet that it required nine parsons from Oxford to lay the ghost, which they at last effectually did, in a pond hard by, the water in which does not freeze, it is said, even in the most severe winter. This pond is still shown by the villagers, although they are quite unable to assign any reason for the peculiar conduct of the ghost.

Neglected for nearly a hundred years, a portion of the ruined mansion was then converted into a malthouse, afterwards into labourers' dwellings, and finally demolished, in 1810, for the purpose of re-building Wytham Church. Among other mementoes of its former owner, was an arch bearing upon the label the inscription "*Janua Vitæ Verbum Domini. Anthonius Forster*, 1575." This, with some handsome tracery windows, was removed to Wytham, the arch being built into the entrance wall of the churchyard. The date and name were for some reason destroyed, possibly to evade an apparent anachronism, for Anthony Forster had been dead two years in 1575. These windows and other objects of interest were engraved in the *Gentleman's Magazine* for 1821.

It is said, and I believe truly, that so great interest was excited in Cumnor Place by Sir W. Scott's novel, that the Earl of Abingdon was induced to drive some visitors from Wytham to see the ruins, forgetting that some years previously he had given orders for their demolition. The disappointment of the party, on arriving upon the ground, was great, as may be imagined, and not less so that of the Earl, who too late realized his mistake. The disappointment was felt by everybody, for, it is said, all the world hastened to the site of the tragedy so graphically described by Scott, only to find they were too late. The public was not then aware that its sympathies had been aroused by the vivid imagination and marvellous genius of the novelist; and that, while there was just a substratum of fact, the greater portion of this historical novel had no foundation other than the great constructive power of the author. While thousands deplored the untimely fate of Amy Robsart, their sympathies were in truth tributes to the dramatic powers of the novelist, not to the unfortunate heroine; the novel may be said to bristle with chronological inaccuracies and utter disregard for historic fact.

It has been repeatedly reasoned that novelists should be permitted a certain licence, and in actual fiction this may possibly be; but, if the subject and characters chosen are both historical, misconception, to put it mildly, may easily arise, and erroneous

opinions be indelibly impressed upon the mind of the reader. Let me recall to your memories the outline of "Kenilworth," after which I propose to notice some of Scott's most glaring historical inaccuracies and anachronisms; and, while I have no intention of attempting a defence of Robert Dudley and his followers, for the crime here alleged to have been committed, I believe I shall be able to show you that he was in this instance, at any rate, greatly maligned. The plot in brief is as follows:—Robert Dudley Earl of Leicester, son of the Duke of Northumberland who had been executed for endeavouring to place Lady Jane Grey upon the throne, having secretly married Amy Robsart, desires to be free, and confides his wishes to his retainers, Richard Varney and Anthony Forster. The Countess, who was living in retirement at Cumnor Place, hearing of the festivities given by her husband at Kenilworth, goes secretly there, and has a most affecting interview with Queen Elizabeth, in the course of which the Queen bitterly reproaches Leicester. At length, by specious promises, he prevails upon Amy to return to Cumnor, arranging to come to her as soon as liberated from his attendance upon the Queen. She complies, and is assigned by Forster to a portion of the building approached only by a drawbridge in which is concealed a trap-door. At night Varney, riding hastily into the courtyard, gives the Earl's private signal—a peculiar whistle—on hearing which Amy rushes out to meet her husband; but Forster having meanwhile withdrawn the bolts, she falls through the trap. "A faint groan and all is over." Immediate punishment overtakes the criminals. Varney is arrested, but poisons himself in his cell; while Forster, in his hasty endeavour to escape, closes behind him a secret door, and dies a lingering death.

Mr. Reid then proceeded to notice some of the most glaring historical inaccuracies and anachronisms which appear in "Kenilworth." Sir W. Scott derived his story from a ballad by W. J. Mickle, and from Ashmole's "Antiquities of Berkshire," who copied from a scurrilous work, called "Leicester's Commonwealth," published in 1584. Mr. Reid showed that Dudley's marriage with Amy Robsart was no secret, and that the latter died three years before the former became Earl of Leicester, and fifteen years before Elizabeth visited Kenilworth. Anthony Forster and Varney were gentlemen of good character, and not the villains as represented in the novel. A true account of Amy's death was given with the finding of the jury at the inquest, and Mr. Reid concluded

by saying—"Taking the evidence into consideration, I must certainly express my own impression, that whatever may have been Leicester's faults—and they were many—or whatever crimes may be charged against him, he was, at any rate, guiltless of any intent to make away with his wife, Amy. One word more. I would ask, even if Dudley were shielded in his evil doings by his Court influence, would this have also affected public opinion in the country? I am of opinion that, at that time, his Court popularity would have militated rather unfavourably than otherwise for him. Yet, what do we find is the case? Within four years of his wife's death he is elected Chancellor of the University of Oxford, and Steward of the Boroughs of Abingdon, Wallingford, and Reading,—all within easy distance of Cumnor Place, where his wife, Amy, was found dead at the foot of the stairs, as some said, foully murdered. Had he hand, direct or indirect, in such a crime, or had suspicion then attached to him, I venture to affirm, neither Oxford University nor the electors of these boroughs would have so honoured him. These nominations must have been practically a declaration of confidence in his innocence; at least, that is the effect that has been made upon me."

After the Lecture, which was received throughout very heartily,

The CHAIRMAN said he was sure they very highly appreciated the Lecture which they had listened to, and they were much honoured by the presence of the Lord Chief Justice of England.

The Rev. P. H. DITCHFIELD said it was a great treat to hear Mr. REID upon a subject which he had studied so thoroughly, and which had been so well worked out. He had traced the history of Cumnor in the thorough manner which was characteristic of his work. The charge of historical inaccuracy had often been brought against Sir Walter Scott, who, in the introductions to his works, often referred to these charges, and disclaimed perfect accuracy. He gave another instance of this in "Peveril of the Peak." But these inaccuracies need not detract from the interest of the story. On behalf of the Society, he begged to propose to Mr. REID a hearty vote of thanks for his delightful Paper.

The Rev. J. M. GUILDING, in seconding, thanked Mr. REID for clearing the character of one of the oldest county families of Berkshire—the Forsters. He did not admire Leicester (who was a type of the courtier-noble of the Tudor age), but he was guiltless of this crime. Leicester, who was the High Steward of Reading, married as his second wife Letitia, a daughter of Sir Francis

Knollys, a native of Reading. On one of the walls of St. Lawrence's, Reading, was a ragged staff of the Dudley family. He was sure they were all delighted to see Lord COLERIDGE, who was one of the brightest ornaments in connection with English literature.

Lord COLERIDGE (who was received with cheers), in supporting the resolution, said that, notwithstanding his avowed resolution to the contrary, he could not help accepting the invitation from his valued friend, Mr. GUILDING, to attend that meeting. He ventured to put a personal matter to the Lecturer, who would be conferring a great favour upon him (Lord COLERIDGE) and others if he would extend his researches into a more obscure corner of the novel of "Kenilworth." There was an interesting passage in that novel, in which Tressilian, the ill-fated hero, puts up at a blacksmith's forge. His horse is shod, and in the course of a great deal of conversation he quoted this proverb, "*Quid hoc ad Iphicli boves?*" "What has this all to do with the shoeing of my poor nag?" Being interested in such matters, he looked into Erasmus, Wolf, Hoffman, and other authorities, to try and discover the origin of that expression. There was an account of Iphiclus and his oxen, but how it became a proverb he had never been able to find out. When he was in the House of Commons, he asked learned persons there if they could elucidate the matter for him, and he ventured to ask Mr. Gladstone (who, whatever his political opinions might be, must be considered a great scholar), also Mr. Lowe and Mr. Goschen; but neither of them could give him the information, and he had never been able to find out. If Mr. REID could tell them where it was to be found, he should be very much obliged to him (applause).

Mr. J. A. BRAIN said he thought he could throw a little light on one part of Mr. REID'S Paper. It was in connection with a lady who formerly lived in Reading—Mrs. Hughes, the grandmother of Mr. Thomas Hughes, author of "Tom Brown's Schooldays." Mrs. Hughes was the widow of the Rev. Dr. Hughes, a Canon of St. Paul's and Rector of Uffington, where Weyland Smith's Cave and the Blowing-stone, and other Berkshire antiquities mentioned in "Kenilworth," were situated. Mrs. Hughes was an intimate friend of Sir Walter Scott, and had visited at Abbotsford; and he (the speaker) had been informed on good authority that that lady had supplied Sir Walter with much of the information which was incorporated in the novel of "Kenilworth." He added that it was generally admitted that Sir Walter Scott never visited Berkshire.

The vote of thanks was cordially passed, and the meeting closed.