

Obituary

ARTHUR E. PRESTON, J.P., F.S.A.

1852-1942

Freeman of Abingdon

When on May 21st last the death of Mr. Preston was sorrowfully recorded, many tributes were paid to his outstanding services to Berkshire and to his native town of Abingdon. It was then noted that whilst bringing to bear on public matters the keenest of business brains, he combined with his mastery of finance and law a great love of the past. References to his historical work were necessarily brief, and it is the proud duty of this Journal to put on record a little more fully some account of his services to archaeology.

His interest in local history dated from boyhood, and after retirement in 1908 from one of the most important Accountancy practices of his day, he devoted all the leisure he could spare from his many public offices to historical research.

In the days when he was taking a leading part in County Council affairs he collected for the Shire Hall portraits of the Lords Lieutenant and other County officials and prepared historical notes of these office bearers. Whilst Mayor of Abingdon from 1910-1912 he renovated with infinite care the beautiful Council Chambers, and linked them up with the old Schoolroom which he restored as a gift to the town. To the fine oil paintings hanging in the Council Chambers he added his own collection of engravings of noted figures in Borough history; and for the rest of his life never ceased gathering together the history of the buildings and of the donors of the pictures and Corporation plate, and preparing biographical notes of the Mayors, High Stewards, Recorders, Town Clerks and M.P.'s, from the time of the Incorporation of the Borough in 1556 to the present day. As Master of Christ's Hospital—Abingdon's other ancient Corporation—he not only administered its affairs to the great material benefit of all its charitable trusts, but unravelled its history and that of the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, its mediaeval predecessor. He had its many old deeds calendared and carefully preserved.

For the history of Abingdon Abbey, which was to have been his main theme, all the more important series of national records were searched for material concerning this early Saxon foundation and its long line of Abbots. It was the documentary record that appealed to him, but when excavations of the Abbey site were undertaken in 1922 it was Mr. Preston who directed the work, photographing and recording the finds day by day. The history

of Abingdon's churches, of the ancient Town Grammar School and of surrounding places where the Abbey held property, all came within his purview.

This store of knowledge could always be drawn on, and many were the letters he wrote in answer to inquiries. Every civic occasion at Abingdon was graced by his observations, into which were woven relevant history, enlivened by wit and humour. Members of this Society are amongst the many who will never forget the able and entertaining way in which he acted as guide to Abingdon's historic treasures.

As Mr. Preston began to withdraw from some of his public work, his literary output increased. In this Journal he published the following:—*Sutton Courtenay and Abingdon Abbey*¹, *The Demolition of Reading Abbey*², *The 14th Century Painted Ceiling, St. Helen's, Abingdon*³, and *The Carswell, Abingdon*⁴. The article on St. Helen's Painted Ceiling is a comprehensive account of the roof paintings which Mr. Preston at his own expense had cleaned and treated with preservative. At the same time he installed special lighting to reveal their beauties. Others of his articles worthy of permanent record were generously contributed to School and Parish magazines; such a one was *Abingdon Fairs and Markets*, which appeared in issues of *The Abingdonian* from 1922 to 1924⁵.

In 1939 he wrote an interesting pamphlet entitled *The Armorial Glass, County Hall, Abingdon*; and his handbook on *Christ's Hospital* (1930) was described by *The Times* reviewer as "a model of what a short history of this kind should be."

His most important published work *St. Nicholas, Abingdon, and Other Papers* was likewise reviewed in *The Spectator* as "a model of what scholarly research and local patriotism can produce." The first part deals with the intricate story of St. Nicholas Church and its eccentric parish. The middle article on the early history of Abingdon School was stated in *The Cambridge Review* to be on a level seldom attained by similar works. Lastly comes an account of *Fitzharris, an old Abingdon Manor*, to which he wrote a postscript for *The Antiquaries Journal* (Oct. 1934) under the title of *The Moated Mound*. What was written of *St. Nicholas*

¹ Vol. 25, (1919-20) 23-38, 94-113.

² Vol. 3, (1935), 107-144.

³ Vol. 40 (1936), 115-145 and Plates 1-12.

⁴ Vol. 45 (1941), 37-44 and Plates 1-5.

⁵ Other articles were:—"Abbots of Abingdon in the Making" (*Annual of Our Lady's School, Abingdon*, 1930); 'The Abbey Gateway' (*Ibid*: 1934); 'The Old Vicarage of St. Nicholas' (*Abingdon Parish Magazine*, July-Oct., 1926); 'Church Records of St. Helen's' (*Ibid*: 1934); 'The 1st M.P. for Abingdon (Oliver Hyde) and his Memorial Tablet in St. Helen's Church' (*Ibid*: May-July, 1934).

in the Journal of the British Archaeological Association is true of all Mr. Preston's work :—

“ His judgment is sound and his presentation of facts accurate ; and his attention to minute detail is guided by a sense of arrangement which sets leading points of his narrative in relief, and distinguishes between its essential elements and their clothing.”

It was this attention to detail, together with an almost unbelievable expenditure of his time upon honorary public work, which limited his writings. That more did not come from his pen is much to be regretted, but enough appeared to place him high on the list of the County's historians. There is no space left to enlarge upon his strong character and endearing personality. He was the perfect host, and wherever he was, laughter and good cheer abounded. He always made an unforgettable impression, and something of his personality is enshrined in his writings ; so that, keenly as his loss is felt, it can truly be said “ Now he belongs to the ages.”

A.C.B.