



The Quarterly Journal

OF THE

Berks Archæological and Architectural Society.

The History of Wokingham.

By Rev. P. H. Ditchfield.



THE Members of the Berks Archæological and Architectural Society assembled in the Town Hall, Wokingham, on Wednesday, March 26th, to hear a lecture from the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, Rector of Barkham, and hon. sec. to the Society, on the history of Wokingham. Advantage was also taken of the occasion to allow Mr. E. Frankum to give such information concerning the pictures adorning the Town Hall and Council Room as he could obtain. The demonstration was exceedingly interesting. The Hall was full, amongst those present being: The High Steward of Wokingham (Mr. John Walter), who presided, the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield, the Rev. E. Sturges, Alderman T. M. Wescott, Mr. H. T. Roberts (Town Clerk), Mr. E. Frankum, Mr. and Mrs. Melville, Mr., Mrs. and Miss Leveson-Gower, Rev. and Mrs. A. Carr, the Rev. J. F. Llewelyn, Ald. Heron, the Rev. D. Paul, Mrs. Walter, Dr. and Mrs. Hicks, the Misses Sturges, the Rev. E. C. Leslie, Mr. and Mrs. R. F. Hart, etc.

Mr. DITCHFIELD commenced by remarking that the object which the Society had in view when it meditated a descent on that ancient

town, was to stir up a little historical enthusiasm and to encourage an interest in the ancient history of the place. For those who admired antiquity Wokingham had many attractions. Its quaint streets, old houses, and well-restored Church presented many charms to those who were fond of the study of scenes of bye-gone times. But there were other reasons which attracted the Society to Wokingham besides its external appearance. It had a history which, if not so exciting as that of lordly Reading or Royal Windsor, still possessed features of no small historical interest and was well worthy of their study. Surrounded by the great forest of Windsor, in the midst of the royal domain and hunting ground, Wokingham seemed to have passed a tranquil and placid existence, comparatively undisturbed by the great social and political convulsions which harassed the life of more important places. The Borough is of ancient origin. In the charter which was granted to the town by Queen Elizabeth it was stated "by all the time whereof no memory of man is to the contrary there hath been enjoyed certain liberties, privileges, customs as we are credibly informed. One leet to be holden yearly about the feast of Easter and a Court Baron by our steward of the Manor of Sonning in the presence of the Alderman of Wokingham." No memory of man was to the contrary that Wokingham possessed these ancient privileges and existed under a regular Municipal constitution which Queen Elizabeth by her charter confirmed to "her good and faithful subjects." The charter then proceeded to give a sketch of what this constitution was, the form of which carried us straight to Saxon times, and must have differed little from that which existed here before the Conquest. The Court Baron was the old Manorial Court, where before the Lord of the Manor the officers of the Borough were selected; and the Court Leet was the Borough Court where prisoners were tried and the affairs of the township arranged and discussed. Having described the various offices, including that of Alderman (an office which was maintained until the reception of the Charter of Incorporation, which reformed the old Corporation), and explained that according to the charter there was a market every Tuesday and two fairs, Mr. Ditchfield remarked that though Queen Elizabeth was most liberal to the towns of England, and renewed and granted many charters and privileges, she made no new bequest to her loyal subjects at Wokingham, although her charter was the oldest of which they had any record. The origin of the name Wokingham, was probably well known. The Hôcings or Wokings (the children of Hôc) were a Saxon clan who formed a family settle-

ment in that neighbourhood. Woking was probably their first settlement, and then when the family increased they swarmed like bees in a hive and settled again at Wokingham, the village of the Wokings. They drove away some Celtic inhabitants who were there before, and of whose presence they found a trace in the rude earthenware jar, which Mr. Sturges so happily discovered in the glebe fields. These Celts, too, had previously displayed an earlier race of inhabitants, traces of whom had recently been discovered by Captain Gregorie in the very perfect flint implement which was found while digging in the Milton Road. A very interesting document was then produced, which had not been mentioned before in connection with the history of Wokingham. It was very ancient and was written 708-715. This document was a Bull of Pope Constantine contained in the chartulary of the Abbey of Peterborough, or, Medeshamstede, as it was then called. The Bull referred to the existence of a monastery somewhere in the territory of the Wokings, but whether at Woking or Wokingham was not quite clear. Wocchingas was the name in the document. It was under the Government of Abbot Hedda, and Constantine granted to it at Bermondsey exemption from episcopal jurisdiction in temporals. This document the Bishop of Oxford pronounced to be genuine; but it was difficult to trace the connection between this monastery and Peterborough. Possibly the documents were picked up by some ignorant or designing collector anxious for the glory of Peterborough, as sometimes the title to an estate of *bócland* was conveyed by the transfer of the deeds without a formal record of the transfer. Wokingham was passed over in silence in the Domesday Survey, being termed in the charter a "parsell of our Manor or lordship of Sonning." The good people of Wokingham did not enjoy very happy times under the Norman kings. They lived under the most cruel tyrannical system of law which was ever invented—the old forest laws of England. The forests were under the absolute will of the king and were outside the common law or right of the kingdom; they had special commissioners, officers, laws and customs of their own, and these were drawn up rather to ensure the peace of the beasts than that of the king's subjects. If any luckless Wokingham man in Norman times ventured to kill the king's game he had to suffer cruel mutilation, if not capital punishment. The clergy were not subject to the common laws in those days, but if they dared to hunt in the royal domain they had to pay the penalty. In 1227 the Bishop of Salisbury procured a grant from the Crown that he might hold his

market at Wokingham peaceably, and in 1258 he had a grant of two fairs at the festivals of St. Barnabas and All Saints (the patron Saint of Wokingham Parish Church). The Testa de Nevill, compiled in the reign of Edward III., contained some information about the condition of the people of Wokingham in the reigns of Edward I. and Henry III. The reign of Edward III. was remarkable for the king's very arbitrary exactions, which he found necessary for the carrying on of his French wars. He required masons and carpenters to enlarge his royal castle at Windsor, as though he were levying a tax, and in 1327 he had granted to him by a subservient Parliament the 20th of the moveable goods of every person in the realm, the clergy alone excluded. Fifty-seven names of Wokingham people of that time appeared on the assessment roll. The history of the Parish Church was then briefly described. The South doorway was Norman work, and the west window was of the time of Henry VI. The Church possessed a large quantity of plate which attracted the eyes of unscrupulous commissioners of Edward VI., who visited Wokingham and carried away with them 162 ounces of these sacred vessels. One chalice they kindly left behind. He did not know whether it still remained; if it was still in the custody of the Rector it was the oldest piece of Church plate which had yet been discovered in this county. Coming to the charter of James I., the lecturer explained that it referred to the former charter granted by Queen Elizabeth and also to the charters of "divers others, formerly kings of England," from which he gathered that although Queen Elizabeth's charter was the earliest charter in existence, it was not the oldest which had been granted to the town. James I. declared Wokingham to be a free town governed by one body corporate and politic, "the Alderman and Burgesses of the said town;" the constitution was changed from that ordered in the previous charter and its powers enlarged. The Corporation could buy land, enjoy the same privileges of justice as other towns of England and were allowed to use a common seal. The government was vested in an Alderman, 7 capital Burgesses and 12 secondary Burgesses, who constituted the Common Council of the town. It was also ordained that the administration of justice (except for treason, murder or felony or the losing of life or limb) was placed in the hands of the Alderman, High Steward, Recorder and the ex-Alderman. A Town Clerk and two Sergeants were the officers of the Borough. James also gave them permission to build a Guildhall and a prison, and to hold a market on Tuesday and three fairs. This charter, which was dated 1613, remained in force

up till 1885. Mr. Ditchfield next called attention to a very interesting series of ordinances, orders and constitutions which were agreed upon at Wokingham in the first year of the unhappy reign of Charles I., and pointed out that the usual severe edicts applied against foreigners or strangers from other places, presuming to engage in any business, keeping a shop or stall, or pursuing any trade or mystery, no one but a freeman being allowed to trade in the town under heavy penalties. The lecturer went on to remark that the time of the civil war was fast approaching. Wokingham had no walls to guard it, and it did not occupy any position of strategic importance, so it did not play a very important part in the history of that tumultuous period, although, doubtless, the Royalist troops and Cromwell's soldiers would often march through Wokingham and create a great sensation among the good townsfolk. Some of them distinguished themselves in another way. Several people took to poaching and gave Parliament a great deal of trouble. The bequest of Mr. Richard Palmer, in 1664, showed the open and wild state of the country in the 17th century. He set apart an estate at Eversley, the profits of which were to be paid to the sexton of the Parish Church, for ringing the great bell for half-an-hour every evening, at 8 o'clock, and every morning at 4, during the winter months, "so that strangers happening to lose their way in the country might be informed of the time of night, and receive some guidance in their right way." The sound of the bell was also intended to promote a timely going to rest in the evening, and early arising in the morning. No account of Wokingham was considered complete without some reference to bull-baiting and the gift of George Staverton, who bequeathed the rent of a house at Staines for the purpose of buying a bull each year. The wretched animal was baited to death, and in order to add to the pleasure of the spectators, a second bull was provided at the cost of the poor rates. The flesh of the animals was given away or sold, and the proceeds provided shoes and stockings for poor children. In the recent county history this bull-baiting, and Molly Mog, the daughter of the landlord of the "Rose," who was celebrated by Gay and his lively companions, and beloved by Edward Standen, the last of the Standens of Arborfield, were mentioned as the only two things worthy of record in the history of this ancient Borough. The bull-baiting was certainly a practice which could not excite any feelings of pride, for a more disgusting, brutalising exhibition could hardly be conceived. An old inhabitant of Reading, Mr. Ald. Darter, when he was a boy, in the year 1815 witnessed

the spectacle, and had most fully and ably described what he saw. And yet the practice was officially recognised, and the Alderman and Burgesses attended "in state"—(the Burgesses wore gowns in those days)—and watched the fight from the windows of the old "Rose" Inn, the site now occupied by Mr. Sale's shop. They were very merciful gentlemen! They gave the signal for the dog to be set on, and they would only allow one dog at a time to attack the bull. The last baiting took place on St. Thomas' Day, 1832, although as early as 1801 a sermon was preached by the Rev. E. Barry in the Parish Church on "Barbarity to God's dumb creation," containing a severe condemnation of the ancient practice. There remained still a vast amount of material for a continuation of the history of this ancient town, including the history of the Manors—Evendons, Coweye, Beches, Ashridge and Buckhurst—and the famous charities, viz., Luckley or Lucas' Hospital, founded by Henry Lucas in 1663, the famous schools founded by Dr. Charles and Mrs. Martha Palmer, and Archbishop Laud's charity. These and many other interesting features of the old life of Wokingham and of the relics of former days he must leave for the present, but he trusted that these few hastily gathered notes might not be altogether without interest to those who loved their own town, and that their meeting that day might help to diffuse a little information and knowledge concerning the relics of antiquity which time had spared.

The documents and objects mentioned by Mr. Ditchfield were upon the table, and at the conclusion of the meeting were examined with keen interest by numbers of the ladies and gentlemen present.

Mr. E. FRANKUM remarked that he had been able to ascertain by research the list of Stewards and Recorders of Wokingham from the beginning of the 17th century up to the present time. He found on examination of papers in the possession of the Corporation that in 1793 it was resolved to fine the councillors who did not attend the meetings of the Council 2s. 6d. for each meeting missed, while any member of the Council who failed to attend church on certain occasions was fined 5s. for each offence. Mr. Frankum went on to speak of the pictures in the possession of the Corporation. As to the value of some of them there was considerable doubt. It had never been ascertained how they got into the possession of the Corporation. His earliest recollection was that they hung at the entrance to the old Town Hall when the Guardians met there. The paupers used to wait in the passage, and amuse themselves by picking holes in the pictures, and ultimately they were removed and

placed over the witness-box in the old Town Hall. When the old buildings were pulled down it was seen that some of the pictures were unquestionably of great value. They were restored and framed in 1859—because in those days, he believed, they were not framed, but merely stretched on back pieces. As to the persons many of them represented, it was entirely a matter of conjecture. The portrait of Charles I., it was believed, was a copy of the one by Vandyke now in possession of the Earl of Pembroke. Of the portrait of Charles II. there could be no doubt. The portrait of Archbishop Laud in the Council Chamber was considered to be the best they possessed. There could be no doubt about it, as it was almost the counterpart of the one in the possession of the Corporation of Reading.

The Rev. E. STURGES proposed a vote of thanks to the Chairman. He believed it was a well ascertained fact that the Parish Church at Wokingham was first dedicated to St. Mary, and the dedication was changed in comparatively recent times to All Saints. With regard to the monastery supposed to have formerly existed at Wokingham, he could not think there could be any doubt but that there was a monastery. It was inconceivable that a town of such great importance as Wokingham evidently was in former times should exist without there being a suitable provision for that intense, enthusiastic devotion to monastic life which they knew their Saxon fathers adhered to. Directly they came to the conclusion that there was a monastery some difficulties were at once cleared up. They had heard that day that Queen Elizabeth gave a charter, and that she and James I. referred to many previous charters that had been given by previous kings of England. There was evidence that the original Corporation of Wokingham was a Saxon Corporation. These Saxon Corporations only existed here and there at centres of the country, so that in early Saxon times, Wokingham must have been a place of great importance. The larger monasteries became possessed of the smaller ones, and gradually absorbed them, and in this way Wokingham became attached to Sonning, perhaps about the 11th century. Sonning then became the centre of ecclesiastical life of the district, and Wokingham the centre of civil life. The courts and markets were held there, and the paths through the Forest all led to Wokingham, as the great centre of law and merchandise. Regarding the spelling of the word "Wokingham," Mr. Sturges remarked that all had long ago grown out of the opinion that the proper way to spell it was "Oakingham." It was spelt without the

"W" in 1749, but in older documents it was spelt with a "W." Regarding the termination "ham," Mr. Sturges pointed out that it had two significations; when pronounced with a long "a" it signified home, and when with a short "a" a limit or division; thus it would seem that Wokingham was the limit of the territory of the Wokings. Speaking of the church the rev. gentleman expressed a hope that the Society would make a special visit to it in the summer, when it could be explained on the spot.

Mr. WALTER said that no subject could be more interesting to thoughtful persons than the history of the place, and the residents thereof, where they lived. Probably no country in Europe contained such materials for the pursuit of this interesting study as Great Britain. A country was not, in his opinion, to be measured with regard to its greatness so much by the extent of its area as by the number of objects of interest it contained. It would take any thoughtful and careful traveller far longer time to make himself acquainted with England than to make himself acquainted with the whole of North America. In England there was scarcely a parish in which he was detained in investigating its history and antiquities; and if any special locality were taken in which a person might spend any number of weeks in studying its antiquities and history, that was probably Yorkshire. With regard to the name of the place and the proper way of spelling it, he did not think that the road had been made absolutely clear at that point. They would be surprised to hear that there were at least five different ways of spelling Wokingham. In his younger days his father spelt it "Oakingham" and later with a "W." In old maps it was spelt "Okingham." It was next spelt "Ockingham," then "Oakingham." It was now spelt "Wokingham;" but there was what he might call an intermediate way he had discovered—"Wokingeham." Which was the correct and which the vulgar way he could not say. It was quite possible that the true way to spell the name was "Oakingham" and the vulgar way "Wokingham," in the same way as the vulgar pronunciation of oats was "wuts." But he did not think it was possible to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion on the point. Mention had been made of curious customs, amongst others of bull-baiting. He remembered perfectly the last occasion on which bull-baiting took place at Wokingham. It was on St. Thomas's Day, 1832. He remembered perfectly people talking about it. Mr. Walter went on to observe that he should like to form an idea of the look of Wokingham 300 years ago. It was a great pity that

some means could not be taken to find out the history of the houses on the south side of Rose Street which must be between 300 and 400 years old. Mr. Walter concluded by again expressing the pleasure he felt at being present.

The REV. P. H. DITCHFIELD thanked the Mayor and Corporation for their kindness in allowing the Society to have access to their documents. Mr. Ditchfield then referred to the different objects of interest on the table. The mace, he said, was very interesting, and bore the date 1758. There was a large acorn, a relic of the old Town Hall, and an ancient lamp, also from the old Town Hall. There was also a very interesting toast list which was used at one of the large municipal dinners in the olden days. He had not been able to decide what it all meant; but he was told that they were not so loyal in those days as they were now, and that the toast of the sovereign and royal family came last. It was dated about James I., but he thought it was older than that. There was an Elizabethan coin—very valuable; and an old trade token.

Mr. WESCOTT replied on behalf of the Corporation, and said the Mayor and Corporation felt great pleasure in granting the hall on that occasion, and would do so again.

The interesting proceedings then terminated.

ROMAN REMAINS AT READING.—We regret that want of space prevents us from publishing a correspondence which has recently appeared in the *Reading Observer*, arising out of a reply to a query in the *Quarterly* with reference to Roman remains in Reading. The discovery of large quantities of Roman pottery in the neighbourhood has led Dr. Stevens to believe that there was a considerable Roman settlement at Reading. Another correspondent was of opinion that the Romans used the Thames as the great water-way to the west, that Roman remains found on the banks of the river did not prove that there was a station at Reading, and that the pottery was principally Romano-British and not Roman. Another site has been suggested by a correspondent for Calleva, which, he imagines, may have been in the Parish of Tilehurst, above Calcot, at a spot called the city. A.A.H. has ably stated his arguments; but almost all Antiquarians agree in assigning to Silchester the site of the once famous *Calleva Attrebatum*.