



St. Ann's Well and Chapel, Caversham.

By Edward Margrett, F.G.S.

IN January last I was told that an old well had been discovered at Priest Hill, Caversham. On visiting the place I found that in the process of making a new road and laying out the land for building purposes, a discovery of some local interest had been made.

At the south side of the Priest Hill, at the angle of the new road leading towards the river Thames, there is a dry well about 9ft. deep and about 5ft. in diameter, steined with dressed chalk and flints. The work is much finer than is usual in modern wells and, evidently, was very carefully executed. The faces of the chalk blocks vary from about 4 to 5in. in length and 2 to 2½ in thickness, and are mostly triangular on plan. The flints are arranged in bands at intervals.

After careful examination, I concluded that the work was late 15th or early 16th century.

The soil in which the well was sunk consists of false bedded clays and sands, and the well was probably filled by surface drainage percolating through these, forming what are known as surface springs.

These have probably been destroyed by the drainage and other subsequent operations on the adjoining lands.

If the well was carried to the water level in the chalk, which I do not think is probable, the depth would be about 40 feet to water.

The water would probably contain a little iron in solution, which would account for its healing properties, in the "Ages of Faith."

I have since looked up the local histories to see if I could find any reference to this well. I find in "Aubrey's Letters," published in 1813, a letter dated April 15th, 1727, to the well-known antiquarian, Thos. Hearne, and signed J. Loveday, who was Rector of Caversham, the following, concerning the chapel on the Caversham Bridge :

"It was dedicated to St. Ann, and from thence the religious went at certain times to a well now in the hedge between the field called The Mount and the lane called Priest Lane, which is supposed to

have its name from their going through it to the well, which was formerly called St. Ann's Well." . . . "There was in the memory of man a large ancient oak, just by the well, which was also held in great veneration."

These further extracts relating to the chapel and its contents may be of interest :—

The chapel was a cell of Notley Abbey, Bucks. Among the Cottonian MSS. is a letter of Dr. London (one of the Commissioners of Henry VIII.) to Thomas Cromwell, then High Steward of Reading, under date Sept. 16th (1536) as follows :—

"In my most humble maner I have me commendyd unto yower gude lordeschippe, ascertening the same that I have pullyd down the image of our ladye at Caversham whereunto wasse great pilgremage. The image is platyd over with sylver, and I have putt yt in a cheste fast lockyd and naylyd uppe, and by the next bardge that comythe from Reding to London yt shall be browght to your lordeschippe.

I have also pullyd down the place sche stode in, with all other ceremonyes as lightes, schrowdes, crowchys and imagies of wex, hangyng about the chapell and have defacyd the same thorowly in exchuyng of any farther resortt thdeyr.

Thys chapell dydde belong to Notley Abbey and ther always wasse a chanon of that monastery, wiche was callyd the warden of Caversham, and he songe in thys chapell and hadde the offeringes for his lyving. He was acostomyd to shew many prety relykes, among the wiche wer (as he made reportt) the holy dager that kyled Kinge Henry, and the holy knyfe that kyled Seynt Edwarde.

All thees, with many other, with the cotes of thys image, her cappe and here, my servant shall bring unto your lordeschippe thys wek I have sent the chanon home agen to Notleye and have made fast the doores of the chapell, wiche ys thorowly well coverd with ledde. . . . The chapell standith so wildely that the ledde will be stolyn by nyzt."

To Sir Richard Rich he wrote :—

. . . . "And I myssed no thing here butt oonly a peece of the holy halter Judas wasse hangyd withall."

To Cromwell, in another letter, he says :—

"I have sent uppe the principall relik of idolytrie in thys realme, an aungell with oon wyng that browt to Caversham the spere hedde that percyd our Saviour is syde upon the crosse."

Also from "Hearne's Collections."—May 22 (Sat.), 1714.

"On Sunday morning last, being Whit Sunday, I rode over very early in the morning to Reading, and taking with me the 2nd Volume of *Leland's Itinerary*, I examined many particulars that that excellent antiquary hath noted, and found everything to be so exact that I have every day a much better opinion of his great industry, care, learning and judgment. He tells us that 'at the north end of Caversham Bridge, as we come from Reading, there standith a fair old chapelle of stone on the right hand, pilid in the foundation for the rage of the streame of the Tamise.' I could find nothing of this chapelle, but was told that there was lately built a new house (which I saw) where it stood, and that remains of an old building were taken up when the said house was erected."

The subject of holy wells is a very large one, and runs through the whole of human history, and will be found in the traditions of Egypt, India, Greece, Rome and in the customs of less civilized peoples.

The mention of wells in the Bible is of common occurrence. A belief in the efficacy of certain waters in cases of disease has been current through all Christian times, and in our own day appears to have a somewhat vigorous revival, as in the well known instances of St. Winifred's Well, N. Wales, and of the Cult of Notre Dame de Lourdes, etc.

There were a number of these in the neighbourhood of Oxford. No less than 19 are enumerated in "The Legendary Lore of the Holy Wells of England," by Robert Chas. Hope, F.S.A., 1893, but he makes no mention of St. Ann's, Caversham.

There still exists a spring at Whitley, Reading, which in recent times was much resorted to as beneficial for sore eyes. This spring is said to have supplied Reading Abbey with water.

In modern times the belief in the efficacy of certain waters for the cure of diseases has been adopted by the medical profession, and the annual pilgrimages to these number many thousands of their patients. The benefits to be derived seem to rest on the same conditions as those of the ecclesiastical miracles—a little mineral matter, in solution, some fasting, more bodily exercise and much faith.

It would be a matter of regret if such an interesting object of mediæval times, as this Well, should be destroyed. It might so easily be enclosed and preserved as an item of local interest. It is well worthy of the attention of the inhabitants of the locality.