Henry the First's Tomb in Reading Abbey.

THE Rev. J. M. GUILDING, Vicar of St. Lawrence's, Reading, read an interesting paper on "The Tomb of Henry I. in Reading Abbey," at the Annual Meeting of the Society. Mr. Guilding began by quoting some remarks of Alderman Darter in his "Reminiscences of Reading by an Octogenarian," describing the discovery, during his boyhood in 1810, of a stone coffin in the Abbey Ruins. The coffin, so far as Alderman Darter remembered, had ornamented columns all round the outer edge, the latter being about three inches thick, and these were broken to within a few inches of a little moulding at the base. The coffin was placed in the Boys' Schoolroom in the Forbury, where by degrees its appearance became altered owing to visitors and others taking away fragments of it. In 1887, at the request of the Vicar of St. Lawrence, Mr. Darter accompanied him to the spot where the coffin was found 70 years previously, which singularly enough agreed with that noted on a ground plan as the place in which the Vicar thought the coffin must have been found. Mr. Guilding proceeded also to refer to a paper by Archdeacon Nares, then Vicar of St. Mary's, Reading, and an accomplished antiquary, containing a minute and careful description of this ancient sepulchral relic, the Archdeacon giving it as his opinion that the coffin was the undoubted sarcophagus which contained the remains of the great Norman King, Henry Beauclerc, founder of Reading Abbey, buried in 1135. By the mischievous propensities of schoolboys and the no less mischievous curiosity of visitors desirous to chip off and carry away some memento of this Royal relic, every trace of the ornamental Norman moulding speedily disappeared. When the Abbey Ruins fortunately passed into the possession of the Corporation some years since, efforts were at last made for its preservation. The broken fragments were repaired and patched together, though unfortunately reducing the original length

of the sarcophagus, and a new piece of stone inserted at the foot. It was then removed and fixed in the wall of one of the apsidal chapels forming the south transept, the only portion of the Abbey Church still surviving. But by some incongruous and unhappy fatality, the tomb of this great prince was still doomed to further dishonour. Among the portions of the old Gaol, standing on the site of the Abbot's lodgings, there was a stone fire-place of the Tudor period, handsomely carved. On the demolition of the old Gaol, and the erection of the present model prison, the fireplace was removed to the transept, and under the supposition that it might do duty for a canopied tomb, the sarcophagus was placed beneath. It was entertaining, if not instructive, to hear visitors, and sometimes their guides, descanting on the antiquity and beauty of this sepulchral fireplace. Mr. Guilding went on to discuss the question whether there was sufficient ground for concluding that the existing coffin now preserved in the ruins, and which was exhumed in the presence of two reliable and independent witnesses, near the site of the high altar, was the same coffin in which King Henry was interred. He admitted that the argument must mainly rest upon inference and reasonable conjecture, but when the accumulated facts were connected he thought they would furnish a chain of presumptive evidence so complete as not to miss a single link and so strong as to remove all doubt. He then traced, first, the circumstances of the King's death and burial; second, the circumstances which led to the destruction of his tomb and monument after the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539. Regarding the former he quoted William of Malmesbury, a contemporary writer, who stated that the King had continued in Normandy three years before his death, and that he was seized with illness at Lihun, while hunting, and died after seven days' illness, having summoned to him, when his malady increased, Hugo, whom from Prior of Lewes he had made Abbot of Reading, and afterwards Archbishop of Rouen. The body, this historian says, was brought to Rouen, the intestines being buried in the Monastery of St. Mary des Prés near that city, and the rest of the body put on board ship and brought to England and buried in the Monastery of Reading. Gervase of Canterbury (1122-1200) expressly said that the King's body was entombed in the Church before the high altar, or more probably on the north side of the altar, the usual position of a founder's tomb—*in ipsâ ecclesiâ ante altare.* Florence of Worcester confirmed William of Malmesbury's account. Matthew Paris, a monk of St. Alban's, writing about 1250, gave additional details to

the same effect, and further particulars of the embalming and entombment of the King might be gathered from other sources. Some time after the King's death a stately monument was erected to his memory in the Abbey Church, on which was the King's effigy, as large as life, with the usual emblems of Royalty. Mr. Guilding fixed the date of this erection early in the thirteenth century, when sepulchral monuments on tombs became more common and ornate than in the Anglo-Norman period. At all events, the monument was not immediately erected, for in the year after the King's burial his widow, Adeliza of Louvain, came to Reading on the anniversary of the King's death, attended by her brother and the officers of her household. She visited the Abbey Church, where she was received by the Bishop of Salisbury, the Abbot, and a large number of ecclesiastics. In testimony of her regard for her husband she placed a rich pall on the altar with her own hands, and gave by a Royal Charter "to God and to the Church of St. Mary at Reading for ever the Manor of Eastone in Hertfordshire which formed part of her dower for the health and redemption of the soul of her lord the most noble King Henry and of her own." At the close of the fourteenth century the monument seemed to have become decayed, as it was expressly mentioned in a Charter of Richard II. which confirmed all former privileges granted to the Abbey, on condition that the Abbot should properly repair the tomb and image of King Henry, the founder, within one year. Mr. Guilding then discussed the second point of enquiry—the fate of the founder's tomb and monument at the dissolution of the Abbey in 1539. In November, 1539, Hugh Faringdon, the 31st and last Abbot, was executed, with two of his monastic brethren, for denying the King's supremacy. The Abbey, being dissolved, became the property of the King as the heir and successor of the founder, and though the estates were sold or exchanged, the monastic buildings, and probably the Church, remained intact during the remainder of this King's reign. The neglected and disused Church would soon, however, with its historic monuments, shew signs of decay and dilapidation. However wanting in reverence the King might have been, as a Royal residence the Abbey buildings were preserved for a time from destruction. For a while the choir of the Abbey Church remained intact and the monument of Henry Beauclerc, though uncared for, was not then destroyed. To the disastrous years which followed the accession of Edward VI. he attributed the complete dismantling of the Abbey Church and the consequent ruin and destruction of the founder's

tomb. In 1550 the Abbey buildings and lands were granted to Seymour, Duke of Somerset, and the materials of the Abbey walls and roof were probably used in the re-building of St. Mary's Church, Reading, which took place between 1550 and 1553, as shown by the Churchwardens' accounts of the period. There was a tradition that the King's body was preserved in a coffin of silver, and the hidden treasure was sought for by the workmen engaged in demolition. The monument was rudely broken by axes and hammers, but no silver was there, only the mouldering remains of a once mighty King. The broken sarcophagus, with the bones of the dead King, was thrown into the rifled and dishonoured grave; and there rested again for a long pause of 250 years. Mr. Guilding then recapitulated the facts tending to show that the existing coffin was the identical coffin in which the King's body was entombed. The coffin was found exactly *in situ* of the King's tomb, before the high altar; it was immediately inspected by two independent witnesses, who gave exactly the same account of its character and appearance; it evidently belonged to one of high rank and who lived in the 12th century, the mouldings being of 12th century character; and the mutilated and broken condition would at once show that it had received previous violence, and been hastily re-interred, while of course the bones would utterly perish. To his mind the evidence was almost irresistibly conclusive that this could be no other than the original coffin in which the King's remains rested, as no other would be allowed a place so near the high altar except the founder. On these grounds he ventured to appeal to his fellow-townsmen and to invoke the aid of that learned Society to rescue this historical relic of the founder from its unworthy position, and place it once more within the hallowed precincts of a Church. His desire and hope was that a subscription might be raised under the auspices of the Society, and perhaps with the patronage and support of our gracious Queen, to erect in the adjacent Church of St. Lawrence, which King Henry built, on his foundation of the Abbey, a monumental cenotaph, comprising an effigy of the King who lay close by, placing under it the remaining fragments of his tomb. Was it too much to hope that there were in Reading architects competent to give a worthy design and a sculptor equal to such a task? If their Society should promote this effort of replacing the Royal founder of Reading in a position of honour it would accomplish one of its great objects—the preservation of what was noble and good in the records of the past.

A discussion followed the reading of the paper, the CHAIRMAN remarking he should have been only too glad if he could make himself believe that it was really the coffin of Henry the First, but he had heard nothing which had convinced him that it was so. He went to the Abbey Ruins that day to see the coffin, and made a minute search to see if he could find anything like ornamentation on it, but he could see nothing, although there were indications of carving. He maintained that it was not a Norman coffin, but that it was a coffin of the 14th or 15th century, and that the coffin down there was not sufficiently large to contain the body of a man wrapped up in bull-hide, as they had been told the body of the King was.

Other gentlemen present also expressed some doubt as to the tomb being that of Henry the First.

Mr. GUILDING, in reply to the various speakers, said he thought they should hold their judgment in suspense, because there was a great deal to be said on both sides. The present coffin was not its original size, it having been broken, repaired, and much shortened. They might remember that King Henry I. was a spare man of medium height. With regard to the entire demolition of the ornamentation on the coffin, his theory was against him, although he did not think the argument was so strong as it looked. His own opinion was that the coffin had been chipped to about half its original size. Where he felt there was a missing link was, that it was necessary to trace the history of the coffin from the period when it was placed in the National Schools until the present day.

HOLY WELLS OF BERKSHIRE.—Mr. R. C. Hope, F.S.A., F.R.S.L., contributes to the January number of *The Antiquary* (Elliot Stock) an interesting chapter on "Holy Wells: their legends and superstitions." Those of Berkshire enumerated are—St. Mary's Well, Speen, Newbury; the "Miraculous Well" at Yattendon—which, although always quite full, never overflows; St. Andrew's Well, Bradfield; and Sunny Well.

AT an important Sale of Books and MSS. at Messrs. Sotheby, Wilkinson and Hodge's rooms last week Ashmole's "Antiquities of Berkshire," 1723, 8vo., sold for £10 12s. 6d. (Daniell); and Ackermann's "History of the University of Oxford," two vols., 1804—for £3 8s. od. (Young).