



An Old Corner of Bucks.

By Ernest W. Dormer.

(Continued from page 120, Vol. 10.)

From the caves, after a short rest, we sally forth to climb the steep hill to the church which is so situated as to preclude feebleness from ever attempting its portals, and which is closed in winter and a small red brick structure at the foot of the hill used for the purpose of divine worship. West Wycombe hill, on which the church stands is credited by some authorities as having been a watch mount, from which alarms were given in early times by means of beacons when the approach of the enemy (probably the Danes) was detected.

After our slippery climb we wend our way through the old churchyard overgrown with tall rank grass and shaded by stately and venerable yews. It is here, lingering over the peculiar headstones and inscriptions of the 17th and 18th centuries, one can imagine how the poet Grey found a country churchyard a congenial spot in which to exercise his muse; and it is also here in this God's acre, the inhabitants of the modest little village, after the petty dissensions of life, lie to await the day when the distinctions of creed or social position will avail nothing.

We are fortunate to find the sacred edifice open for inspection. The Church of St. Lawrence is a singular though beautiful structure of brick, flint and stone in the classic style, consisting of chancel, nave, north porch and battlemented tower containing six bells, one of which bears the date 1581; the tower has a large ball on top. The lower part of the tower which is built of stone, and the chancel are the only parts of the original structure now remaining; the upper portion of the tower which is composed of brick, and the nave having been rebuilt in 1763 at a cost of £6,000 by Sir Francis Dashwood, Bart. On the north side is the inscription "Hanc œdem condidit Franciscus baro le Despenser," and on the south side a sun dial. The nave is very lofty and has a painted ceiling with a magnificent cornice by Greek artists, supported by pilasters

with Corinthian capitals. The chancel which is ancient is small, but highly finished and paved with marble mosaic in lozenges. The ceiling is painted in oils with a representation of the "last supper" by Borgnis the Milanese. The actual painting of this work took the artist three years to accomplish and he was lying upon his back on scaffolding the whole time. An ancestor of one of the villagers is said to have handed materials and food to the artist whilst engaged on his great task. He was the guest of the Despensers family during his stay at West Wycombe, a member of that family having commissioned him to execute the work. The painting is certainly a select example of this great painter and a splendid ornament to the Church which is itself highly interesting. A peculiarity is pointed out to those whose observant faculties are not so keen as those of others. Judas Iscariot is depicted turning away from our Lord and the other Disciples clustering around him with eager questions, and the betrayer's eyes, looking downwards are of surpassing intensity. No matter in which direction the visitor stands the eyes of Judas are ever gazing at him intently and the feeling to one of a nervous temperament, especially when the bluish light of a solitary candle is burning within the chancel, is not of a pleasant character. It is said that this feature only adds to the excellence of the fine example of ecclesiastical art.

The windows in the chancel are glazed with stained glass and small scripture pieces, which breaking the glare of light, cast a solemn yet pleasing gloom through the whole of the chancel, and when aided by the splendid organ over the west door, have a very impressive effect.

The chancel contains many monuments to the honour and glory of those departed; chiefly to the Dashwood family. A most remarkable thing in connection with one of these mural tablets to the memory of Francis Dashwood, Turkey Merchant, is the appearance of a red hand in the marble. It is called the "Bloody Hand" and all attempt to remove it have resulted in failure. Tradition avers its presence to a murder committed by one of the family, but authorities say there is no truth in the legend, but they cannot account for the phenomenon.

There is a large mural monument with the following inscription:—"Hereunder lies the body of Hugh Darrell, of Mill End, in this parish, gent., who died 3rd January, 1667, whose ancestors possessed that estate for near 400 years."

Within the body of the church is a curious font-stand of carved

oak, representing a serpent climbing round a pillar after a dove which is struggling for the top. On the flat top are four more doves, who have apparently reached a place of safety. It is supposed to be typical of the trials and temptations of youth.

The interior of the church is neat as well as peculiar. The pulpit and desk are mahogany arm chairs with reading desks before them, both in the Louis XV. style. What appear to be low benches around the sides of the church were originally receptacles where the supposed Monks stored their wine. There are no pews, but forms fixed without distinction. The ceiling and communion table are elegantly painted in mosaic.

The next inspection must be the tower. A small door on the left and some twisted old oaken steps bring us to the belfry, where many a visitor's name appears on the woodwork, and an inscription that the bells were first rung in this room on October 25th, 1761. This is doubtless meant after the church was restored. We go on up and soon reach the break in the tower from whence the modern part commences. This upper part is reached by a more modern stairway, from which we emerge on to the top where stands the ball. It is reached by an almost vertically placed iron ladder, with guiding chains as handrails. Access to the ball is gained through a trap-door which opens outwards. It is composed of wood and is nearly 700 feet above sea-level. Anyone who cares to venture may go up in the ball; it is an experience seldom met with, and nerve is a very helpful qualification. From the top of the tower a magnificent view of the surrounding country can be obtained. A lovely panorama is spread before us. Miles and miles of beautiful hills and woods stretch away on all sides. To the left we see High Wycombe with the Church of All Hallows nestling in the centre. Away to the boundaries lie Keep Hill, whilst Roundabout and Tinkers Woods form a pleasing adjunct to the romantic scenery. To the back winds the dusty road about Bradenham and Saunderton and their verdant environs, while to the fore stands West Wycombe Park, the ancestral home of the Dashwood family.

Having admired the surroundings we descend to terra firma and take our way to the interesting erection at the east end of the Church; the Mausoleum.

It is an extensive fabric, built by Lord le Despenser in 1763. His motive for designing and erecting this very singular and massive structure originated in a legacy bequeathed by George, Lord Dodington, to defray the expense of erecting a monument to his

memory. The structure is a hexagonal enclosure of flint, without a roof, having a frieze and cornice supported by Tuscan columns, with recesses for monuments, and smaller niches for the reception of urns and busts. On the cornice is the inscription, "To George Doddington, Baron of Melcome Regis."

In the centre of the mausoleum is a beautiful altar monument of marble, under a canopy supported by four stone pillars. On one side the words "*mors solamen miseris*" are inscribed, and on the other "May this cenotaph, sacred to the virtues and graces that constitute female excellence, perpetuate the memory of Sarah, Baroness le Despenser, who finished a most exemplary life, January the 19th, 1769."

A rich monument of statuary marble in one of the recesses records the memory of the husband of the above lady, Lord le Despenser, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1762. He died in 1781, "revered, regretted and beloved by all who knew him."

But the most extraordinary circumstance connected with this unique erection is the singular legacy given by Paul Whitehead, the celebrated satirical poet, to Lord le Despenser, viz. :—the heart of the bard. The relic was bequeathed to Lord le Despenser by the poet as a mark of affectionate gratitude for his patronage, and an income of £800 per annum, which his Lordship had been instrumental in obtaining for him. The ceremony of the deposition of the heart was the most serio-comical funeral which perhaps has ever been performed, and is thus described by an eye-witness :—

The procession began at 12 noon, consisting of an officer, 9 grenadiers, rank and file two deep, two German flutes, two choristers in surplices with notes pinned to their backs, two German flutes, eleven singing men in surplices, two and two and the odd man last, two French horns, two bassoons, six fifes and four muffled drums. The bier bearing the elegant marble urn containing the heart was ornamented with black crape, supported by six soldiers, with three others on each side to relieve them. Lord le Despenser followed as chief mourner, in uniform, as Colonel of the Bucks Militia, with crape round his arm. Major Skottowe, Captain Lloyd, and seven other Militia officers. Two fifes and two drums, 20 soldiers, two and two with firelocks reversed. Dr. Arnold, Mr. Atterbury, and another, walked on the side of the procession all the way with pieces of paper in their hands beating time. The Dead March in Saul was played the whole of the way by the flutes, horns and bassoons, and fifes and drums successively, the bell tolling and great guns discharging every

three minutes and a half. The hill, which is very precipitous, was covered with people, so that it was an hour before they reached the mausoleum, when also another hour was consumed in marching round it, and performing funeral glees and incantations specially composed for the occasion by Dr. Arnold. This being done, the gift, so expressive of the poet's deep sense of obligation, was placed on a marble pedestal in one of the recesses in the mausoleum, with the following inscription :—

Paul Whitehead, Esq., of Twickenham,

Obiit December 30, 1774.

Unhallow'd hands this urn forbear ;

No gems nor orient spoil

Lie here conceal'd, but, what's more rare

A heart that knows no guile.

The ceremony was concluded by the soldiers firing three volleys and marching off to a merry tune with the drums and fifes. Next morning a new oratorio called Goliath, composed by Mr. Atterbury, was performed in the Church.

But fate is unkind and Paul Whitehead's heart was never destined to lie long undisturbed. It appears that one winter's night in the year 1839, two thieves climbed over the gate of the mausoleum and stole the case containing the heart from the urn, thinking it was silver. Their avaricious natures received a rude shock on examining it, for it was made of lead. It was never replaced and the whereabouts of the singular relic to this day is unknown.

The mausoleum is not open to visitors, but a good view of the interior can be obtained through the entrance gate, which is kept locked. It is, to say the best of it, an awesome erection : the sombre, gray flint, around which some dead ivy is trailing, looks ghostly in summer time, but the effect in winter, when the wind howls through the bare trees and circles round the church tower, is weird indeed.

We are unanimous in expressing our intention not to spend a night in or by the mausoleum in company with the recollections of Paul Whitehead and his queer funeral procession ; and so leaving the unique erection of an old-time village, we wend our way to the foot of the hill and so to High Wycombe, perhaps like many other visitors, trying to imagine the labour required to carry to so great a height the materials for such erections. But then, right down the dark ages we find that no hill was too precipitous nor any danger too great to stay the erection of houses for religious worship.