

Reviews.

RECORDS OF THE PARISH CHURCH AND PARISH OF WOKINGHAM.

By CANON B. LONG. Oxford University Press, 5/- net.

The old Forest town of Wokingham, with its memories of bull-baiting, silk-weaving, and not a few eminent men, has long needed a competent historian to tell its interesting story ; and it is appropriate that a former rector, Canon Long, now of Whitchurch, Oxon, should perform this duty for his old parish and church. In his preface he denies any " claim to be an archæologist, historian, or expert in any way, but merely to be a compiler of information, collected from many sources," but the reader will be better able to assess the truth of this disclaimer when he has read the book : there is ample evidence of Canon Long's ability to undertake the task he set himself.

The origin of Wokingham is obscure, and long before a settled community arose, there was probably a clearing in the dense forest, in which, under primitive conditions, the early inhabitants of these islands lived by hunting game, which was plentiful, sowing a little corn, and finding fish to their liking in the stream which afterwards became the Emm brook. When the game thinned and the soil became less productive, they moved along to another site. Nomadic, and untroubled by private rights and personal importunity, they roamed the land and partook of nature's bounty wherever and whenever they pleased. They had freedom without the fetters of subsequent national and individual enactments ; but their lives were not wholly devoid of adventure or personal risk. All this, however, was long before the author's story opens, for he has not ventured behind Saxon times. Indeed, he has not mentioned the Romans, who were certainly not far away ; and has given us no clue to the shadowy Eadhelm who is credited with giving the name to Emm brook.

It may be a surprise to some to learn that the town of Wokingham does not derive its name from the sturdy oak which grows

to such girth and perfection on the clay it loves in the Forest Division of the County. True, Wokingham and Oakingham were in the past interchangeable terms, both in document and parlance, but even so, the acorn and the sprig upon the old town seal is a pleasant but polite fiction so far as origins are concerned. Like the Sunni of Sonning, the Reads of Reading and the Wealhs of Wallingford, the name of Wokingham is in all probability derived from a tribe or clan, in this case the Woccingas, mainly settled in Surrey in ancient days, and whose chief centre appears to have been Woking. As Canon Long rightly points out, the references in 8th century charters to the Woccingas are more likely to concern the Surrey settlement, and it would be hazardous to connect them with the town of Wokingham. But ancient tribes have left traces of their passage and rule in many parts, and if the drift of scholarly research is along right lines there need be no hesitation in connecting the forest town with the Surrey clan.

For all practical purposes Wokingham's story starts soon after the Norman Conquest. The mighty lordship which before 1086 stretched from the borders of Surrey to the Chiltern Hills—an estate so ancient that not even a tradition survives of the way in which it came into ecclesiastical hands—had its centre at Sonning, and Wokingham was one of several chapelries within the Peculiar of the Dean of Sarum; an arrangement that lasted from 1078 to 1846. In fact, it was not until the Bishop of Oxford, in the latter year, became the patron of the living, that the town had other than a "Perpetual Curate" appointed by the Vicar of Sonning, the Dean of Sarum or the latter's lessee. In 1219, the Bishop of Sarum granted the privilege of a market to Wokingham, and it thus became a centre of trading which played no small part in its subsequent growth to the status of a municipal borough. Queen Elizabeth gave a charter to the town in 1583, and this recites certain privileges which had been enjoyed from time immemorial by virtue of Wokingham being "parcel of our manor of Sonning." In 1612, James I granted a charter of incorporation by which it became a free borough under the style of "The Alderman and burgesses of the town of Wokingham." It was not until the 'eighties of last century, when the town was constituted a muni-

cipal borough under the Municipal Corporations Act, that the title of the chief magistrate was changed from "Alderman" to "Mayor," the breaking of a historical link which Canon Long appears to regret.

There is much else about Wokingham which the more general reader and resident of the town and neighbourhood will desire to know and they will find it in Canon Long's book. It would obviously be unfair to extract many of the interesting facts which go to make the story so fascinating to lovers of the past, and so, with a note or two more, I will end. It has long been known that Wokingham was the centre of an important bell-foundry as early as the 14th century, but its site was, I believe, not so well known. There is an ancient lane called Bellfound Lane, near Ashridge farm, which seems to indicate the site. In the year 1846, an acute controversy arose regarding the respective liability of the parish and the Dean of Salisbury for the repair of the parish church, and a somewhat acrimonious correspondence ensued regarding, *inter alia*, the alleged decanal neglect. In a petition presented to Parliament about this time occurs the following description of a part of the parish: "One portion of the parish lies in a wild and remote district, and contains an increasing population composed exclusively of laborers and broomdashers, who subsist almost entirely by cutting heath on the commons and converting it into brooms, and who having for the most part no masters to control them, and no persons of a superior station dwelling among them, stand peculiarly in need of regular pastoral superintendence, and the want of it must be attended with the growth of irreligion, vice and immorality, and must result in the most deplorable consequences if some means be not speedily adopted to arrest and put an end to evils of so deplorable and awful a character."

There will be many who will wish to add to their collection of Berkshire books this exceedingly interesting history of Wokingham town.

E.W.D.