# History of Faringdon.

*By P. H. Ditchfield.*

---

FARINGDON owes its existence and importance to this fact that here in this town five great roads meet. It is British and Saxon and Norman, and has had its full share in the military history of the country.

There are extensive remains in the neighbourhood of the primitive inhabitants of Britain. Faringdon Clump is probably a Celtic tumulus. In the distance we see the Seven Barrows. Badbury camp is near here. Not far away is the famous White Horse, and I trust that I shall not be considered heretical if I venture to suggest that it was not dug out by Alfred's men after the battle of Œscendum. At that crisis in the history of England when the Danes, like other enemies in less remote times, though defeated were not quite conquered, Alfred's men would be far too busily engaged in trouncing their enemies to find time for cutting out White Horses. In all probability it was made by our Celtic forefathers and not by Alfred's merry men elated by their victory. Uffington camp, Cherbury camp near Pusey, are doubtless British fortifications, and we have near here at Little Coxwell that remarkable series of holes excavated in the ground called Coles Pits, which as far as I am aware are not the remains of the palace of old King Cole. Before the invasion of the Belgæ, the Atrabates held central and western Berks; but after the incursion of the former, the Celts proper were driven into the northern and western parts of the county. The great forest of the Kennet valley stayed the onward progress of the Belgæ, and beyond this on the Ilsley Downs and in this neighbourhood the original Celts found a refuge and a home. They were a roving people whose flocks fed upon the hill sides, and on the approach of an enemy that strange relic of antiquity, mis-named King Alfred's bugle horn, sent forth its weird notes, the herds were driven into the sheltered fortresses of Uffington or Badbury and there remained in safety until the foemen had passed on their way.

Other relics of the Celts have been found here in the shape of coins. British coins of Tincomius the son, the Atrabadian Commius, have been found here : and the names of places retain the remembrance of our Celtic forefathers. The name of your own town ends with *don* or *dun*, the Celtic word for a fortification, which was adopted by the Saxons and became the Fearings dun, the fortified settlement of the Fearings, or sons of Fear. Your rivers, the Thames and the Ock, are Celtic words and belong to the Gaelic language of the S. Highlands, or the Manx and Irish Erse. The Thames is the Temese or broad water, the termination ese, and the Ock being derived from the same word uisge—water.

Of Roman Faringdon I can find few traces. Of the coming of the Saxons we have more evidence. The particular tribe which settled here were the Fearings or Faringas who, as I have said, adopted the Celtic name *dun* or *don*, and called it after their own name, unless as I suspect the old spelling of the work was Farington. So Leland spells it—an examination of the old forms of the word would settle the question—ton is of course pure Saxon. Most of the names in this district, as in other parts of Berkshire, are of Saxon origin. The Uffingas, or sons of Offa, settled at Uffington. Pusey and Charney were islands derived from the Saxon *ey*—an island. Buscot, Kelmscott, Longcot, and many other names are all Saxon. And in this period Faringdon was a very important place. The Saxon Kings had a palace here in which Edward the Elder died in 924 A.D. Before this his revered father, whose millenary we are just commemorating, must have often been here; for did he not almost within sight of this town fight his great battle with the Danes?

Faringdon occupied a strong strategic position. Hence it took a prominent part in most of the civil wars that have devastated our land. During the war between Stephen and "that ungodly, restless woman, the undutiful daughter of our late pious King Henry," as the Abbot of Reading was pleased to call "that presumptuous Matilda," Faringdon took an important part in the conflict. Her half-brother Robert, Earl of Gloucester, raged through the country, seized upon the King's towns and castles, treacherously surprising the castles of honest lords and good knights, and burning the homes and destroying the lives of all such as would not join him. It was the age of castle building. Every rich man, says the chronicle, his castle made, when the land was full of earth-works, and when as the castles were made they filled them with devils and evil men. This Earl of Gloucester built one here in 1144, a hurriedly erected

structure which did not live long. At the close of Stephen's reign, he ordered every castle to be levelled that had been left standing in this fair county of Berkshire, and so Sir Alain de Bohun and his soldiers together with the Abbot of Reading, perambulated the country and ordered the boroughs and townships and all good men to assist in rooting out the foul donjons which disfigured the land like blots of ink let fall upon a pure skin of parchment. Some say that Faringdon Clump was the site of this castle. It probably stood on the site of the Monastic Cell of which we shall speak presently. In the meantime the Norman builders had begun to build the noble church. There must have been a Saxon church here previously, but I know of no trace of this earlier edifice. The North door and tower and the much restored South door are the chief evidences of Norman workmanship. A little later the town just escaped the honour of possessing a grand and glorious Abbey built by Cistercian monks, which might have rivalled the splendour of Waverley, or Tintern, or Fountains, monasteries built by this Order. A colony settled here, and in 1203 King John gave to them the Manor of Faringdon, on the condition that they built a monastery there. However, in the following year he determined to transfer his donation to his newly founded Abbey of Beaulieu, in Hampshire, and Faringdon was deprived of its monastery. Nevertheless the town was not altogether deserted by monks. Some stayed on in a small house which became a cell to Beaulieu Abbey.

The first charter was granted to the town in 1218 by King Henry III. It contains a grant of a market on Mondays to the Abbot of Beaulieu. The burgesses had held a market on that day of the week long before this, as it appears from the charter granted by Edward II. in 1313 when the day was changed to Wednesday. Faringdon was formerly called Cheping Farington because of this market. Leland says: "Some call this town Cheping Farington, but there is none or very small market now at it."

There is preserved in the Bodleian Library an old account book of Beaulieu Abbey. One item tells of the visit of the Court of Henry III. to Faringdon, who was accompanied by his Queen, Prince Edward and Roger de Mortimer, and stayed a night here, being entertained at the cost of the Abbot and Convent. The expense of entertaining the King does not sound to us very costly. It was only 100s. 6d. The Queen cost 75s; Prince Edward 50s. 6d.; and Robert de Mortimer, the King's favourite general, only cost 4s.

The life of the old town went on peacefully and quietly. The monks were busy with building and perfecting the church in that most fruitful period of Gothic architecture, the Early English. The town continues to be governed by its bailiff and burgesses. The lordly Abbot of Beaulieu still remains Lord of the Manor. Again its peaceful calm is broken by the sounds of fighting. The nobles are in league against their lawful sovereign Richard II. Headed by the Earl of Derby son of the Duke of Lancaster, they made an insurrection, and here came Robert de Vere, Earl of Oxford, a worthless creature and favourite of the King, whom he made Marquis of Dublin (a title before unknown in England) and then Duke of Ireland, transferring to him for life the Sovereignty of that island. A great battle was fought near here at Radcot Bridge, in 1387, when De Vere was defeated, and only escaped by swimming his horse across the river. Of this exploit the poet sings :—

Here Oxford's hero, famous for his boar,
While clashing swords upon his target sound,
And showers of arrows from his breast rebound,
Prepared for worst of fates, undaunted stood,
And urged his heart into the rapid flood,
The waves in triumph bore him, and were proud
To sink beneath their honourable load.

The "hero" fled to the low countries and died in exile a few years later.

Nothing else occurred to disturb the quietness of this peaceful vale, until the troubles of the Reformation period. At the dissolution of Abbeys in 1536 Beaulieu fell with the rest, and the white-clothed monks disappear from Faringdon, and the manor is again vested in the Crown. In 1547 it was granted to Thomas Seymour, of Sudeley, Lord Admiral ; but on his attainder it again reverted to the Crown.

In 1554 Queen Mary granted it to Sir Francis Englefield. From him it passed by purchase to the family of Pleydell of Côleshill, who held it until the year 1589, when it was sold for £3,000 to Sir Henry Unton, Knight of Wadley. This family, which gives its name to the Unton chapel in the Church, was one of more than local celebrity in the reign of "Good Queen Bess." And here I may recall the fact that one of the first publications of the Berks Ashmolean Society, founded in 1840, the precursor of our Berks Archæological Society, edited under the care of the eminent antiquary John George Nicholls, was a valuable work known as the

Unton Inventories, relating to Wadley and Faringdon in 1596, with a memoir of the family.

They were great people them Untons. Three of them represented Berkshire in Parliament, and among their alliances we find the illustrious names of Bouchier, Seymour and Hastings. The earliest Unton of whom we read came from Chorley, Lancashire, and was chirographer to Edward IV. Sir Thomas was Sheriff of Berks in 1531 and resided at Wadley near here, a manor belonging to my old college, Oriel, Oxford, and was knighted at the coronation of Anne Boleyne. He died In 1553, and his monument with that of his wife Dame Elizabeth is the oldest and most handsome in your Church. Sir Alexander Unton succeeded, who married Mary Bouchier, daughter of John Lord Berners, the translator of Froissart's chronicles. He was knighted at the coronation of Edward VI. His monument is on the left hand of that of his father, a canopied altar-tomb; at the back are engraved brass plates, with figures of his two wives and children, and many armorial bearings are engraved on the mantles. His son, Sir Edward Unton, married Anne, Countess of Warwick, whose father was beheaded, and whose first husband only just escaped the same fate and died a few days after his release from the Tower. The Countess soon consoled herself and married Sir Edward Unton six months after her first husband died. The poor lady, however, afterwards went mad. Sir Edward was a great traveller, and the British Museum has a MS. Journal of his travels in Italy. Queen Elizabeth came to stay with him at Wadley, to whom he presented a handsome jewel, thus described "one jewel of gold garnished with diamonds and rubies and five pearls pendant, one bigger than the rest." He seems to have been a favourite of his royal mistress, and gave her other rich jewels. He was buried at Faringdon, and his monument is on the east wall of the Unton chapel.

*(To be continued).*