

Reviews.

ANCIENT ABINGDON.

THE CHURCH AND PARISH OF ST. NICHOLAS, ABINGDON, AND OTHER PAPERS, by Arthur E. Preston, F.S.A., Barrister-at-Law. (Oxford : University Press. London : Humphrey Milford. 21s. net. 1929.)

Abingdon is a famous and fortunate borough. When railways were invented it escaped the fate of Swindon, and retained many of its old buildings, its lore and customs. It possesses a history that extends back to pre-Conquest days, and a learned and skilled historian who spares no pains in carefully collecting its records and producing them in a noble volume worthy of the town. For many years Mr. Preston has been delving in a fruitful soil compiling masses of material on the annals of Abingdon, nor are his researches ended. In this volume he has disclosed only a portion of his discoveries, as he informs us in his preface that he contemplates a further work on the complete history of the borough, to which all Abingdonians and Berkshire lovers will look forward with the keenest interest.

The present volume treats of the history of the church and parish of St. Nicholas, the early Grammar School (to the end of the XVIth century), and an old Abingdon manor known as Fitzharris from the name of its last mediæval holder in the XIIIth century, one Hugh Fitz-Henry or Fitz-Harry. This last leads to a record of some of the old families connected with Abingdon, the Tesdales, Bostocks and others who have left their mark on the history of the town.

The Church of St. Nicholas is "peculiar" in many ways, though not in a technical or ecclesiastical sense, and has passed through many vicissitudes, poverty being the cause of many troubles. It still stands, a noble church, nigh the entrance gatehouse of the Abbey, now the Guildhall, of transitional Norman date, having been erected some years before the close of the XIIth century. Mr. Preston has discovered a reference to an early incumbent in an Abbey document about the date

1184, and this is earlier than that given by some other authorities, including Leland. Originally built by the monks, it was intended to found a church for the lay officials and servants of the Abbey, for travellers and pilgrims, for the numerous workmen that were employed on the monastic buildings, the military knights and tenants, for traders and casual visitors. But St. Nicholas' was not a monastic church, and was not for some time an ordinary parish church. There was no glebe or tithe. With much careful research the author has compiled an almost complete list of incumbents, a task of no little difficulty, considering the peculiarly complicated nature of the benefice. All that can be discovered about the holders of the living has been attached to each name, and constitutes a valuable series of biographical notes.

CHURCH'S COMPLICATED HISTORY.

Until its fall in 1538 the Abbey always presented to the benefice, and for some undiscovered reason the incumbents were always designated as rectors. Usually a rector is one who owns the great tithes of the parish ; but St. Nicholas', as we have said, owned no tithes. Until the XVth century these rectors appointed vicars, who discharged the duties of their office while they concerned themselves with other affairs. There seems to have been for a long period the duties of acting as *magister scholarum* of Abingdon's famous Grammar School. Later on the vicars vanish and the rectors perform their proper business. Again in the XVIth century the rectory becomes a sinecure, and the vicarage is annexed to that of St. Helen's. For 300 years the Crown held the patronage, and then in 1846 the rectory was united with the vicarage of St. Helen's. Was ever history so complicated ? The author is certainly to be congratulated in finding his way through such a bewildering maze and ascertaining, we think for the first time, the actual facts about the story of this mysterious church.

What may be called the golden age of St. Nicholas' was in the XIVth century, when it became a distinct parish under the Bishop's Ordination drawn up in 1372. The church had a warm

supporter in the Abbey. The Abbot and convent recognised that it was their spiritual child. It had been built by them, and they favoured it at the expense of the rival church, St. Helen's. In all the disputes between the Abbey and the town (which were evident in all places where existed a powerful abbey and a corporation clamouring of freedom, e.g., Reading, Canterbury, etc.) the parson and parishioners of St. Helen's took the part of the people against the Abbey and even supported acts of violence against the monastery, whereas St. Nicholas' and the Abbey were always very good friends, and the latter's policy was to magnify the interests of St. Nicholas' and to promote its importance. Hence the Bishop, doubtless on the advice of the Abbot, constituted St. Nicholas' as a parish with definite boundaries, including the monastic precincts, Ock Mill and various granges connected with the manors of Fitzharris, Northcourt and Barton. Moreover, the church had interests in Bayworth and Sunningwell.

The income of the benefice was, however, small, and it had to support both a rector and vicar, and the division of the stipend was not without unpleasantness between the two incumbents. Mr. Preston has discovered that each had a residence on the north of the church. In 1410 the two offices were united, and later on the vicarage was united with St. Helen's. The author has made an intimate acquaintance with the later rectors, who varied in type from the industrious parish priest to learned lawyers and professors who held distinguished posts at Oxford University or at Canterbury.

It is difficult to imagine the changes caused in Abingdon by the dissolution of its Abbey that had been so long the lord of the town. St. Nicholas', however, continued its existence, impoverished as before, the rectors being still without clerical duties, while the vicars of St. Helen's, though responsible, did little. The usual ecclesiastical changes took place at the Reformation, and St. Nicholas' lost most of its treasure of plate, vestments and ornaments. A very prominent layman of the parish and of the town was John Blacknall, who left money

for the increased support of the readership in the church, which was of immense service to the town owing to some lax clerics. Want of space forbids a lengthy reference to the troubles of the Civil War period in Abingdon. It is remarkable for the very gallant defence of St. Nicholas', which was threatened with destruction, and the enforced abandonment of all Church of England services. . . . Fortunately, the Royalist champion, Dr. Peter Heylin, came to reside at Lacy's Court, where all through the Puritan domination he held services according to the use of the Church of England, and fought vigorously for St. Nicholas', ably supporting the old clergyman, Mr. Huish, who "went on with his prayers as usual, and this little church withstood all the batteries and fierce assaults of its enemies, who were never able to demolish it or unite it with Saint Ellens."

A very interesting chapter is that on Nonconformity in Abingdon. Hitherto very little has been known concerning its history, and scarcely anything published. The author has become possessed of a great store of unpublished papers, and from them he amassed the chronicles of these sects, which will be entirely new to most of his readers.

ABINGDON'S ANCIENT SCHOOL.

Perhaps the most fascinating chapters deal with the story of the famous Abingdon Grammar School, which was never more successful than it is to-day. Its old buildings still stand just across the road from St. Nicholas', though the school itself has flitted away to "fresh fields and pastures new." Mr. Leach, whose book is well known in Methuen's "Antiquary's Series," was the discoverer of the fact that very many of the old grammar schools were far older than was generally supposed and were not monastic, and Abingdon can claim a very high antiquity. Certainly it is pre-Conquest and may rank with the very oldest schools in England. Mr. Preston compares its date with that of Reading School, and claims for it greater antiquity. By the way, he quotes from Miss Rose Graham's learned book on "English Ecclesiastical Studies," and yet deems Reading Abbey

to have belonged to the Cluniac order. Although the first abbot was a monk of the Cluniac monastery of Lewes, the learned lady states definitely that Reading Abbey never belonged to that Order. The whole story of the school is admirably told, and we have a clear picture of its great benefactor, John Roysse, the rich London merchant who followed the example of many others who, having made their fortunes in trade, returned to their native town to enrich it by their charitable bequests. Associated with his name is that of Tesdale, who was especially concerned in advancing the interests of the school and in founding scholarships for Abingdon boys at Oxford. The story is too long to be told here but Mr. Preston brings out for the first time the part played by the Corporation of Abingdon in founding Pembroke College, Oxford, for the reception of Abingdon scholars.

PRICELESS DOCUMENTS.

There is much else that a reviewer of this valuable and interesting work would desire to call attention to, but want of space forbids a longer notice. Attention may be called to the fate of some of the priceless contents of the library of the Abbey. A certain George Owen, of Oxford, M.D., physician to Henry VIII and accoucheur at the birth of Edward VI, also a brewer by trade, acquired the lordship of the Hundred of Hormer for a trifling cost, and purloined some priceless Saxon charters and other old manuscripts from the Abbey. The secret methods whereby Master Owen possessed himself of these documents is known to the author and by him alone. He has not yet disclosed his secret. Eight charters somehow passed to the Cotton Collection now in the British Museum. Stevenson in the *Abingdon Chronicle* states that transcripts of other MSS. and documents are in the possession of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. They were made by Robert Talbot (c. 1548). At the end of the "Carta De Civelea" it is stated that it was made from a charter "which was had off Mr. Owen." At the end of another charter the copyist states "I had the cotype hereoff off Mr. Doctor Owen. Phisician." The authorities of

of Corpus Christi College may be glad to know what treasures lie in their possession, probably reposing in dusty oblivion on the shelves of their library.

Again we beg to offer our congratulations to Mr. Preston for his valuable work and to the town of Abingdon on possessing such an accomplished and able historian and such a wealth of antiquarian lore and almost unsurpassed historical treasure.

P.H.D.

THE STORY OF YATTENDON.

YATTENDON AND ITS CHURCH. With Records of the Manor and Village from the Xth century to the Present Day. Compiled by the Rev. J. E. Smith-Masters, M.A., Rector of Yattendon (The Cornwall Press, Ltd., 1-6, Paris Garden, London, S.E.1. 3s. 6d.).

Yattendon is a fortunate village. During its long life, dating back to King Alfred's time, who owned it and left it by will to his wife, it has been the home of many residents eminent in Church and State, some of whom have left their marks and notes behind them and also their good works. The late Dean of Norwich, Dr. Beeching, was rector here, and collected valuable information on his old parish. The Waterhouses adorned the village by building a new manor house and adding to the church. We find long extracts from the writings of Mr. Charles E. Keyser, who wrote one of his learned and carefully composed articles in *The Berks, Bucks and Oxon Archæological Journal* on the church, from Mr. Walter Money, "The Victoria County History of Berkshire." Trevelyan's "History of England" is laid under contribution for the story of the manor in Norman times, and Dr. Bridges, the Poet Laureate of England, has immortalised the village by his production of the Yattendon hymnal, a model, scholarly hymn book now famous throughout the country.

Yattendon is also fortunate in now possessing a history which the present rector has compiled from all these various sources and from a diligent search in the contents of his parish chest, which happens to be well filled with historical material, and a careful study of the monuments in his church; also in

having a generous and liberal squire, Sir Edward Iliffe, C.B.E., ex-M.P., who had defrayed the cost of the publishing of the work and the supply of the numerous illustrations. Frequently the cost of producing a local or parochial history deters one from undertaking such a publication, as the sale can only be limited. Happy is the author who is entirely relieved from such responsibility !

The description of the interesting church is admirably given. There is a complete list of rectors from January 12th, 1297, with some notes by Dean Beeching. The personality of George Bellas, rector, is striking. He once received the "generous" fee of 5s. 3d. from one Wm. Hutchins for placing a monument of his son, which he describes as "full of absurdity." On reading the inscription we cordially agree. Many distinguished names occur in the annals of Yattendon, amongst others that of Thomas Carte, the historian. The Norreys family figure largely in the story of the parish as lords of the manor, especially Sir John Norreys of Elizabeth's time, a very gallant soldier. The author refrains from telling the strange story of Sir John Gallini, who came to England from Italy as a dancing master with the title granted by Pope of Knight of the Golden Spur, pleased the Prince Regent, came to the house of the Earl of Abingdon to teach dancing, and to his lordship's disgust married his daughter. The story is too long to be told here.

The family of Waterhouse acquired the manor more than 50 years ago, and by their generosity and benefactions have conferred great benefits on the place and left memorials of their artistic genius. Perhaps the memory of Beeching, the present writer's friend, will live longest in the annals of Yattendon, and in thanking Mr. Smith-Masters for his pleasant book we thank him also for including Dean Hutton's tribute to the memory of one who "among scholars and humble folk, among leaders or among learners ; among wits as their equal ; among priests as their example—stood out in his time as a man never without honour or without love."

P. H. DITCHFIELD.