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## The Stream called the Hallowed Brook at Reading.\*

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IT is the fate of many rivers to take their rise in almost idyllic surroundings and finish their course amid the clamour of industry ; to start their leisurely flow between banks fringed by the rosy spikes of the loosestrife and to end their travail in a stream carrying the flotsam and jetsam of a mercantile age. The stream with which these notes are concerned has but five miles or so to flow ; it is not unduly harassed by the debris of inlets ; it does not have its origin in a bubbling spring. It is a branch or arm of the Kennet commencing at a spot called Arrow Head in Langley Mead in the parish of Theale, and flows in a serpentine course to the town of Reading. Perhaps the word serpentine is not sufficiently indicative, for no serpent could by any contortion form the sinuosities of this waterway in parts of its course. How many centuries have passed since this separate channel was formed we have no means of knowing, since English documentary records do not reach so far ; but if we are ignorant of its beginnings we do know that this physiographical fact cannot be later than the 11th century, because in or about 1086 several corn mills were driven by these waters, notably at Calcot, Southcote and Coley ; and there are good reasons for believing

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THE HOLY BROOK AT CALCOT.

[*Reading Mercury Photograph.*]

that these mills existed before the Norman Conquest. Two of them have disappeared and their exact sites are not clear ; the third, Calcot, is pleasantly situated in its original spot and still performs its age-old purpose. In addition to the mills, the stream was tapped for a defensive moat round old Southcote House, and later formed into a pleasant sheet of water in front of Coley House. Coley Farm was also indebted to its contiguity, and there were weirs and locks along its course. Somewhere by Coley Farm was that ancient bridge across which a Vachell denied the right of a monk of Reading to carry hay ; slew him for his persistence, and fled and gave his house a motto that it is better to suffer than revenge, which said motto is still to be found beneath the armorial coat of the family.

Now it is a matter of some interest to the people of Reading that this little stream has had no small share in the origin and prosperity of the town. The reasons will shortly appear. It is called the Holy or Hallowed Brook (indeed it has occasionally been known as the Holly, Hollow and Hollowed Brook), and its name is generally accepted as having been derived from the fact that a portion of it ran through the sacred precincts of Reading Abbey. The monastery was founded in 1121, so if the theory of the stream's name be accepted, it may have had another name before the princely piety of Henry Beauclerc took shape. No such name has come down to us, however, although it seems inconceivable that in all its long and sinuous travel from Theale, there is no stretch of it which had not a descriptive title among the folk who had free and unfettered use of its waters. That such small, and, indeed, much smaller, streams could have distinctive names is patent from the fact that even ditches are mentioned in pre-Conquest charters. The Kibble ditch, a tiny brook near North Moreton, and sometimes called Tibbald Brook, commemorates a name Gybhild, itself a puzzle, which is referred to as early as the tenth century in the *Cartularium Saxonicum*.<sup>1</sup> But let us for a moment assume that the name of the Holy Brook after the 12th century does derive from monastic association,

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. 810. and *lang Gybhilde*.

and that up to the present time no other name has been recorded or remembered.

A short time ago, Dr. Stenton, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Reading University, a leading authority, gave a learned lecture before the Berkshire Archæological Society on "Some Points in the Early History of Reading," wherein he dealt with the problem of the parochial organisation of the town before the Norman Conquest. Among the interesting detail that emerged was the theory—perhaps it is something more substantial than a theory—that the Church of St. Mary the Virgin at Reading was originally a Minster providing for the spiritual needs of an area much larger than the parish it was destined eventually to serve. Hence the name Minster Street. Now, it is not without significance that there was once a mill known as Minster Mill on a short branch of the Kennet and joined to the Holy Brook, just at the foot of the gravel plateau on which the Minster of Reading stood, and it seems probable that it was the mill of Saxon Reading before the mills, later known as St. Giles's Mills in Mill Lane, came into existence on the southern side of the Kennet. This is not to infer that the mills in Mill Lane were not working before the Abbey was built; but it is worthy of note that the Abbot's Mill was placed on the Holy Brook on the eastern side of the town, which, despite Kerry's arguments, was certainly far removed from the mediæval hustle of Reading in the 10th and 11th centuries. We may, therefore, with abundant caution, assume that earliest Reading grew up on the northern side of the little stream which afterwards bore a sanctified name, rather than on the swampy and reedy margins of the Kennet proper. We may further be certain that whatever the monastic community may have done to improve the course of the Brook and hasten the flow of its waters, there was a time when, through the whole length of its course, it gurgled pleasantly in sylvan surroundings and had not, before joining its parent stream, to find its darkling way beneath the buildings of Reading.

At this point I would like to advert to the Minster Mill and its stream. Bridge Street, anciently called Seven Bridges, makes it clear that the Kennet had at this point split itself into

six streams which later merged into their parent before it joined the Thames. The seventh stream was, of course, the Holy Brook. Next to it in a southerly direction, was the Minster Mill Brook, the bed of which has for many years been filled in. But it is interesting to note that all these streams were connected, and they proved of very great importance in the economic development of Reading, particularly to the cloth trade, for there were two or three fulling mills situated on them. The Minster Mill Brook commenced to flow from the River Kennet at a point just above County Lock, continued its course through part of the town and supplied power for the Minster Mill which was situated at the back of the houses in Minster Street. It joined the Kennet again just above High Bridge, and its point of issuance can still be detected near the Lower Ship stables. In its passage through the town it passed, like the Holy Brook, under many houses and warehouses, or, at least, the stream was arched over and houses built upon it. A small cut joined the two brooks.

Poor mad Leland had something to say of the Holy Brook in his peregrinations : " The Ryver of Kenet cummith thorough the Middle of Redding toun, but devided principally into 2 Partes, whereof the principal streame cummith thorough a great wood Bridge in the south side of the Toune. The Arme that breketh out of the Kenet is caullid the halowid Brooke, and brekith out of the principal streame of Kenet up aboue the Toune by West South West aboute the Bere, wher thabbat of Redding had a fair manor Place of Bryke, and so cumming doune by Medowes ynto Reading Toune passith thorough a Peace of thabbay. And a little lower joinith again with the great streame : and a little lower Kenet hole streame goith into Tamise Ryver." But Leland has made an error. The " fair manor Place of Bryke " to which he refers was Bere Court at Pangbourne, and more than three miles from where the Holy Brook takes its departure from the Kennet. The truth of the matter, as before stated, is that it " brekith " out of the parent stream at Arrow Head, or, as some have said, Langley Mead. Its course is sinuous till it reaches Coley, from which place it follows a fairly straight course to a place called the Old Orchard. Here it goes northward and in a similarly

straight line continues its flow through the town till it reaches the Abbey Mills. Man, the local historian, says : " From the Holy Brook running in a perfectly straight line from Coley, there can be no doubt that this part of it was originally formed into a canal at the expense of the Abbot and monks, for the express purpose of supplying not only the mill, but even the Abbey, with soft water, thus securing the two most necessary articles of subsistence to the inhabitants of this once noble monastery. . . . The brook, in its passage through the town, was paved at the bottom with bricks, and the greater part of it arched over, and its fall from Coley to the mill has been so gradually preserved that the latter is able to work, even in the highest floods, without being prevented by the back water, owing to the mill being situated so much above the level of the river into which the water of the brook falls after passing it."

There is a document in the archives of the Corporation entitled : " Orders, Acts, and Decrees made at Reading the 7th March, in the seventeenth year of Elizabeth, by Commissioners appointed under a Commission of Sewers dated 22nd October in the twelfth year of her reign, respecting the rivers Kennet and Loddon, and all other rivers and brooks (and particularly the Hallowed Brook) falling into the same rivers." A jury had been empanelled and evidence taken, and the orders made bear this preface : " Forasmuch as it appeareth to the Commissioners, as well as by presentments of the jury upon their oaths in that behalf charged, as also by view of the said Commissioners taken in their proper forms, that great default is in the things hereafter specified, and that reformation ought to be made as well for the commodity and benefit of the inhabitants of the town of Reading (who have chiefly their water to brew, bake and dress their meat out of the brook called the Hallowed Brook, parcel of the said river of Kennet) as of the lords, owners and occupiers of the meadows and low grounds in Reading, Whitley, Coley, Hartley, Southcot, Burghfield and Tilehurst, adjoining or near to the said river of Kennet, or within the level of the same, from the mouth of the Kennet where it falleth into the Thames unto Burghfield Bridge and Stoken Bridge. Therefore the Commissioners upon due

consideration," and so forth, "do ordain, etc." They then go on to make sundry orders respecting the brook, and, among others, that it shall be deepened and cleansed, and its banks repaired and encroachments removed. Among the terms were: "If any person shall build or repair any building over the Brook, and his tiles, mortar, or other stuff shall fall into it, he is to take it away within a month, and the occupier of Abbey Mill is to open Grinwick's (? Girdwick's) Lock and the floodgates of the Mill for the purpose of running off the water and carrying the rubbish away. Hogsties, stables and buildings of that nature are to be removed and drainage for such buildings into the Brook to be discontinued within a month of the orders, and none is to be afterwards made. Any person having a gutter running from his house into the Brook is, within a month, to make a grating, the bars of which shall not be above half an inch asunder, so that nothing but water may pass into the river. Grass hatches are to be made by the Corporation to prevent the washing of gravel and soil from the streets into the Brook at specified places. "No horse shall be watered or washed within the said Hallowed Brook, and stays are to be made to prevent horses going into it. No person is to cast or throw into it any horns, bones, sheep's feet, dust, straw, rushes, dirt, weeds, gravel, ashes, ridding of lime pits, tan vats, etc., or suffer any buck water or other filthy water to run into it." The occupier of Abbey Mill is once a month to go before (? between) sunrise and sunset, in a boat from the mill to Girdwick's Lock, to inspect any annoyances there may be in the brook; but he is particularly enjoined to keep his boat locked up at night. Every Sunday, before four o'clock in the morning during April, May and June, the occupiers of Abbey Mill, Minster Mill and St. Giles' Mill are to pull up their floodgates and locks and to keep them open till six o'clock on Monday morning, and at Easter and Whitsuntide they are to be kept open till the Monday and Tuesday in those weeks, and until six o'clock on the Wednesday. And lastly, Conservators were appointed, consisting of the Mayor of Reading for the time being, and the two last preceding Mayors; but if there shall not be two such living, then the Mayor and two of the "Ancients of the Bench

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THE SITE OF GIRDWICK'S LOCK.

*[Reading Mercury Photograph.]*



in the Borough " are to be the Conservators, and to have the care not only of the Hallowed Brook, but of "all brooks and streams of the river Kennet in all the places where the same falleth into Thames, commonly called the Kennet Mouth upward as far as the Liberties of the Borough do reach and further until Burghfield Bridge and Stoken Bridge aforesaid."

These, then, were the somewhat extensive regulations dealing with the Holy Brook made by the Commissioners appointed by the Queen. The decrees were "ordained" in 1575. Twenty-one years later, in the thirty-eighth year of her reign, an Inquisition was taken at Reading which has some reference to the Brook. The following are extracts from this document, the witnesses being on oath. "That the Queen's Majesty is seized in her demesne as of Fee in the right of the Crown of England of two ancient Town Mills situate within the scite of the late dissolved Monastery of Reading now in the tenure of Francis Knolles Knight for Term of one year and somewhat more being the remnant yet to come of a Term of one and twenty years heretofore granted by Her Majesty to William Webb, Citizen and Salter of London, by Letters Patent under the Great Seal of England bearing date the first day of March in the nineteenth year of Her Highnesses Reign. In which Letters Patent there is reserved an yearly rent of four pounds payable to Her Highness, her heirs and successors for the said Mills during the said Term.

"To the second article (the witnesses) also say upon their oath as follows in the English words (viz.): That the aforesaid Mills do stand upon a little River called the Hallowed Brook which taketh head out of the River of Kennet at Tilehurst in a place there called Langley Mead being distant about five miles from the said Mills and near unto and right against a piece of meadow ground in Langley Mead aforesaid called the Lords piece the mouth of which little River where it first taketh Head out of Kennet is as broad as Kennet itself is, and from thence it runneth down through parts of Tilehurst, Southcote and Coley even to the Borough of Reading and through the Town into the said Scite of the late dissolved Monastery and there driving the said Mills at the end of a house called the Wast House: a little beneath the said Mills it falleth again into the said River of Kennet "

Emerging further from the decrees aforesaid is an additional piece of interesting information. It seems that the "Millner" (? Millowner) had to deepen the Brook "from the topp of the marke alreadie sett downewarde to the ground three fete and a half in all places from the bridge at the Shewsmakers rowe end" (that is at or about the point where the Brook is now covered over at Jackson's Corner) "unto Girdwicke's Lock" (the sluice below the Almshouses in Castle Street) and should "caste" the Brook from this lock to Stoken Bridge, Burghfield, before the ensuing Michaelmas. This was to be done at his own charge, but he was given the right to make certain charges against the occupiers of the grounds, etc., on the banks, and heavy penalties were imposed for default in this connection. The waters of this stream still drive the Abbey Mills, and it would be interesting to know, from the legal point of view, how the passage of some three and a half centuries has affected both the rights and the obligations of the "Millner."

It will thus be seen that the Holy Brook occupied an important part in the affairs of Reading as late as the reign of Elizabeth; one might even say that it was of far greater importance then than now. Before the Dissolution the members of the Corporation had to cross the Brook at the foot of Yield Hall Lane in order to reach the place of their deliberations. In fact, one of the reasons advanced for the removal of the centre of local government was because the old Gild Hall actually stood upon the banks of the Brook. Listen to what Dr. London, one of the Commissioners for the Suppression of the Monasteries, wrote to Thomas Lord Cromwell on the subject: "I beseech your lordship to admit me a poor suitor for these honest men of Reading. They have a fair town and many good occupiers in it, but they lack that house necessary of, the which for the administration of justice they have most need of. Their Town Hall is a very small house and standeth upon the river, where is the common washing place of the most part of the town, and in the session days and other court days, there is such a beating of battledoors as one man cannot hear another, nor the Quest hear the charge given." He then goes on to plead for the house of the

dispossessed Friars for a new Town Hall, and this is eventually granted.

There are still many lacunæ in the story of this ancient stream, but it would, I think, be safe to say that the Holy Brook is more closely connected with the rise and progress of ancient Reading than the Kennet, and certainly the Thames, and some of the reasons for this opinion I have endeavoured to give in the earlier part of this article.