

Some Notes on the Parish of Ruscombe, Berks.

By Llewellyn Treacher, F.G.S.

(Continued from page 46, Vol. 11.)

There is very little of general interest to tell about Ruscombe until we approach the time of the Reformation. This series of changes, during which the ownership of so many of the neighbouring parishes was transferred from monastic corporations to the hands of private persons, friends of the party in power at the time, seems to have left Ruscombe untouched. But other and more subtle influences had been at work to effect a change, in many respects as great, if less conspicuous. During the earlier part of our history the prebendaries had lived for part of the year, while they were not engaged in their cathedral duties, on their manors at Ruscombe, in order to receive and consume the proceeds thereof in kind, and also to pay their labourers in the same manner ; but as during the 15th and 16th centuries the use of money payments became more general, it was found more convenient to let the manors on long leases, and for the prebendaries to reside at Salisbury or elsewhere altogether. The lessees were usually people of some position, equalling in social standing the actual lords of the surrounding manors. In the earliest parish registers we meet with names of Ruscombe people marked as "gent." or "esq.," who were probably some of these lessees, such as the Conisbys, Scroopes, Lawrences, Stroudes, etc. About the same time also the Dean let on lease the great tithes of the parish, including the patronage of the living, the first lessees being the Barkers of Wokingham and Sonning.

As we proceed onwards towards the 17th century information becomes more abundant and distinct, and we are able to get a more or less correct view of Ruscombe and its inhabitants. Before the year 1638 the nave and tower of the church were of flint and chalk, chiefly the latter, there being entries in the churchwardens' book of large sums spent on digging and carrying chalk to repair the steeple. In that year they had to be completely rebuilt in brick as we see them now. The chancel was left as it was, probably because it had been better built from the first. At the north-west corner of the churchyard, on what is now glebe land, stood an old building called the church house, or parish house, inhabited by Thomas Browne, the parish clerk, at a rent of 40s. per annum, the churchwardens

paying the repairs and taxes called *fifteens*, about 8*d.* a year. On the south and west sides of the churchyard was a large expanse of open ground called *Ruscombe Green*, on which the parishioners had rights of grazing cattle. The green is now enclosed, but its former extent can easily be traced by the elm trees and old fences, which are of a different character to the modern hedges. Around the green and along the roads leading to *Hare Hatch* and *Waltham* and *Ruscombe Lake*, were the ancient small enclosed fields or *crofts*, with the dwelling-houses of the villagers. There were probably ten or twelve well-to-do families, and these occupied nearly one-half the area of the parish, the remainder being divided into two or three common fields; that is, not common or public land, as we usually understand the term, but fields cultivated in common by the tenants of the manors. Of the manor houses, *Northbury*, even then an old house, was occupied by the family of *Stroude*. *Southbury* manor house, a building very similar to that of *Northbury*, was pulled down about fifty years ago. In the 17th century it was held by the *Hydes*, a well-known local family at that date. Some of the small enclosures still bear the same names as then, but most of the houses have vanished. About this time we get the first glimpse of an estate which seems never to have had any connection with the original *Ruscombe Manors*. On the south side of the parish and partly in *Hurst* is *Stanlake Park*, then called *Stanlakes Farm*. The first mention of it that I can find is that in 1582 *John Strowd* of *Stanlakes* was buried. A little later it was the property of *Thomas Deane*, clothier, of *Reading*, who left money to the town chargeable on his *Ruscombe* estate. *Deane's* daughter and heiress married *Richard Aldworth*, who either built or enlarged the house. He also purchased the neighbouring property in *Hurst* parish known as the manor of *Hinton Pipard*, which was situated in that curious little strip of *Wiltshire* which has been such a puzzle to local historians. *Richard Aldworth* left money in charity to the town of *Reading*. In 1631 he gave to *Ruscombe* church for the use of the Holy Communion a silver chalice, a silver plate, and a "faire pewter flagon," all of which are still in good preservation. He died in 1638, while the rebuilding of the church was in progress, and was buried just outside the south-west corner of the chancel, where his tomb still stands, but the inscription is utterly obliterated. *Ashmole* says that he was described as of *Hinton Pipard, Wilts.* During the early part of the Civil War, *Ruscombe* was situated near the great centre of operations. In the register for 1642 we find recorded

between Jan. 21 and March 22 the burials of thirteen soldiers. It was in February this year that the fight took place at Henley, which is so graphically described by Man in his history of Reading, and in the following April there was the great march of the Parliamentary army under Essex from Windsor to Reading. Some of these soldiers may have died of disease, but that a fight did take place in the neighbourhood is clear, as one man at least is recorded as "kild." This was George Myn, Lieutenant of a Company. As Myn's home was at Sonning he would naturally have been taken there for burial had not the fight been close to Ruscombe. Future historians of the Civil War may perhaps give us some account of the battle of Ruscombe Green. Among the others who were buried was Thomas, a snap-fack boy. I have not been able to get a satisfactory explanation of this term. It may have meant the boy who put the match to the touch-hole of the cannon. A little later the parish suffered severely from the plague. In the burial register are the following entries :—"1646. Edward Pollentine and five of his children which dyed of the plague in Twiford with some others who dyed of that disease were buried on or about May 17." "Nicolas Smith, James Kedgham and divers others of Twiford dying of the plague were buried this summer June 24." Then there is a blank for six years. In 1652 there is the solitary undated entry : "Grove was buried." There is a similar gap in the registers of baptisms and marriages, except a few of the former, which seem to have been inserted at a later time.

Under the Act of 1653 for appointing Parish "Registers," as they were called, the Minister of the parish, William Manning, was appointed for Ruscombe. His nomination was signed by Richard Bigg, of Haines Hill, a local magistrate of the Parliamentary Party, who also signed the corresponding appointments in many of the neighbouring parishes, but it is noteworthy that in most if not all the other parishes a layman was appointed registrar, owing probably to the clergy being Royalists. William Manning, of Ruscombe, was evidently a Puritan minister. Immediately upon his appointment as registrar a remarkable increase took place in the number of marriages at Ruscombe, not of Ruscombe people, but of persons from all parts of the surrounding district, from White Waltham, Bray, Hurley, Lawrence Waltham, Windsor, Reading, Cawsam, Binfield, Wokingham, Remenham, Easthampstead, etc. Members of the Puritan Party resident in the neighbourhood appear to have flocked to Ruscombe to be married by a Minister of their own persuasion,

In one case the parties, both of White Waltham, had their banns published three market days at New Windsor and then came all the way to Ruscombe to be married. Whereas the average number of marriages for the preceding years was about five or six, now there were for the remainder of 1653, after the appointment of Mr. Manning, nine; for 1654, twenty-one; for 1655, fifteen. In 1656 they dropped to three, on account of Mr. Manning having to leave the parish, the stipend, £23 per annum, not being sufficient for the maintenance of himself and his family. In 1658 there were two marriages only, and then for ten or twelve years an annual average of only one. This great drop in the number of marriages from what it was twenty years before must be accounted for partly by the effects of the Civil War and the Plague, especially the latter, because we miss so many local names from the registers, the families having become extinct. About this time there was a change at Northbury manor. The Stroudes came to an end in the male line; Margaret, the daughter and heiress of the last William Stroude, being married to Nathan Knight, who was M.P. for Reading in 1678. Knight not only succeeded to the estates of the Stroudes, but he also purchased several other small properties in the parish. His descendants lived at Northbury till the end of the 18th century. William Walter Knight, the last of his race, was buried at Ruscombe in 1799.

There are in the register book a good many entries of money collected on Briefs between the years 1669 and 1680. As you know a Brief was an order issued by the authority—usually the Ecclesiastical Court—on behalf of persons or places in distress, for collections to be made in churches for their assistance. Most of them relate to losses by fire and flood, and a complete collection of Briefs would give us much information on the state of the country at the time. The smallest amount collected on a Brief at Ruscombe was in 1673. In 1672 Drury Lane Theatre, the scene of Nell Gwynne's performances, was burnt down, and to provide funds for its rebuilding Briefs were issued, doubtless at the desire of the King. When the collection was made at Ruscombe it resulted in the sum of two pence. Let it not be thought that the good people of Ruscombe were at all disloyal. The money they spent on beer for the ringers on the King's Birthday, Gunpowder Treason, and other patriotic festivals disproves that. The two pence simply meant that they thoroughly disapproved of the theatrical pleasures of the Merry Monarch.

(To be continued.)