



The Berks, Bucks & Oxon Archæological Journal.

Gossip of an Antiquary.

The Sonning Bridges are exercising the minds of everyone, and loud are the protests which are being made against the action of the members of the Oxfordshire County Council, who by a majority of one have doomed to destruction these most beautiful features of the old village. There is one universal chorus of condemnation of the action of these misguided councillors who seem to have hardened their hearts and threaten to destroy not only these bridges at Sonning, but all the venerable structures across the Thames, which, unfortunately, are at their mercy.

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The Thames Conservancy is a powerful body. Its agents are active and sometimes over officious in scenting out possible sources of contamination in the little rivulets which ultimately find their way into the Silver Thames. Can the Conservancy do nothing to arrest the destruction of the chiefest beauty of the stately river, and to preserve its most picturesque features?

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The artists have had their say. Mr. Leslie and Mr. Holman Hunt have spoken out manfully in their defence of these ancient structures, and their cry has been taken up by the London papers. Mr. W. Holman Hunt, the eminent artist, writes:—"The nation, without doubt, is in serious danger of losing faith in the testimony of our poets and painters to the exceptional beauty of the land which has inspired them. The poets, from Chaucer to the last of his true British successors, with one voice enlarge on the overflowing sweetness of England, her hills and dales, her pastures with sweet

flowers, and the loveliness of her silver streams. It is the cherishing of the wholesome enjoyments of daily life that has implanted in the sons of England love of home, goodness of nature, and sweet reasonableness, and has given strength to the thews and sinews of her children, enabling them to defend her land, her principles, and her prosperity. With regard to the three Sonning bridges, the re-construction of which is contemplated, parts of them have been already gradually rebuilt with iron fittings in recent years, and no disinterested reasonable person can see why they could not be easily made sufficient to carry all existing traffic. If the bridges were to be widened in the service of some disproportionate vehicles it is obvious that the traffic such enlarged bridges are intended to carry would be put forward as an argument for demolishing the exquisite old bridge over the main river which is the glory of this exceptionally picturesque and well-ordered village; and this is a matter of which even the most utilitarian would soon see the evil in the diminished attraction of the river not only to Englishmen, but to Colonials and Americans who have across the sea read widely of its beauty. Remonstrances must look ahead, and can only now be of avail in recognition of future further danger. We on our side of the river have, I believe, nothing to do with the money cost, and therefore it may be urged that we have no right to interfere; but the population on the near Oxford side is small. On the Berks side are the people immediately concerned in the beauty of the neighbourhood, and we are called upon to plead the cause for the whole of the beauty-loving England and of all river-loving people in particular. Before any further step is taken we claim that full plans and elevations should be submitted to public opinion represented in Sonning by a committee now forming. Surely this is no extravagant demand."

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The proposed vandalism is as obnoxious to antiquaries as it is to artists and lovers of the picturesque. The Sonning Bridges date from mediæval times, and are relics of antiquity which can ill be spared. Brick is a material as nearly imperishable as any that man can build with. There is hardly any limit to the life of a brick or stone bridge, whereas an iron or steel bridge requires constant supervision. The oldest iron bridge in this country—at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire—has just failed after 123 years of life. It was worn out by old age, whereas the Roman bridge at Rimini, and the mediæval ones at St. Ives, Bradford-on-Avon, and countless other places in this

country and abroad, are in daily use and likely to remain serviceable for many centuries to come.

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The building of bridges was anciently regarded as a charitable and religious act, and guilds and brotherhoods existed for their reparation. At Maidenhead there was a notable bridge, for the maintenance of which the Guild of St. Andrew and St. Mary Magdalene was established by Henry VI. in 1452. Indeed, there was a bridge here in the 13th century, for a grant was made in 1298 for its repair. A Bridge-master was one of the officials of the Corporation granted by Charter of James II. The old bridge was built of wood supported by piles. Happily there were no traction engines in those days to disturb its equilibrium. The town owes its origin to the bridge, as Camden tells us that after its erection Maidenhead began to have inns and to be so frequented as to out-vie its neighbouring mother, Bray, a much more ancient place. The present bridge was built in 1772 from designs by Sir Roland Taylor.

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Abingdon has also a noted bridge which was connected with the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, formed in 1389. The Guild had a Bridge Priest to pray for the souls of the benefactors and makers of the bridge, John Brett and John Houchons, and Sir Peter Besils who gave the stone and left houses, the rents of which were devoted to its repair; and Geoffrey Barbour, who gave some wealth for the same object.

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Within the memory of man there was a beautiful old bridge between Reading and Caversham, but this has gone the way destined for those at Sonning, and the hideous iron-girder structure erected in its place. Some day I shall write a history of Berkshire bridges, and it will be a veritable history, for none of the old ones will be left, and the illustrations of the modern substitutes will form a pleasing feature of this important work.

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By the way, I met with a charming little bridge-history in the dry records of the Patents Rolls of the time of Edward I. It appears that one Matthew de Berghefeld (or Burghfield) built a narrow wooden bridge across the waters of the Abbot of Reading in the village of Burghfield, moved merely by pity and not impelled by any right, because of the danger of drowning and other mishaps which happened to passengers there, and caused it to be widened sufficiently

for carts and men on horseback to cross, which was a charitable act most praiseworthy. However, in the time of his grandson, Peter de Burghfield, one Theobald le Carpenter, whom the King had lately commanded to repair the bridge, procured before the King that the said Peter should be compelled to contribute to the repairs thereof. A jury was appointed to investigate the matter, and the results of these investigations are not recorded ; but it is an interesting instance of the universal truth that a kindness conferred is regarded as a right.

Proceedings of Archæological Societies.

BERKS ARCHÆOLOGICAL SOCIETY.—On July 30th, the Society visited St. Albans, and in spite of unfavourable weather, had a very successful excursion. The ancient Abbey Church was visited and ably described by the President, and after luncheon at the “Pea Hen” the party made a pilgrimage to the interesting churches, and were afterwards hospitably entertained to tea by the President.

On September 19th an excursion was made to Hungerford and Littlecote House (by kind permission of A. Hirsch, Esq.), together with Avington, Wickham, and Welford. About 50 were present, including several members of the Newbury Field Club. Littlecote was ably described by Walter Money, Esq., F.S.A. After luncheon, a public meeting was held at the Corn Exchange, when a lecture was given by the Rev. P. H. Ditchfield on the history of the town. The constable, W. G. Alexander, Esq., presided, and there was a large gathering of residents in addition to the members of the party. The party then drove to Avington, Wickham and Welford, the churches of which were described by the President, and Mrs. Batson gave an excellent account of the histories of the manors of Welford and Wickham. Mr. and Mrs. Batson most kindly entertained the Society to tea and after a brief inspection of the grounds of Welford Park, the travellers returned home, having enjoyed a very pleasant and interesting excursion.

HAMPSHIRE FIELD CLUB.—This Society, last month, visited this county, and the party was hospitably entertained by the President of the Berks Society at Aldermaston, who described the history of the manor and the interesting village church, which he has so beautifully restored.