

Evesham eBook

Evesham

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Evesham eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	7
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	11
Page 6.....	13
Page 7.....	14
Page 8.....	16
Page 9.....	18
Page 10.....	19
Page 11.....	20
Page 12.....	21
Page 13.....	22
Page 14.....	23
Page 15.....	25
Page 16.....	26
Page 17.....	27
Page 18.....	29
Page 19.....	30
Page 20.....	31
Page 21.....	32
Page 22.....	33

Page 23.....	35
Page 24.....	36
Page 25.....	37
Page 26.....	38
Page 27.....	40
Page 28.....	41
Page 29.....	42
Page 30.....	44
Page 31.....	46
Page 32.....	48
Page 33.....	49
Page 34.....	50
Page 35.....	52
Page 36.....	54
Page 37.....	55

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	
Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER II	4
CHAPTER III	7
THE FOUNDING OF THE ABBEY	7
THE ABBEY AFTER THE CONQUEST	10
THE DISSOLUTION	12
CHAPTER IV	14
CHAPTER V	18
CHAPTER VI	20
CHAPTER VII	26
CHAPTER VIII	30
CHAPTER IX	31
CHAPTER X	35
THE END	37

Page 1

INTRODUCTION

Yonder lies our ... village—Art and Grace are less and less: Science grows and Beauty dwindles—roofs of slated hideousness!

—LOCKSLEY HALL, SIXTY YEARS AFTER

Those who love with a deep reverence the work of their forefathers, whether because of the character and beauty of their handiwork, or from the historical associations which are indissolubly connected with it, cannot but regard with pain and abhorrence any cause which tends towards the demolition or destruction of the monuments of the past. To these it is a significant and distressing fact that hardly any modern English buildings or streets possess the qualities which give the value and charm to the old cities, towns, and villages of which we are the grateful inheritors. If any reader is inclined to doubt the truth of this statement, or to consider the sentiment expressed extravagant or groundless, let him consider the difference between the old towns and the new.

Evesham provides a typical and sufficiently striking instance of the contrasted methods and results. Here there is hardly an old house which has not a local and individual character. Many of them may be plain, severely plain, some possibly ugly; but in each can be read by all who will, a distinct and separate thought, or series of thoughts, connecting the dwelling with its builders and owners, and with the soil out of which it has sprung.

As the varying undulations of the face of the country tell a plain tale to the geologist, so the shape and materials of human habitations tell their story to the student of architecture and the history of man.

The poet Wordsworth pointed out that one of the great charms of the Lake country lay in the way in which the dwellings sprang out of the hill side, as if a natural growth born of the requirements of the peasant or farmer and the materials provided by nature. Throughout England this was once the case; no two houses were precisely alike because no two people had precisely the same ideas, wishes and requirements; and the material was dictated by the stone or timber provided by the district. Every building was in old times the combined expression of the individual man and the *genius loci*.

The timber cottages which are still to be found in the town tell of the time when tracts of the original forest still lingered, and oak was the cheapest material fit for building. Often the foundation of the walls is of stone, and the earliest stone to be used was that which could be had for the digging, the blue lias found in thin layers embedded in the clay of which the vale is composed. In the back streets which retain, as would be expected, more of their primitive character than the more respectable thoroughfares, this blue stone has been much used, and in the churches it can be seen in the earlier parts

making a very pretty wall with its thin horizontal lines. The tower of the church of All Saints shows it to great advantage.

Page 2

Another stone is also employed, and one far better suited for building, because it can be obtained in blocks of almost any size, and carved with the utmost delicacy. This is oolite, the stone of which the Bell Tower is built. From Norman times it was used in the more important parts of the Abbey, as is shown in the foundations of the great tower now exposed to view, and in Abbot Reginald's gateway. But the oolite stone could not be got much nearer than Broadway, and what was used by the monks in all probability came from the hill above that village. In numerous old houses this stone is made use of, but in almost all it must have come indirectly, having once formed part of the structure of the monastic buildings, or perhaps of the castle which for a short time flanked the bridge on the Bengeworth side of the river.

In the seventeenth century bricks came into fashion, and good clay for their manufacture was amply provided by the neighbourhood. To the end of the century belongs Dresden House in High Street, a fine example of the style of William the Third's time, built by a wealthy lawyer, who came to settle here, from the northern part of the county. Tower House in Bridge Street, probably of later date, is beautiful in its proportions and mouldings, the prominent lead spouts adding much to the general design. Unfortunately to this fashion for formality and brick-work, at a later period superseded by a covering of plaster, we must attribute the demolition of the older fronts, generally of timber, and often gabled and projecting, which gave such a pleasant irregularity to our old streets. Though formal and lacking in artistic qualities these Georgian screens have a certain historical value in showing that our little town was prosperous through the century, and able to support a decided air of respectability. But not without reason do we deplore the change.

The eighteenth century saw the beginning of the great development of machinery, and in these Georgian house fronts, the productions of a mechanical age, we see the deterioration of popular architecture. Every line is rigid and without human feeling: the style, where any exists, is exotic, not national or local; classical, not vernacular. It is a learned importation, not a popular growth. The mason has dwindled into an unreasoning tool in the hands of the architect; hence the lack of personality, the absence of charm; and only in rare instances has the architect proved himself capable of supplying those qualities of design and proportion which to some slight degree compensate for the loss of interest on the part of the craftsman.

Page 3

In almost all buildings the roof is a prominent feature. In Evesham the old roofs are all made of oolite "slats," and as these are split irregularly, we have tiles of various sizes and slightly varying in shape. In roofing the plan was to place all the large tiles below, and to decrease the size gradually towards the ridge, the result being most pleasing to the eye. Besides the interest given by irregularity, the delicate silver grey of the oolite roofs, varied with tints of moss and lichen added by time, produces an effect unsurpassed by any other form of roof covering. Even the clay tiles, introduced at a later time, take their place when mellowed by sun and rain; and these throw into unpleasant relief the modern glazed Staffordshire ware which resists all softening influences. The Welsh slates, too, before perfect mechanical regularity was obtained, made a pretty roofing, though they, of course, have no local interest here.

No one would wish to dwell long on the opposite side of the contrast. We have already traced the beginning of the decline of domestic architecture, and the present condition follows as a natural development. In recent years the town has spread in every direction that is possible. In the centre is the Evesham of the past, the Evesham our forefathers built and our fathers knew. But it is encircled by streets and houses which are not the product of the vale, nor are they marked by any individual character. Rows upon rows of dwellings, symmetrical, mechanical, and monotonous, can give no pleasure to the eye, nor can the mind read in them any story save the commercial enterprise of a commercial age.

No one can note these differences without sometimes asking the cause of this lamentable degradation in the character of the buildings which compose our modern towns. They are many and complex, and too deeply rooted in present-day commercialism for us even to hope for their removal. Yet we may still turn to examples of individual effort throughout the country and find satisfaction. Here and there are houses possessing some of the finest qualities which have gone towards making our ancient streets and cities; and here we have evidence that beautiful building is still possible if we will but have it. It may be claimed that even the streets we build are historical as our old towns are historical; that they are the outcome of the age we live in. And truly this is so; and for this very reason we must needs be patient if we cannot be hopeful.

But it is something to recognise the fact that we have in our old buildings and streets records of unquestionable veracity, full of character and meaning, and such as we are entirely unable, with all our boasted advantages, to rival or even imitate. And more than this, we have in most of the work that has been left to us examples of craftsmanship, in every kind, which are invaluable as models of what we once could do, and may do, under favourable conditions, again.

Page 4

Let us then guard this goodly heritage for ourselves and our children with jealous care, trusting that in fulness of time their handiwork may be not unworthy to stand beside the best that has been accomplished in the past. These storied towns may then be with us still to teach what no history book can tell, and to inspire us with the spirit of emulation for those qualities which sleep with the Genius of the Past.

CHAPTER II

EVESHAM AND THE VALE

Great Evesham's fertile glebe what tongue hath not extolled. As though to her alone belonged the crown of gold.

—MICHAEL DRAYTON.

Evesham stands on a kind of peninsula formed by a deep loop of the river Avon on its way from Stratford-on-Avon to Tewkesbury. The broad vale in which it lies is enclosed by a semicircle of hills, which provide a background to every varied landscape, and give a sense of homeliness and seclusion which those who are familiar with unbroken stretches of level country will at once recognise and appreciate. From the east to the south-west range the Cotswolds, not striking in outline but depending for their beauty in great part upon the play of light and shade and the variety given by atmospheric effects. To dwellers in the vale the appearance of the hills not only reflects the feeling of the day but foretells the coming weather. When a delicate, blue haze shrouds their forms, entirely obliterating the more distant heights, the pleasure-seeker rests content in the promise of a fair morn; but no pleasant expectations can be formed when, robed in deepest purple, they seem to draw in and crowd together, and with vastly increased bulk to frown upon the darkening vale.

[Illustration: EVESHAM AND BREDON HILL FROM THE PARKS]

At each end of the Cotswold range, as seen from Evesham, stands, sentinel like, an isolated elevation, and in early times, as present remains testify, both these were occupied as fortified posts. To the east is Meon Hill, and to the south-west stands Bredon, the nearest and most prominent of the group. In the south-east the position of Broadway is decisively marked by its pseudo-Norman tower, and due south the level outline ended by an abrupt escarpment to the eastward is Cleeve Cloud, carrying the range on towards Cheltenham and Bristol.

But the chief glory of the vale, so far as its background is concerned, is the truly mountainous outline of the Malvern Hills, the whole length of which is seen bounding the western horizon. The breadth of the valley here is more than twenty miles from hill to hill, and includes both the Severn and its tributary stream. To how many does the

thought of sunrise not recall this undulating range illuminated and glorified by the clear beams of the early sun striking across the vale and thrown back in glittering fragments by the long line of houses at its base! And few

Page 5

more beautiful associations will gather round the sunset than those in which Malvern plays its part, the rocky skyline standing up sharp and clear against the ever-changing brilliance. As we recall the scene the dazzling effulgence fades into a glow, the glow diminishes almost imperceptibly into twilight, and, as we watch, a line of twinkling lights becomes visible beneath the hill, and one by one the stars appear in the deepening sky.

Northward there are no striking elevations, the ground sloping gradually upward by the Lench Hills and the Ridge Way towards the great central tableland; but opposite Malvern, continuing the horizon to the north of Meon, can be seen, when the air is clear, beyond the flat Stour valley, the outline of Edgehill, recalling as we gaze the years of civil strife, full of terror and bloodshed, yet round which Time has thrown his mantle of romance.

So far we have been able to dwell on the broad features of the country which it takes many ages to change or modify. From the earliest times we can record the settlers on this chosen spot must have looked out on the same hills and the same broad valley with its overarching sky. But then, instead of the "crown of gold" of which Drayton sings, or the silver sheen which in springtime now glorifies the gardens, the face of the country was, we are told, one vast thicket of brushwood and forest trees. In Blakenhurst, meaning black forest, the name of the hundred in which the town is situated, we have an indication of the former character of this region. Only here and there was a clearing with a few huts giving shelter to a scanty population of herdsmen and hunters. In those shadowy times the river was broad and shallow, unconfined to one course, here swift and clear, there sluggish and thick, feeding creeks and marshes by the way, and overgrown with rushes and water weeds; of no use probably as a water-way but prolific in fish and fowl.

During historic times the vale has been hallowed by many events, and is sacred to many memories: there is hardly an acre which does not bear evidence of the doings of our forefathers through the long ages of which we have knowledge. The site of the town was apparently unoccupied by the Romans though their thoroughfares run not far distant, and their camps are numerous on the neighbouring hills. Not until Saxon times do we hear of this fertile peninsula being inhabited, and then we are told by the chroniclers of a village called Homme near this spot, the home of only a few peasants. Like many other towns and cities, in England, Evesham is said to have had a monastic origin, and for a long succession of years it is to the monastery alone that she owes her existence and celebrity. The monastic foundation dates from about A.D. 702, and from this time until the Conquest we know little of the fortunes of the place. Access would have been difficult in those days to so retired a spot protected on three sides by a broad river, and though doubtless there was a ford passable on horseback when the water was not in flood, yet until the building of the bridge it must have been isolated indeed.

More than once we are told of ravages of the Danes. We know they penetrated far into the country, and Evesham did not escape their vigilance.

Page 6

Side by side with the growth of the abbey the little village sprang up, and gradually increased in importance. No doubt in times of stress it was accustomed to look to that wealthy institution for succour. On the Church the inhabitants would be dependent for all sacred rites and the fulfilment of their spiritual needs; but occasionally we find them waxing independent, and even defying the abbot himself. At best, however, the fight must have been an unequal one, with wealth, learning, and power on the one side, and poverty and ignorance on the other. After an honourable career of eight hundred years the monastery was overthrown. Even this great abbey, with its wealth and power and integrity, was impotent to withstand the popular prejudice aroused by the exposure of the degradation and vice prevailing in so many kindred institutions, the greed of Henry VIII., and the ruthless energy of Thomas Cromwell. In a few years it was swept away, leaving only a few beautiful fragments to tell of its former grandeur.

Evesham's next great claim to notice is as the field of the decisive battle of 1265, ending in the defeat and death of Simon de Montfort, and the allies still remaining faithful to their leader. This event, we know, added much to the fame of the monastery, and reacted on the town by bringing many pilgrims to the grave of that popular hero. The tomb of the great Earl vied with, or exceeded in popularity, the many sacred relics already enshrined in the abbey church.

In early days, as has been pointed out, Evesham lay out of the common beat; the Avon formed a *cul-de-sac*, and the main road from Worcester to London and Oxford merely skirted the town, ascending Green Hill from Chadbury, continuing its course by what is now known as Blayney's Lane, and crossing the river by a ford or bridge at Offenham Ferry. In consequence of the growing importance of the town, the road was probably diverted to its present line.

Although in pre-Reformation days the abbey dominated the town and the abbot's will was practically law to the inhabitants, yet the townsmen on the whole lived quite apart, doing their own work, managing their own affairs, and enjoying themselves in their own way. The monastery, too, was complete in itself, having its own staff of servants and needing little, if any, outside help. The precincts of the abbey were as entirely shut in with their high wall and strong gates, all fortified in the Edwardian times, as any castle; and little of what went on in this self-contained society would be known to the people living without. It must be remembered also that the townsmen had their own church, that of All Saints, and only on special occasions would they be allowed entrance to the great church belonging to the monks. It would seem that the second church, dedicated to St. Lawrence, was principally used by pilgrims, and this was connected with the monastic buildings by a covered walk of stone.

Page 7

To Edward the Confessor we learn the town owed certain rights connected with its market, and during the Middle Ages it was an important centre for the trade of the district. On account of this market, and from the fact that the greater part of the abbey lands lay on the left bank of the river, it would seem probable that a bridge of some kind was built quite early in the Middle Ages, if not before. In monastic times there existed a Guildhall, which betokens of itself a community of active citizens, and social and commercial organisation. The education of the children was probably looked after by the monks, and before the dissolution a grammar school was founded by the abbot. In Merstow Green we have the public pasture and recreation ground. When the parent abbey was removed, the town was quite able to take care of itself: in the same century a new and more spacious Town Hall and Market was built, suggesting that the old Booth Hall was insufficient for the requirements of the time; and in the early years of the reign of James I. a Royal Charter was granted to the inhabitants in the name of Prince Henry, and the little town became a corporate borough.

In the seventeenth century a revolution was effected by the river being rendered navigable from the Severn up to Stratford-on-Avon. Wharves were built, and numerous barges plied their trade up and down the stream. Through Stratford, Birmingham and the Midlands became accessible for heavy traffic by canal. In this century the peaceful vale is once more disturbed by the clang of arms. During the Civil War Evesham was an important military post, on account of its position between the Royalist cities of Worcester and Oxford, and the engagement which took place here will be recounted in due order.

No very notable events took place for many years; the gardening industry flourished, the town retained its importance as an agricultural trading centre, but progress was slow, and life free from incident. But the change from those days of leisure to these in which we live is great. Now the river has ceased to be utilised for commerce: two railways connect the town with every other place of note in the country, and the whole aspect of things is altered. The Evesham of to-day is with us; over the past a glamour is spread.

It may be that, even if we had the chance, we would not return to the past, but over many of us few other studies exercise so great a fascination as the contemplation of the "good old days" which are gone.

CHAPTER III

THE ABBEY

Eoves here dwelt and was a swain, Wherefore men call this Eovesholme.

—LEGEND ON MONASTIC SEAL.
(Modernised.)

THE FOUNDING OF THE ABBEY

Page 8

In the dim ages of antiquity, when the face of the country, now busy and fertile, was one dense forest, with here and there a settlement of dwellers in huts, tillers of the land, herdsmen, or hunters, there lived near the spot now occupied by the thriving town of Evesham a swineherd named Eoves. One day, we are told, a favourite sow was missing, and her master hunted brake and briar, far and near, in search of her. While on this errand he penetrated far into the depths of the forest, when suddenly he was startled by a radiant light, in which appeared three figures of women dazzling by their beauty. The vision faded, and on the spot the joyful herdsman discovered his sow with a litter of young.

The news was soon noised abroad, and at length reached the ears of Egwin, the Bishop of the diocese, at Worcester. Egwin inquired into the matter, visited the place, and was himself rewarded by the appearance of the three figures, whom he pronounced to be no other than the Virgin Mary with two attendant angels. Moreover, he was commanded by the Holy Virgin to build a church in that very place. The Bishop, we know, built a church here, founded a monastery, and himself became first abbot. These events occurred early in the eighth century.

Egwin was a man of high connections and influence, and before long the new institution was handsomely and sufficiently endowed. Ethelred, King of Mercia, his nephew Kenred, who succeeded him, and Offa, King of the East Saxons, being the chief donors.

There is another picturesque legend concerning Egwin, which is preserved in the coat-of-arms used by the monastery. It appears that the prelate was falsely charged with certain offences, and to prove his innocence he made a journey to Rome; but before setting off, he fastened a chain and horselock to his ankle and threw the key into the river Avon. On his arrival in the Holy City, a fish was caught by his companions in whose belly the very key was found which had been cast into the river before his departure! Another account relates that the fish who had swallowed the key leapt on board before the travellers reached their destination! The legend of the foundation of the Abbey is engraved on the conventual seal in a series of scenes; and we know it was also depicted in the glass of one of the large windows in the church.

[Illustration: The Bell Tower Evesham]

How far the events of this early time are historical, how far traditional, or even mythical, it is impossible to say, but for many years afterwards the record gives us merely the scanty information we should expect. We hear of the depredations of the Danes, and the destruction by them of the monastery, and later of discords and dissensions between monks and canons; indeed, it is not until the reign of Canute that the Benedictines gained complete and final possession of the Abbey and its estates. The first church and monastery were probably of wood. Later, in the Saxon period, stone would have taken its place, but the form was no doubt primitive in the extreme. The

founder's tomb would be the principal treasure, but, as time went on, other relics were acquired, and many shrines needed to contain the precious remains.

Page 9

It was to King Canute that the monks owed the relics of Saint Wistan, which held the place of honour in the church in mediaeval days. They were enclosed in a magnificent tomb erected behind the high altar, in the position occupied by the shrine of Edward the Confessor in the Abbey Church of Westminster. Soon afterwards we hear of the acquisition by purchase of the body of Saint Odulf from some travelling merchants, dealers in relics of sanctity, who, as will be seen, had no right to have the remains of the saint in their possession.

Saint Wistan was a scion of the royal house of Mercia, heir to the throne, and for a short period nominal monarch, but his nature was more fitted for a religious than a political life, and he took little part in the affairs of the state. In the year 849 he fell a victim to the treachery of his cousin Britfard, a rival claimant to the kingdom.

Saint Odulf was not an Englishman, his whole life having been spent at the monasteries of Utrecht and Stavoren in the Netherlands. Several miracles are recorded as having been worked by him both before and after death. To the monastery of Stavoren, which he had founded, his body belonged by right, but from here it was stolen and conveyed to England. By unknown means it came into the hands of certain vendors of holy wares, as related above, and from them it was purchased by Abbot Aelfward, for something like a hundred pounds, about the year 1034.

A curious story relating to the remains of this saint is told in the monastic chronicles. Edith, the queen of Edward the Confessor, being anxious to acquire some precious relic for purposes of her own, called upon a number of the religious houses of England to send their treasures to Gloucester, there to be inspected by her, and, among others, the convent of Evesham sent the remains of Saint Odulf and Saint Egwin. As the queen was examining the shrine of the former, she was suddenly struck with a peculiar form of blindness, and not until she had invoked the saint's intercession, and declared her intention of restoring the sacred relics to the monks, did she regain her sight!

Another interesting personality gained in a very different manner the reverence, if not the worship, of the religious devotees of the time. This was Saint Wulsy, a hermit of repute, who, we are told, lived for seventy-five years a life of contemplation and seclusion. From Crowland Abbey, his earlier home, Wulsy was led blindfolded, that he might not be contaminated by the world, to Evesham, and near the church he built with his own hands a chapel in honour of Saint Kenelm, saint and martyr, with a cell adjoining, in which he spent the rest of his life.

In the reign of Edward the Confessor the church was rebuilt and greatly enlarged by Abbot Mannie, noted as a skilful craftsman in gold and silver; but even this must have seemed to the ambitious Norman insignificant, and unworthy of its high purpose, for very soon after the Conquest it was pulled down to make way for a much larger and more dignified building.

Page 10

THE ABBEY AFTER THE CONQUEST

William the Conqueror did not oust the prudent Abbot whom he found in office at Evesham. A favourite at the court of Edward the Confessor, Abbot Agelwy stood high also in Harold's regard, and was not only unmolested when William took up the reins of power, but was appointed to other offices of great trust and political importance. On his death the abbacy was given to a Norman monk, Walter of Cerasia, and in his time the great church of which some foundations still remain was begun. The "wily Agelwy" had left "four chests of silver" towards this reconstruction, but this was not enough to build even the crypt and chancel, and we find Abbot Walter sending the chief treasures of the monastery, namely, the shrines containing the relics of Saint Odulf and Saint Egwin, round the country in charge of certain monks for the collection of more funds.

According to the monkish historian Saint Odulf refused to allow himself to be used for this purpose, and after one experiment the attempt was given up. The story goes that the shrine was carried to Winchcomb and laid in the church there, with the intention of being brought out next day into the market-place for exhibition, and probably with the hope of some cures being effected. But when the bearers tried to remove it from the church they could not with all their strength raise it from the floor; so the sermon was preached outside, a collection made, and the shrine (which now could be lifted with perfect ease) brought home. The expedition with Saint Egwin was quite successful, and a considerable sum of money collected towards the building.

As time went on the Monastery waxed in wealth and importance, and succeeding abbots completed, furnished, and decorated the new church planned by Abbot Walter. It had the usual choir, nave, central tower, and transepts; and cloisters surrounded by monastic buildings. Those who know the larger Norman churches of England will be able to form a fairly correct impression of the church at this time; but it is impossible to imagine truly the effect of the painted walls, arches and columns, the rich monuments, shrines, and altars decorated with fine embroideries, goldsmith's work, and jewellery; all illuminated by windows of richly coloured glass.

From time to time Abbots with a taste or genius for building added to the structure. In the thirteenth century the central tower fell, and this was in part rebuilt and the choir repaired by Marleberge, an Abbot conspicuous by his ability, of whom we shall hear later. It was Marleberge who helped to complete a bell tower, which also fell to the ground not many years after, to be replaced by the beautiful campanile which still remains. Although the great church of the Monastery was the principal part of that institution, and on it was lavished all the wealth and skill available, yet it was but a small part of the whole group of

Page 11

buildings forming the “mitred Abbey” of Saint Mary and Saint Egwin. Round the cloister were ranged the principal chambers accommodating the abbot and the monks. Here were the chapter house in which meetings of various kinds were held, the refectory where meals were served and partaken of, the long dormitory where the monks slept, and the scriptorium in which the writing and illuminating was done. Round the outer courtyard, entered by the great gatehouse, which could be defended in case of need, were other buildings, barns, stables, and servants’ quarters. Not far away was the hospital, and almost adjoining the principal gatehouse was the Almonry where the poorer guests were received and food served out to the needy. This building exists at the present time, and it will be observed that it is not enclosed within the boundary wall but is open on one side to the public green.

[Illustration: THE GATEHOUSE AND ALMONRY]

The Monastery owned much land, mostly in the neighbourhood, and before the dissolution the income through various channels has been calculated at about eighty thousand pounds of our present money. Dr. Jessop has described with wonderful realism the daily routine of the Benedictine monasteries, and the chronicles of Evesham have provided him with some of his most valuable information. In addition to the daily services which occupied much of their time, we find every member of the community busy with some work specially entrusted to him. In a well-regulated monastery idleness was impossible; the limited time permitted for leisure was usually occupied by recreation, gardening and bowls both being favourite pastimes. Of course writing and illumination were in constant demand, and Dr. Jessop has pointed out that in addition to the production of church service books, of music, and educational work in connection with the school, “a small army of writers” must have been needed in the “business department of the scriptorium.” The Benedictine rule would appear to have been framed with the idea of giving full employment to every inmate of the monastery.

Considering the wealth of the institution, consisting for the most part in land, and the responsibilities consequently incurred, we are not surprised to read that before the dissolution the Abbey of Evesham contained eighty-nine monks and sixty-five servants. The property did not all lie in the near neighbourhood. In the fifteenth century the Abbey of Alcester came into the hands of the Monastery. At an earlier period the Priory of Penwortham in Lancashire was granted to this wealthy body, and in the time of William Rufus monks were sent to a religious house at Odensee in the island of Fuenen, in the Baltic sea, to instruct the members in the Evesham usage of the rule of Saint Benedict. This Priory became a little later a cell of the great Abbey.

Page 12

Life in the Monastery of Evesham seems to have been sustained at a high standard throughout its long career. If all the “religious houses” had kept true to their vows and aims as that at Evesham did we should no doubt have a very different story to tell. One abbot alone appears to have been an exception to this general rule of good conduct. This was Roger Norreys, a “dissolute monk” of Canterbury, who was thrust upon the unwilling convent by Prince John when acting as regent in King Richard’s absence. After many years, and with much difficulty, he was convicted “of seven or eight distinct offences” and deposed. After the public exposure of his vicious life, and his unjust and tyrannical rule, it is surprising that instead of being severely punished he was sent to the cell of Penwortham and allowed to hold office as Prior until his death. The story of the fight between the convent, headed by Thomas de Marleberge, a clever and well educated young monk who afterwards became abbot, and the wicked and shameless Norreys, is related at full length in the chronicles which have come down to us, written it would seem by Marleberge’s own hand. The scandalous behaviour of the Abbot and the neglected state of his house was no secret, and the knowledge of it prompted the good bishop of Worcester in an attempt to exceed his rights by visiting the Abbey in order to inquire into the state of things existing there. In this act he defeated his own ends, for the Abbot and monks immediately united in common cause against so flagrant a breach of their privileges, claiming, what was finally acceded to them, exemption from all authority except that of Rome. The Abbot left the Monastery, and the monks barricaded every entrance, so that when the bishop arrived he was forced to encamp with his retinue upon the green outside the walls. By the indiscretion of the bishop a legal point was raised upon which the monks would by no means yield, preferring their present miserable condition rather than allowing the slightest infringement of what they believed to be their rights. The whole story, giving a curious insight into the state of the country at that time, is too long to relate here: an expensive and troublesome lawsuit followed, which was carried from court to court in England and Rome, and was finally settled some fifty years later in favour of the Monastery.

The last of the abbots and one of the most striking figures on the roll was Clement Lichfield. To him we owe much of the architectural beauty of both the parish churches; and besides erecting the bell tower he adorned the choir of the “great church,” as it was called, with perpendicular decoration.

THE DISSOLUTION

Page 13

Philip Hawford cannot be counted on the list of abbots. After having borne and yielded much, Lichfield resigned, and Hawford was appointed in his place, merely that he might surrender his charge in due form to the King, an act to which it was impossible for Abbot Lichfield to condescend, Hawford afterwards became Dean of Worcester, and there in the cathedral, in a recess behind the reredos, his effigy may still be seen, in full abbatial vestments, mitre and staff. Abbot Lichfield was allowed to retire to the manor house of Offenham, where he died in 1546, and was buried in the lovely chapel he had built in early life on to the church of All Saints beneath the shelter of his own Abbey.

* * * * *

The story of the Monastery has now come to an end. In 1536 the lesser priories and monasteries were suppressed, and we can well imagine the tremor which this daring act of Henry must have sent through the religious world. We can be sure the blow was unexpected by the monks themselves. Only a few years before this Clement Lichfield had devoted much labour and money to the decoration of the great church, and his last work was the building of the tower which stands to this day. We can never know whether the architectural additions which he made to the parish churches were suggested by the suspicion that they might survive that glorious edifice under whose shadow they reposed; but in his later years of retirement surely we may believe that he experienced a sorrowful gratification at the thought that some of his work would remain for the admiration of future ages, and that his mortal remains would lie in peace within the chapel which, in his youth, he had planned and adorned.

While Thomas Cromwell and his agents were engaged in their grim work of destruction we can fancy how Rumour first made herself busy; how the people talked of royal commissions and inquiries; tales would reach them of priories and convents which were seized, and of monks and nuns thrown upon the world. Messengers were seen to come and go, and the great gatehouse of the Abbey was eagerly watched by the curious and anxious townspeople. They talked from door to door, and in clusters in the market-place, and on Merstow Green, from which the precincts were entered. At last the blow fell! One by one the monks filed out of their historic home in solemn procession, their heads bent beneath a weight of misery they were hardly able to bear, though not yet capable of realising the full meaning of the calamity which had befallen them. It is true they were not sent into the world entirely without means of subsistence; some who were in holy orders had been appointed to livings by the Abbot and convent; to others pensions were allowed, but what would this avail in their time of sorrow!

Then the grand pile of Gothic buildings was resigned to the King's agents, and a great cloud hung over the little town. In a short time the gorgeous shrines and altars were plundered and desecrated; the buildings were sold; and before the eyes of the astonished inhabitants tower and pinnacle, church and chapter-house, gatehouse and cloister, fell a prey to the hand of the destroyer!

Page 14

CHAPTER IV

THE REMAINS OF THE ABBEY

“_... work, that stood inviolate_ *When axe and hammer battered down the state*
... the tall Belfry of the Abbey Gate *Yet stands majestic, pinnacled, elate,*
And fills the Vale with music far and wide.”

—HERBERT NEW.

The earliest architectural remains are the work of Norman abbots. The most perfect relic of this period is Abbot Reginald's Gateway, now leading from the market-place into the churchyard, which consists of side walls both decorated with round arches and shafts. The building above has been much “restored.” As there are no signs of stone groining, the superstructure was, in all probability, always of timber, but the design of the arcades, and certain moulded arch stones found embedded in the soil below would seem to point to the existence in former times of two stone arches, one at each end, which would add much to the strength of the building. This gateway stood in a line of wall enclosing the monastic precincts and the outer yard in which stand the parish churches, and stretching to the river eastwards and westwards. The lower portions of the walls have recently been cleared of earth and exposed to view. It will be noticed that the soil has risen by gradual accumulation to a height of several feet above its original level in the seven hundred and fifty years which have elapsed since the construction. In monastic times this gateway figured in the important ceremony attending the installation of a new abbot. Before entering the precincts of the monastery the destined prelate, accompanied by his chaplains and personal following, halted in this corner of the market-place, and after entering one of the adjoining houses where his shoes were removed he proceeded barefoot into the churchyard. The whole convent, duly accoutred, were in waiting, and as soon as the new abbot appeared in the gate they emerged in ordered procession from the north porch of the great church to meet him. After various formalities he was solemnly escorted to the church, where further important ceremonials were performed.

[Illustration: ABBOT REGINALD'S GATEWAY]

To the previous century may be assigned the bases of the substantial piers which stood at the crossing of the nave and transept, and supported the tower of the great church. These remains may be seen in the excavated hollow a few steps from the southern side of bell tower. The tower of the church was begun by Abbot Walter soon after the Conquest, and there can be little doubt that these massive foundations belong to his time. If we follow the line of wall to the south from this point we come to an arch, bare on this side but elaborately carved on the other with two rows of figures under

canopies. This archway was in the east walk of the cloisters, and gave entrance to a vaulted passage connecting the cloisters with

Page 15

the chapter-house. Though the figures have been considerably mutilated and weather-worn it will be seen that the carving is of great beauty; the outer figures are seated while the inner ones stand, and over both are placed canopies of tabernacle work. We know this as the work of Abbot Brokehampton, by whom it was erected early in the fourteenth century. The bare face of the arch was originally hidden by the stone vault forming the roof of the passage already referred to. The chapter-house stood out in the field; but much farther, even to the edge of the bank which slopes down to the monks' fish ponds, did the choir and Lady chapel extend.

As we retrace our steps we follow the line of the transepts. When we reach the exposed foundations, let us pause awhile and allow our imagination full sway. We are standing in the midst of the choir, in the "dim religious light" of a great mediaeval church. Above is the "high embowed roof" of the central tower; around are the stalls set in a screen of woodwork intricately carved. All is mellowed by the "storied windows," which break the light into many coloured rays. Looking westward, over the blank wall, we should see in vision the tall rood screen and gallery, and, stretching far beyond, the long vista of Norman arches and painted roof: and through the screen glimpses would reach us of the many-coloured west window. Let us turn round, and in place of sunlit trees and river conjure up the broad flight of stone steps, the stately sanctuary above, with its glorious reredos enriched with tabernacle work and carving, gold, silver, and colours; and the clerestory lights shedding that sweet lustre we have seen somewhere never to forget!

The bell tower rising in solitary state beside us cannot wait for its true chronological order. It is one of the few existing examples of many separate belfries built to hold the bells either for convenience, or in cases where the towers of the church were of insufficient strength. As a rule these buildings were much broader and less graceful in design. This tower has been criticised as "squat," but considering its use it will be seen that a broad base is essential to its character. In reality, it is remarkable how much delicacy and grace have been given by form and proportion, without lessening the strength or utility. The tower was built by Clement Lichfield in the last years of his abbacy, and hardly finished at his resignation in 1539. That the builder and his local contemporaries were proud of this last ornament to the town, is proved by the inscription on Lichfield's grave, which concludes with the line "in whose time the new tower of Evesham was built."

Page 16

The bell tower is indeed Evesham's chief glory, from some standpoints her principal cause for pride. Unique in its character, it strikes every beholder with surprise and pleasure in proportion to his capacity for the appreciation of stately form and exquisite workmanship. Built by the accomplished and learned Lichfield in the pure perpendicular style, at a time when Gothic architecture was fast sinking in its decline, it would seem to be, not only one of the triumphs of mediaeval art, but one of the very last efforts of a dying tradition; in it we see embodied the lofty thought of one of our noblest abbots. Though it has not witnessed the beginnings of the conventual life, the early struggles, nor the palmy days of monasticism, it forms a connecting link between the dim past and this present time. It is, as it were, a monument perpetuating the memory of a great period and a great institution.

If the atmosphere be clear we should ascend the spiral staircase, and from the summit, no great height indeed, we shall gain a view of the town with the encircling river, and the vale with the surrounding hills. The tower still performs its function, and every day the chimes play a different tune, all familiar airs that never tire, but with repetition seem rather to gain in association and charm.

If we take the path from the tower which brings us to the left side of Saint Lawrence's church, we skirt an old wall which bounded the great courtyard of the Abbey, and joined the great church to the gate-house. We soon come to a door of fifteenth century workmanship, and close by is a curious Gothic chimney of about the same date. On the inner side was the porter's lodge, and from here to the adjacent church of Saint Lawrence ran a covered way, probably a vaulted passage like a cloister walk, through which the officiating priest would enter. If we proceed we soon find ourselves at the bottom of Vine Street, and looking across Merstow Green; and over the house-tops, bounding the horizon we see Clark's Hill, a steep bank on the opposite side of the river, traditionally said to have been planted by the monks as a vineyard. On our left is a large plastered building enclosed within substantial iron railings. This was once the great gatehouse of the Monastery, and was built in the fourteenth century by Abbot Chiriton, who obtained a special licence from King Edward the Third to fortify the abbey precincts. The windows and the wing projecting outwards are comparatively modern, but a Gothic window may be seen in the wall facing the churchyard, and the original arches can be traced on the garden front. Close by, and possibly adjoining, was the Barton Gate which led to the stables and outhouses. The long low building of stone and timber, washed over in the old manner with lime, which rises from the grass on our left was once the Almonry of the Abbey. It is now occupied as offices and separate dwellings. The front is extremely picturesque with its buttresses,

Page 17

perpendicular window and quaint openings. The western portion, built mainly of timber, with here and there the remains of carving, and a diaper imprinted on the plaster, contains the great fireplace, clearly indicated on this side by the mass of solid stonework. Turning the corner into Little Abbey Lane we come to the yard at the back, and we may be allowed to view the interior of the Almoner's kitchen, which still retains some of its primitive character. From this apartment a passage runs through the entire length of the building, and this was no doubt originally continued, forming a communication with the main buildings of the Monastery. In the corner of the courtyard, beneath a brick gable which is mere modern patchwork, the passage takes an abrupt turn, and in the angle is placed a curious "lantern" of stone, which, from its character, may very probably be the work of the Gloucester school of masons of the fifteenth century. The proper position and use of this curious relic is only guessed at. The chambers below are said to have served the purpose of a prison at one time, the prisoners' food being placed in the lantern, and taken by the unfortunate inmates through the hatch cut in the wall behind. The passage is continued from this corner to the outer wall of the building where it abruptly terminates in a screen of modern construction. If we go farther round this block into the garden we shall come to another cottage, and in the front room we may see a well-carved fireplace ornamented with five quatrefoils. It is composed of the oolite stone used for all the finer and more important work in the Monastery, but has been lately painted, with unfortunate result. Beyond a partition is a beautifully carved fragment which would seem to have formed part of an elaborate shrine or chantry, but now serves as the lintel of the scullery window. Overlooking the garden in which we stand as we leave the door is the gable end of a plain rectangular building, now cottages, but formerly the Abbot's stables.

One more relic completes the list of the remains of the "late Abbey," as Leland pathetically alludes to that important establishment. Walking across the Green we see before us an old stone porch embattled above, and behind it a plain building of two storeys. This was the Grammar School of Abbot Lichfield, and his inscription over the door may still be deciphered, "ORATE PRO ANIMA CLEMENTIS ABBAT." The schoolhouse is of timber, and has been little altered, except that the front is spoiled by the substitution of brick for wood and plaster; the ornamental battlement on the porch is also of recent date.

For more than a hundred years after the destruction of the noble pile the site was used as a stone quarry, and fragments may be found in almost all the older houses in the town, and in many farm buildings in the neighbourhood. There is hardly an old garden near that has not some carved stones of curious shape recognisable by the antiquary as having once formed part of a shaft, a window, or an archway of the proud Abbey. Of these scattered fragments the most important is the lectern of alabaster, Romanesque in style, now, after long misuse and neglect serving its original purpose in the church of

Saint Egwin at Norton, a village lying nearly three miles to the north of the town. A description of this relic will be found in the last section of this work.

Page 18

The local tradition of the splendour of the Monastery is no doubt handed down to us by Thomas Habington, the antiquary, who visited the town in 1640. "There was not to be found," he writes, with pardonable exaggeration, "out of Oxford or Cambridge, so great an assemblage of religious buildings in the kingdom"!

CHAPTER V

THE PARISH CHURCHES

The two parish churches, placed together in one yard, make with the bell tower an unusually striking group. What then would be the feelings aroused in the spectator were the great church, a cathedral in magnitude and splendour, still visible, rising majestically above roofs and spires. To us the Abbey which is gone can do no more than add solemnity to the scene which once it graced. It matters little by which entrance we approach the churchyard, for from every side the buildings group harmoniously; each of the steeples acting as it were as a foil to the other: and both the spires unite in adding dignity to the bell tower. The churchyard in Norman times would seem to have been part of the Abbey precincts, as it is enclosed within Abbot Reginald's wall already described, and a second wall, part of which is still standing, divided it from the Monastery and the monastic grounds.

The Church of All Saints seems to have served, from very early times, as the parish church. As we examine it we read, as in an ancient and partly illegible manuscript, its long story. The restorer, more ruthless than Age or Time, has, with the best intentions, laid his heavy hand upon it, and obliterated much of its character and history; but enough remains to interest us, though pleasure is now mingled with much vain regret. In the simple Norman arch through which we pass as we enter the nave, and perhaps the western wall with the small round-headed windows, we find the earliest records. The slight tower with its sharply-pointed windows and delicate spire was added, probably supplanting an earlier and simple porch, in the time of the Edwards. The arches and northern clerestory of the nave belong to a rather later period when the church was found too narrow for the increasing population; while the arches on the southern side with no clerestory above, are probably later still. The choir and north wall of the nave are the work of the restorer, and tell us nothing but a tale of culpable neglect and mistaken zeal! The head of the north door of the chancel is, however, a relic of the original building, and this should be carefully examined. It is beautifully cut with double rows of cusps, and is of fourteenth century workmanship. The latest Gothic additions are the work of Clement Lichfield. To this Abbot we owe the outer porch so deeply panelled, with its two entrance doorways, its pierced battlements, and finely carved timber roof; to him also do we breathe our thanks as we stand looking up at the lovely vaulting of the Lichfield Chapel built by him in his younger

Page 19

days when Prior of the Monastery. Here was Lichfield buried, and beneath the floor his body lies; formerly a memorial brass engraved with effigy and inscription marked the spot, but this has long since disappeared. The inscription, however, can be read on a tablet lately erected by pious hands to perpetuate his memory. Over the entrance we may still see the initials of the builder carved upon an ornamental shield. The windows are now filled with modern glass, not unworthily telling the oft-repeated story of the "vanished Abbey." In the upper lights are represented figures of the Virgin Mary, and of Eoves with his swine. The shields on either side of the former figure bear the lily and the rose; to the left of Eoves are the arms of the Borough of Evesham, and on the right those attributed to the ancient Earls of Mercia. The figures below show Saint Egwin, with the arms of the See of Worcester to the left, those of the Monastery to the right; and Abbot Lichfield, with his own arms (Lichfield alias Wych) on the left, and those of the Rev. F.W. Holland, to whose memory the windows were glazed, on the right. In the west window of the chapel is Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, with the arms of de Montfort on the left, and those of James the First, who granted the Borough its charter, on the right. Above him is his opponent and conqueror, Prince Edward; to the left his own arms as eldest son of the monarch, and to the right the traditional arms of Edward the Confessor; who according to the Abbey Chronicles first granted the town a market and the right of levying tolls. In one of the carved panels below these windows is a variation of the coat-of-arms of the Monastery.

As we leave the church porch we shall notice the black and white house adjoining Abbot Reginald's gateway on the right. This is now a private house, but was until lately the Vicarage. The lower rooms have been made to project to the level of the first floor, and the picturesqueness given by an overhanging storey has thus been lost. In one of these rooms is a large fifteenth-century fireplace of stone.

The Church of Saint Lawrence has little to say to us of its history. Though an old foundation the irregular western tower is the earliest part now standing, and this is not older than the fourteenth or fifteenth century; the rest of the church was built in Lichfield's time, but after having lain in ruins for many years it underwent a complete restoration towards the middle of last century, with the result that much of the Gothic character is lost. The general plan of the church with its panelled arcade and open clerestory is original, but the northern side is modern, and compared with the old work hard and lacking in feeling. The east window and the chapel now used as the baptistery are both fine examples of perpendicular architecture and worthy of careful study. The carved detail round the east window with its playful treatment of flying buttresses, battlements, and pinnacles is charming

Page 20

in its delicacy and proportion; and some of the detail is almost as sharp as when it left the mason's hand four hundred years ago. The chapel is, in its way, perfect, a complete vault of fan tracery. The decayed condition of the broken canopies, once flanking an altar, and which were the work of the same hands as the east window, shows into what a dilapidated condition the church had fallen. There was a corresponding chapel on the north side of the nave, but this has been long demolished. The present font is an unsympathetic copy of the old one, dating from the fifteenth century and still preserved at Abbey Manor. Outside the tower on the north side, and set on a level with the eye, should be noticed a carving of the Crucifixion, much worn by weather and rough usage; but even yet may be traced a master hand in the attitudes and proportion of the figures.

CHAPTER VI

THE TOWN

The towne of Evesham is meetly large and well builded of tymbre ... The market is very celebrate.—LELAND, *circ.* 1540.

The town of Evesham consists, by reason of its insular position, of only one thoroughfare. The river winds round enclosing it on three sides, so that, there being but one bridge, there is no other outlet except towards the north. There are four principal streets: High Street, which was in all probability an extension of the “celebrate” market along the Worcester and North Road; Vine Street and Bridge Street, both skirting the boundary wall of the abbey precincts, and so probably the oldest in their origin; and Port Street, the main thoroughfare of Bengeworth, forming part of the London road beyond the river bridge. High Street, Bridge Street, and Vine Street lead from the Market Place, and here we will stand and look around. On the north side is the “market-sted,” “fayre and large” as when Leland viewed it, but now converted to private uses. It is a fine example of Gothic timber construction; but to think of it as it appeared to Leland’s admiring gaze, we must imagine the walls and partitions of the lower storey cleared away, and fancy it supported only by massive pillars of oak, roughly hewn and of great strength. Below was the market sheltered from the rain, and such as may still be seen at Ledbury and other places; and above were chambers devoted to the business of the town, and presumably of the various guilds, of which little is now known.

About 1586 the “New Town Hall” was erected, probably of stone from the ruins of the Abbey, on the west side of the square; but from this point the older part of the building is entirely obscured by recent additions, and to understand its first appearance we must walk round it into Vine Street. The general plan, though the difference in material necessitates changes in form, is much the same as in the older Booth Hall, for by this name the older market hall is known. There is the basement, open until lately

Page 21

and used as a market, and above is the large hall, and the rooms for public business. The clock turret and ornamented gable were added in commemoration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee of 1887. Little else calls for notice, but the group of timber gables in the corner near the churchyard will certainly attract the eye by their picturesque grouping. The most prominent of these gables is carved with a flowing design, and in the upper angle can be seen a large T, and some smaller letters which have not been deciphered. Above the chimneys rise the tower and spire of All Saints Church.

[Illustration: *In the Market Place, Evesham*]

The breadth of High Street may be accounted for by the supposition that the roadsides in this direction were broad and grass-grown, and used for the market, which was large and important. Indeed, until quite lately, the fairs now carried on in a closed market were held in the open street, the animals being penned up by hurdles. Bordering the green sward houses would have sprung up to cater for the wants of the farmers and drovers, and, as the town grew larger, a continuous line of street would be formed, and the grass edge would naturally be paved for cleanliness and convenience. The irregularity of the houses in shape, size, and colour will at once strike the visitor. The primitive timber has been almost entirely superseded by the more "respectable" and secure brick front, but the interiors and the backs of the houses show that the construction is often really of wood with a thin veneer of old-fashioned respectability. High Street leads on to Green Hill, now severed from the town by the railway, and becomes the main road northwards. Near the end of the street, towards the railway stations, is a building of stone and brick thinly coated with plaster, roofed with stone tiles, and with a recessed porch and balcony. The railing of the balcony especially should be noticed, being of unusual design, and very likely the work of the local blacksmith more than two hundred years ago. The name, Almswood, reminds us that here was once a wood belonging to the office of the Almoner to the Abbey. On the same side of the street, nearer the centre of the town, is another interesting house. It is a mansion of brick, and in front are some very fine railings fixed on a low wall of stone. The door, which is in the middle of the front, is approached by wide steps, and over it is a heavy canopy supported by wrought-iron brackets of decorated scroll work. This house belonged to a certain Thomas Cookes, whose family were large landowners in the neighbourhood of Tardebigg in the northern part of the county, and was built by him in the time of King William III. It contains a fine staircase, ornamental fireplaces, and panelled walls. At the back is a paved yard enclosed by short wings, and from here a stairway and tunnel lead under a narrow street into what was once a large and beautiful garden. Though now sadly curtailed

Page 22

and overlooked, enough is left to show what it must have been like in former days. Beside the main path is a tall and well-cut sundial of stone, with a weather-vane at the top pierced with the initials of Robert Cookes, and the date 1720. At the end of the garden is a break in the wall, formerly railed across, and flanked on either side by tapering columns. This was a favourite device for obtaining a long vista extending beyond the garden, and when it was constructed the view over the meadows and river to Clark's Hill must have formed a charming outlook. It is now obstructed and spoiled by a modern street. In the farther corner of this old-fashioned garden is a tower of wood known as the Temple, and at the back of this an external staircase winds, giving access to the upper rooms, both curiously decorated with carving and painting. There is little doubt that some of the woodwork came from the Abbey. Facing this is an arbour formed of a huge Jacobean mantel of carved oak, bearing in the centre the arms of the Borough of Evesham.

[Illustration: (High Street)]

An eighteenth century romance attaches to this property. A young doctor, skilful, extravagant, and presumably attractive, won the hand of a Miss Cookes, who inherited the place from her father. After the death of his wife this physician, Baylies by name, being deeply in debt, and having mortgaged his property, disappeared. The house and garden were taken possession of by one of the principal creditors, who must have justified his claim, for the house long remained in his family. The enterprising doctor was next heard of in Prussia, where he became court physician and adviser to the Emperor Frederick the Great.

Three old streets lead out of High Street. To the west, Magpie Lane ends in the river meadows; and to the east, Swan Lane and Oat Street reach the river at the Mill.

Vine Street is little more than a continuation of the Market Place towards Merstow Green; and its old name, Pig Market, shows that it was used in the same manner. Here, again, many of the old houses have been refronted, thus appearing of a much later date than they are in reality. The Georgian dislike of gabled irregularity is once more exemplified. But Vine Street is saved from becoming commonplace by the low line of buildings at the end, still known as the Almonry, and over which the Gatehouse, in spite of its dismantled and modernised state, still seems to keep guard.

Bridge Street is probably the most ancient of the streets. The houses on the south side have gardens reaching to the Abbey walls, a position which would add greatly to their security in early times, and the narrowness of the roadway also goes towards proving its antiquity. This must have been the most frequented thoroughfare, leading as it did in old times to the ford, and afterwards to the bridge and the Abbot's mill beside it. Here were the oldest inns; and though all the house-fronts have been sadly modernised,

either by the insertion of huge plateglass windows or in some less defensible manner, yet the eye still passes with pleasure from house to house, and the effect of the irregularity, heightened by the contrast of light and shade, is picturesque in the extreme.

Page 23

Starting at the top we have on one side the old Booth Hall already described. On this side the bay windows projecting from the level of the first floor add much to the quaint effect. Almost opposite is "The Alley" continuing one side of High Street into Bridge Street and the Market Place. As seen from the High Street side this narrow passage between the shops retains much of its old character, and the windows with their wooden frames and mullions are worth notice. The house on the left next to the Bank with its prominent bay windows was at one time the town house of a family named Langstone, and it was here that King Charles the First stayed and held his "Court" in 1644. Almost opposite is a stately front of brick dating from the next century, of elegant proportions and with well-designed spouts. Further down on the right side is a much renovated gabled building of timber, possessing a fine doorway of the fifteenth century with its massive door and wrought-iron hinges intact. Almost next door is "The Crown," one of the old coaching inns with the courtyard opening on the street. At one time an open gallery ran round the first floor, and traces of this may be seen on the further side. A little above the old house we have just noticed was the White Hart Inn, the most celebrated house when country inns were in their prime. It is now in the occupation of a market gardener and has been much altered, but some of the passages and rooms are still to be seen in the back premises. An amusing story connected with the White Hart Inn has been revived by Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps, who by means of it has endeavoured to explain the line in "Troilus and Cressida." "The fool slides o'er the ice that you should break." The anecdote is related by Robert Armin, who claims to have been an eye-witness of the incident; and this would seem probable, as the local touches are correct and Armin was for some time a member of the company alluded to. It is to be found in a work entitled, *Foole Vpon Foole, or Sixte Sortes of Sottes*, published in 1605, and re-edited and issued, with the author's name attached, in 1608, as *A Nest of Ninnies*. The fool referred to in the line quoted above is suspected to be not merely the imaginary representative of a type but the popular local Fool of Shakespeare's time, a fellow of brilliant parts, but eccentric, and, we must suppose, lacking in balance and common sense. We are told that one winter Lord Chandos's players visited Evesham, and Jack Miller, our Fool, became greatly attached to the company and in particular to Grumball the clown; indeed, so greatly was he enamoured that he "swore he would goe all the world over with Grumball." The townspeople being loth to lose so popular a character, Jack was locked in a room at the back of the White Hart Inn from which he could see the players journeying on their way to Pershore, their next stage, by the road on the farther side of the river. With difficulty he contrived

Page 24

to escape by the window, and ran down to the water's edge. The stream, says our author, "was frozen over thinly," but Miller "makes no more adoe, but venters over the haven, which is by the long bridge, as I gesse some forty yards over; yet he made nothing of it, but my hart aked when my eares heard the ise crack all the way. When he was come unto me," continues Armin, "I was amazed, and tooke up a brick-bat, which lay there by, and threw it, which no sooner fell upon the ise but it burst. Was not this strange that a foole of thirty yeeres was borne of that ise which would not endure the fall of a brick-bat?"! The fact that Robert Armin and William Shakespeare were fellow-actors at the Globe Theatre lends probability to Mr. Halliwell-Phillipps' elucidation.

Continuing our way beyond the Crown Hotel we see on our right, below the level of the street, a quaint row of gables with little shops below quite unchanged by the present conditions of trade. Passing onward towards the bridge we shall see to the best advantage the full effect of this most picturesque of streets.

Alas! that modern enterprise and modern requirements should have demanded the removal of such a bridge as fifty years ago spanned the stream in eight irregular arches. Here we have convenience, but will this condone for the charm of picturesqueness and long association? We cannot but mourn over the loss. From the bridge we look up the river to the weir, mill and water-meadows. On the right, by the yard not far up the stream, stood, in the troublous reign of King Stephen a castle; and from this fortress William de Beauchamp sallied forth, forcibly entered the Abbey, and carried away the goods of the Church. But an abbot in those days was quite equal to meeting a hereditary sheriff on his own ground. Abbot William de Andeville descended on the castle, took it, razed it to the ground, and consecrated the site as a cemetery; no vestige of either castle or cemetery now remains. Old Bengeworth is hardly more than one long street, and there is little now to claim our attention. On the right side of the street, set back behind some iron railings, is a school founded early in the eighteenth century by John Deacle, a man of humble origin and a native of Bengeworth, who, moving to London became a wealthy woollen draper with a shop in Saint Paul's churchyard, and finally an Alderman of the City. In the new church is his tomb with an elaborate effigy in the costume of the period. Passing up the street we should turn before coming to the Talbot Inn and look back: from this point the irregular houses and roofs with the Bell Tower rising beyond make an attractive vignette. The old churchyard can be seen behind the Talbot Inn. The church is gone in favour of the modern and "handsome" structure which we saw before us as we turned out of the main street. Here are only the graves and the base of the old tower. Opposite the remains of the tower is an old stone house, once the manor, where a little chapel can still be seen in an upper room. Except the monument to John Deacle there is nothing in the new church to call forth our interest.

Page 25

[Illustration: THE BELL TOWER FROM BENGEWORTH]

By pursuing our way past the old burial-ground, and taking the turn to the right we find ourselves in Cooper's Lane, associated with a family long connected with the borough. To our left is a pretty cottage, and beyond, seen among the trees but with outhouses abutting on the road, is the Mansion House, still retaining in every feature that old-world sense of remoteness and repose so precious in these days; like a backwater of a rapid river, lying unmoved while the stream of life rushes vociferously by; a veritable "haunt of ancient peace."

The lane leads us into the Cheltenham Road, and we should turn into the public Pleasure Grounds, or, better still, walk a few steps farther along the road, until we have passed them, in order to see the true situation chosen by the monks for their church and dwelling-place.

How dignified does the Bell Tower appear, with the twin spires, rising from the summit of the bank, above the willows which edge the fish ponds! And below in the smooth waters their image is reflected, broken and clear at intervals. All the morning does the sun glorify the scene, and beneath its intense rays the towers gleam white against the blue heavens. Every third hour the bells in Lichfield's tower play an old tune fraught with sweet memories. The horses browse in the meadows or stand beneath the shade of the tall elms. Often a brightly-coloured caravan is to be seen encamped near the ponds, and beside it a fire which sends a faint cloud of blue smoke up against the dark green of the foliage. Out come the children to play on the green slope, to fish in the ponds or gather flowers in the meadow below. An old barge, perhaps, lies under the bank, towed up with much labour from the Severn. Pleasure boats pass now and again, disturbing the water and breaking the reflections into a thousand fragments. Evening comes on; the sun declines, and the face of the tower is dark against the glittering beams; the water receives the glow and reflects the radiance. Tower, spires, trees and landscape assume one sombre hue; clear cut against the sky their forms appear; and, as night falls, the single deep-toned bell rings out the "Curfew" across the silent vale.

Though lying outside the town, and separated from it by the railway, Green Hill is included within the limits of the borough, and forms part of the Evesham parishes. The hill is memorable on account of the well-known battle, described in the next chapter, in which Prince Edward gained the victory over Simon de Montfort, thus concluding the Barons' War. The exact site of the encounter is not known, but tradition points to a spot in the Abbey Manor grounds called Battlewell, on which it is averred de Montfort was slain; and the fight probably extended over a great part of the level plateau on both sides of the present main road.

Unfortunately Battlewell lies in private grounds, but the position may be seen from Clark's Hill. It lies a hundred yards to the left of the road nearly opposite a pretty thatched lodge, but cannot be seen from the highway.

Page 26

Just beyond is a double cottage dividing the road into two, and on the right is a shady lane. This is Blayney's Lane, and, as already mentioned, it was once the London road; by pursuing it we come to the river meadows and Offenham Ferry. The main road runs straight on, and leads, through the village of Norton, to Alcester, Stratford, Birmingham, &c. The way to the left is the old Worcester road, and skirts the grounds of the Abbey Manor. If we take this lane and descend the hill we may turn sharply to the left near the bottom and return to the town by the "New Road"; or walk on a short distance with Wood Norton—the Duke of Orleans' house—on its wooded slope, in full view, and follow a lane on the left leading to Chadbury Mill.

The Abbey Manor, with its pretty grounds, is not open to the public. In addition to the beautiful views obtained from its walks and lawns it contains many treasures of local interest. Chief among these are fragments of columns, window tracery, sculpture, and other relics brought by an ancestor of the present owner, a noted antiquary, from the site of the Monastery. Here are carefully preserved a splendid abbatial chair richly carved and of great size, bearing the monastic arms, and in remarkable preservation; also two quaint effigies of men in plate armour fashioned in solid oak about three-quarters of the size of life. These figures stood on the face of the belfry tower, and, by turning on a pivot, struck the hours; they are in all probability coeval with that building.

In one of the shrubberies, hidden from public view, is an obelisk commemorating the fall of Simon de Montfort, and in the plantation near the lower road is a tower, like the house denoting the period of the late Georgian Gothic revival, and bearing the name of the Earl of Leicester.

CHAPTER VII

THE BATTLE OF EVESHAM

*When the barons in armes did King Henrye oppose,
Sir Simon de Montfort their leader they chose;
A leader of courage undaunted was hee,
And oft-times he made their enemyes flee.*

*At length in the battle on Eveshame plaine
The barons were routed and Montfort was slaine.*

—THE BEGGAR'S DAUGHTER OF BEDNALL GREEN.

One of the treasures of the Abbey of Saint Mary and Saint Egwin at Evesham was the tomb of the great and popular hero Simon de Montfort. Such tombs were a source of much profit to the ecclesiastical institutions of those days. Hither pilgrims flocked in great numbers, particularly on the day specially devoted to the memory of the saint or martyr, and offerings were made proportionate to the wealth of the devotee. Not only

was it supposed that spiritual advantages could be gained by devotion at these holy places, but cures innumerable were believed to have been worked through the intercession of the departed spirit. Hence the great monasteries often partook of the nature of our present-day hospitals, “the maimed, and the halt, and the blind” thronging thither; and, if at first unsuccessful, trying shrine after shrine in the hope of eventual restoration to health.

Page 27

Though de Montfort was not canonised as a saint and martyr, yet he appears to have been regarded in such a light by the common people, and among the archives of the Monastery was preserved a long list of accredited cures and miracles reported to have been worked at his tomb.

It was on the morning of Tuesday, August 4th, 1265, that the memorable battle, ending in the death of Simon de Montfort, was fought. Earl Simon was travelling on the previous day from the neighbourhood of Worcester to join his eldest son, also named Simon, at Kenilworth. With the Earl was King Henry the Third as prisoner or hostage, and on the night of Monday, the 3rd of August, the Earl and his retinue were received as guests in the Abbey, his army being quartered or encamping in the town.

Prince Edward, King Henry's eldest son, was in the neighbourhood with a large army, but his movements for some days past were unknown to de Montfort. On the Saturday before the arrival of the Barons' army at Evesham the Prince had surprised the younger Simon at Kenilworth, killed or taken as prisoners the greater part of his army, and seized all the baggage and standards. The same day he had returned to Worcester and joined the Earl of Gloucester and Roger Mortimer, both leading considerable forces.

Thus we see the Earl, with his adherents, resting at Evesham, unconscious of the fact that, unaided, he must soon face three powerful foes. Next day saw his fate decided.

Early on Tuesday morning all was stir and bustle in the Monastery and in the little town. The troops were preparing to depart at daybreak towards Kenilworth, where father and son were to meet and arrange their future tactics. In the early dawn Nicholas, the Earl's barber, ascended one of the towers of the Abbey, and, gazing northwards, over Green Hill he descried soldiers bearing standards which were evidently those of the younger Simon. For a few moments joy prevailed at the thought of so happy a meeting; but this feeling soon gave place to anxiety and dread. Closer examination showed that though the standards were those of the Earl's son the soldiers who carried them were not Simon's but Prince Edward's followers. In a moment all was clear: the younger Simon had been defeated, perhaps slain, and de Montfort must fight single-handed or yield his cause ingloriously. Retreat over the bridge by which the army had entered the town was useless, for soon it became known that Roger Mortimer was following the route the barons had taken the day before, and would soon be on their rear. With the river on both sides of them, and both ways blocked by enemies, two alternatives alone presented themselves, to fight or to yield. To add to the hopelessness of their position the Earl of Gloucester, with his army, was now joining Prince Edward by the upper Worcester road. De Montfort knew that against such odds the fight would be a hopeless one, and urged his supporters to flee while there was yet time, and not to lose their lives in an unavailing struggle; but none would desert their leader in the hour of peril. "Then," exclaimed the Earl, "may the Lord have mercy on our souls for our bodies are in the power of our enemies."

Page 28

* * * * *

It is recorded that on this fatal Tuesday all the elements seemed to unite in adding horror to the scene of carnage. Shortly before this a great comet had made men fear and wonder; and now, on this morning the sky was overcast with such dense clouds that the land was in darkness; so black were the heavens that nothing like it had been known within the memory of man. A violent tempest, with a deluge of rain and terrific thunder and lightning, swept over the country. The terrified monks could not see their books as they chanted the Psalms in the darkened choir, and as they sat in the refectory they could not tell what food lay upon their trenchers.

Meanwhile the battle raged on the hill above the town; desperately the barons fought, but, one by one, they fell overpowered by numbers. Though the earl was sixty-five years of age he fought "stoutly, like a giant, for the liberties of England" to the end.

We will not dwell on the horror of the battle. Popular tradition still points to the spot where the great leader was slain, and there, beside a spring called Battlewell, was placed a sacred rood. Two young de Montforts fell by their father's side, and many barons, knights, and common soldiers; but few fled. The stragglers from the defeated army were, many of them, slaughtered, as they attempted their escape; and by Offenham Ferry, where in those times probably stood a bridge, there is a meadow, once an island, which to this day bears the name of "Deadman's Ait." The chroniclers tell of the shameful mutilation of the earl's corpse, and how the limbs were distributed through the country, but the dismembered body was buried reverently by the monks in the most sacred part of their church, even before the High Altar. The severed hands were sent by a servant to the wife of Roger Mortimer, at Wigmore Castle in Shropshire. They arrived, so says the legend, while the Mass was being celebrated, and, at the raising of the Host, they were seen, before the bag containing them was opened, clasped in the attitude of prayer above the head of the messenger. In fear and trembling, Lady Mortimer returned the bloody trophy.

Prince Edward himself attended the funeral of Henry de Montfort, his cousin and friend, in the Abbey church.

"Such," sings Robert of Gloucester, "was the murder of Evesham, for battle none it was."

As in the case of other national heroes of old times, popular fancy was allowed to play unfettered round the memory of this noble family. In the well-known ballad preserved by Bishop Percy, of "The Beggar's Daughter of Bednall Green," it is imagined that Henry de Montfort was rescued at night from the field of battle while still living, by "a baron's faire daughter," in search of her father's body; that she nursed him, and that, on his recovery they married, their daughter being "prettye Bessee."

Page 29

The miracles we read of, and to which reference has been made, are many and varied. For some time the fear of royal censure and punishment prevented cures being openly attributed to "Saint Simon," but it was not long before the fame of his healing power spread, and persons were brought from all parts of the country to "be measured by" Earl Simon and restored to health. The process of "measuring" was as simple as it appears to have been effective. It merely consisted in a cord which had previously been placed round the relics being made to meet round the body of the invalid whether man or animal.

The first "miracle" we hear of concerns a dumb boy who fell asleep at the shrine of Saint Robert at Lincoln, whither he had been taken to be cured, and in this state he remained from the Saturday preceding the battle until the Monday, when, suddenly awaking, gifted with the power not only of speech but prophecy, he informed those who stood around that Saint Robert had gone to Evesham to aid Earl Simon who would be slain in the battle there on the morrow! The monkish manuscript goes on to relate cures of various diseases performed on man and beast, personal apparitions, "judgements" falling on scoffers, accounts of the dead restored to life and many other marvels credible or incredible according to the inclination of the reader. One of the "judgements" may be given as an example, showing, by the way, the manners of some of the clergy of that date.

A certain chaplain named Philip had been openly abusing the Earl, and by way of an oath exclaimed, "If he is a saint, as reported, I wish the devil may break my neck, or some miracle may befall me before I reach home." As he returned homewards, being on horseback, and a servant with him, he saw a hare on the road, and spurring onward in chase fell headlong from his horse. His manservant who had likewise abused Earl Simon "was seized by the devil" and remained insane "from the Feast of St. John the Baptist to the translation of St. Benedict."

In 1279 it is reported how, at Whitsuntide a man wheeled his wife, whose life was despaired of, from the parish of Saint Bride's in Fleet Street, London, all the way to Evesham in a wheelbarrow, to visit "Saint Simon's" relics.

For this brief account of the de Montfort miracles I am indebted to a paper by Mr. Oswald G. Knapp, and from the same source I transcribe the following translation of a hymn written in honour of the reputed "saint and martyr" which concludes the ancient chronicle:—

"Hail, de Montfort, martyr glorious!
Noblest flower of chivalry!
O'er the pains of death victorious,
England's saviour, praise to thee.
More than all the saints in story,
Ere they gained their rest in glory,



Thou of cruel wrongs hast borne;
Fouly foes thy corpse insulted,
O'er thy head and limbs exulted
From thy mangled body torn.
Once of wrongs the great redresser
Be thou now our intercessor,
Pray for us with God on high."

Page 30

“Pray for us, blessed Simon, that we may be made worthy to obtain the promises of Christ.”

CHAPTER VIII

CAVALIERS AND ROUNDHEADS

“Who was he that went out from the command at Gloucester in such a blaze, to adde glory unto conquest, and crown hit actions with a never-dying honour, when he took the strong garrisoned Evesham in a storme of fire and leaden haile; the loss whereof did make a king shed tears? Was it not Massey?”

—CONTEMPORARY PAMPHLET.

Once more the peaceful vale was destined to become a field of battle. At an early stage in the conflict between King and people Evesham was fortified and garrisoned by the Royal party, and Samuel Sandys was appointed military governor. The exact nature of the fortifications we cannot exactly know, but it is certain they were complete, and sufficient to withstand a siege if properly manned. A ditch, and rampart of earth surmounted by timber palisades was the probable form of defence, but no signs of such earthworks now remain, and the position of them is unknown.

King Charles paid his first visit early in July, 1644, and he is said to have stayed in what was at that time a large house, probably gabled, with projecting bay windows, on the north side of Bridge Street. This mansion, for it was no less though now divided into shops, was the town house of the Langstones, an influential family in the neighbourhood. Here the King remained two nights, and from “our Court at Evesham” he despatched a conciliatory message “To the Lords and Commons of Parliament assembled at Westminster.”

Sir William Waller, the Parliamentary general, was hanging in the rear of the royal army, and so without more delay the King moved towards Worcester, taking with him the garrison, guns, and ammunition. Before leaving, the army partly destroyed the outworks and rendered the bridge over the river impassable. The townspeople were evidently more in sympathy with the Roundheads than the Cavaliers, for on the departure of the royal forces they immediately repaired the bridge, and Waller entered and remained some days before following the chase.

A week later the King returned, on his way back to the loyal city of Oxford, much to the dismay of the inhabitants. For their rebellious behaviour a fine of two hundred pounds was imposed on the borough, and in addition to this they were forced to provide the royal army with a thousand pairs of shoes.

A year later we find the King once more passing through Evesham. This time he left a garrison in charge of the town under Colonel Legge. But Evesham was too important a place in this conflict, being a connecting link between the “loyal cities” of Worcester and Oxford, to be left in the hands of the King’s party unchallenged. Almost immediately, in the same month of May, 1645, Colonel Massey, Governor of Gloucester, with a troop of horse and foot collected from the neighbouring counties, attacked the town, and after vainly calling upon Colonel Legge to yield, they assailed the fortifications at the bridge and in five other places at the same time. After a short but hard fought encounter the Royalists surrendered, and until the end of the struggle Evesham remained in the hands of the Parliament.

Page 31

On the 29th of May the House of Commons ordered the Speaker to convey their thanks to the colonel and his officers in acknowledgment of their great service.

CHAPTER IX

THE RIVER

There is a willow grows aslant a brook, That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream; There with fantastic garlands did she come, Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples.

—SHAKESPEARE: Hamlet.

In tracing the history of our little town from its origin it has often been observed how important a part has been played in its fortunes by the river that flows through and partly encircles it. It is to the river that the town owes its position, and its very existence probably depended upon the advantages which the stream provided. To the early settlers a good supply of water and natural means of protection were necessary to life, and both these were offered by this narrow tongue of land.

For a long period the river was of little use for traffic, and not until the seventeenth century was it made properly navigable. Now, through the neglect of the owners of the navigation rights, it is once more reverting in places to its primitive character. From Evesham to Tewkesbury the stream is still in good order, but for a short distance only towards Stratford-on-Avon.

Apart from the fascination exercised on the mind by the ever changing surface of water, varied and rippled by motion and by wind, the beauty of this river is mainly due to the delicate and varied foliage of the willows and other trees which grow freely beside it, the luxuriant growth of flowers along its banks—"of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples"—and the variety of blossoming water plants. Few trees are more graceful than the willow when a slight breeze fans its branches, mingling the "hoar leaves" with the grey green of the upper side of the foliage; and many, before and since Shakespeare, have preserved in the "inward eye" such a vision, reflected in "the glassy stream" or more usually in the slightly ruffled surface below. The level meadows, or sloping banks, which skirt the stream have a quiet charm, and beautiful indeed are they in June, when thickly carpeted with buttercups and ox-eye daisies. At almost every turn rise the blue hills, completing the landscape and throwing the sunny meadows into relief.

We can hardly realise to ourselves the protective value of the river in old times without rowing both up and down the stream for a mile or more. Above the town, before reaching the railway bridge we should look back and notice how steeply the land rises from the river on this side. On the margin is the mill, and above are the houses, roof

over roof, descending again in steps to the river bridge. At the top is the Bell Tower, and the church spires are seen near it. From the railway embankment, or the higher ground beyond, the best picture which the town affords is to be seen. Below us winds the river, and over the meadows on an eminence is the cluster of houses forming the town; as a background we have Bredon Hill, delicately outlined, or dark blue as if overhanging the vale.

Page 32

Beyond the bridge we soon come to a picturesquely-situated farmhouse, standing on a steep bank, and looking down upon the meadows. This is the Parks Farm, and all the fields on this side bordering the river were once the deer park of the great Abbey. Presently we reach Offenham Ferry, while a little beyond, set back behind willow trees and plough-land, is the village; and we soon catch sight of the old church tower peering over the bank. At the further extremity of the village, quite near the bank, is the "Court" farm, once protected by a moat fed by the river, and used by the Evesham Abbots as a country retreat. Hither Clement Lichfield, the last Abbot, retired on his resignation, and here he probably died.

The village of Offenham is peculiar in lying away from any main road, and this gives it an air of repose and antiquity, which is pleasant in these days. Whether the place owes its name to Offa, King of Mercia, is an open question, but according to tradition this monarch owned land and had a palace here, the site of which is pointed out by the villagers.

Beside the ferry we have passed there was in old times a bridge, and still, when the water is very low, the solid foundations of the piers may be seen with pointed buttresses facing up and down the stream. When this bridge was destroyed no one can tell; but once upon a time the road from Worcester to London came over Green Hill, and leaving Evesham more than a mile to the south, descended the steep hill where now a grass-grown track marks its course, crossing the river by this bridge. The farm on the right bank is known by the name of Twyford, and so we guess that the creek which leaves the main stream a little way above the ferry once continued its course, forming an island with a ford on either side. Deadman's Ait is the traditional name of this island field, and it is supposed some of the stragglers from the battle of 1265 were slain here while attempting to escape by the ford or bridge.

The irregularity of the river banks, now nearly level with the water, sloping gently upwards, or steep and at times almost precipitous, is much marked as we proceed on our way up the stream. After passing some gardens, and a steep bank overgrown with gorse, the sluggish stream quickens its pace, and we soon reach an abrupt turn where the current is met by an unyielding wall of lias. Under the bare limestone the water is deep and rushes swiftly, but above, the bank is covered with tangled growth of blackberry and wild clematis, and in spring the ground beneath the trees is blue with hyacinths. This sudden turn is Norton Corner, and though no signs of that village can be seen it stands hardly a mile away over the ridge of fields. The whole course we have come may be followed on foot by the old tow-path from the mill. From this point, after crossing the railway, a farm road will take us to the end of the village; or we may take the footpath through the arch beneath the line that we passed a few hundred yards further down.

Page 33

After leaving Norton Corner by boat, the river, for a space slow and easy, soon becomes swift, and as we approach the ruins of an old lock the passage is attended with difficulties by reason of the shallow water and the stony bed. If we successfully pass these rapids and gain the next mill further progress is easy, but the mill can only be passed by lifting the boat over the steep weir. On the way we pass the old Fish and Anchor Inn, and a new ford calculated rather for the convenience of vehicles than of boating parties. From the "Fish and Anchor" we may ascend the long ridge of Cleeve Bank, and command a fine view of the valley and the winding of the stream below. Harvington Mill is at our feet, and the spire of the village church is visible beyond; further up the stream, some distance beyond the hanging wood, is Cleeve Mill, one of the prettiest spots on the river. The village of Cleeve Prior lies behind the bank, and there may be seen, besides the picturesque cottages and church, the old Manor, now a farmhouse, with a quaint avenue of box, elaborately clipped, leading to the front door. Over the fields on the further bank are the Salfords, and among the trees the curved gables of a fine old Jacobean mansion may be distinguished. The next place of interest on the stream is Bidford with its many arched bridge of mediaeval date.

If we follow the downward course of the Avon we find ourselves making a circuit of the town; for a considerable distance the Bell Tower does not leave us but seems to follow our boat, and ever and anon it reappears over the meadows and among the trees on our right hand. Hampton Church stands on rising ground, among the trees, on our left, and soon we are at Hampton Ferry. If we prefer the walk we can take a footpath by the bridge or the Bell Tower, and follow the winding stream to this point. According to the old chronicles a church was built at Hampton, in the reign of Canute, by Leofric and Godiva, so well known in the regions of romance, and they gave land here to the Abbey. The church we see was built and rebuilt by the Monastery, but whether on the ancient site we know not. It is a small but beautiful example of perpendicular architecture, and with the dark spreading yew tree, the remains of the old cross, and the delicately weathered tombstones, it makes a picture upon which the eye dwells with calm satisfaction.

The hill above the ferry is Clark's Hill, and the bank we are told was terraced by the monks of old as a vineyard. Whether tradition is true to facts we cannot surely say; a field beyond the ridge still bears the name of the vineyard, and this may have been the actual site. The ascent of the steep bank is rewarded on a clear day by the splendid panorama which lies around. From the terrace walk we look down upon the town, noticing with regret the predominating hues of brick and slate which mark the modern suburbs; but the old tower, the churches, and the gatehouse, despoiled but yet dignified, unconsciously hold the eye. The old wall of the Abbey precincts ended here at the river, and beside it runs Boat Lane, which would bring us out on the Green.

Page 34

Looking down the stream, over the railway bridges, we see Green Hill, with the Abbey Manor and its grounds the most prominent feature. At some little distance to the right of the house is a grassy comb, and at the upper end is the spring to which legend points as the spot where Simon de Montfort was slain, and which still bears the name Battlewell.

Stretched around us are the Cotswolds, and if we take a path, or lane, leading over the hill westward we may, from the brow, behold Malvern's rugged length and the isolated mass of Bredon. Further northward, if the atmosphere be clear, we should distinguish the most striking height of the Abberly range, a peak which on one side would almost seem to overhang, and, away beyond, the Clee heights looking down on the beautiful and historic town of Ludlow.

Returning to our boat, we glide beneath the Abbey Manor, with its wooded slopes, and presently we reach Chadbury Lock and Mill. On a fair and warm day we may rest here in perfect content, listening to the rush of the weir, watching the swallows flit and skim over the calm water and break the glassy surface into circling ripples; or gazing with silent pleasure down the stream as it continues its peaceful course by wood and meadow.

Not far below Chadbury, past Wood Norton—a country seat of the Duke of Orleans, and by him lately rebuilt—its deer park and plantations, past flowery banks, and thick beds of rushes haunted by waterfowl, is the village of Fladbury. Pleasant-looking houses with trim gardens border the river on our right, and beyond are two mills, with the rushing weir between. That on our left is Cropthorne Mill, now a dwelling-house.

In Fladbury Church are some coats-of-arms in stained glass, said to have come from the Abbey of Evesham. One shield bears the device of Earl Simon. There is also a fine altar tomb, inlaid with brasses, bearing the effigies of some members of the Throckmorton family. The building is architecturally interesting, but the internal effect is marred by the removal of the plaster, thus exposing the rough masonry of "rubble," and the irregularity is much emphasised by "pointing."

On the opposite side of the river is Cropthorne, surmounting a steep bank. Here are many picturesque cottages of timber and thatch, and in this village of orchards, the effect of the street is much heightened if it be seen in the time of the apple-blossom. In this and the neighbouring parishes we may still find much of that rustic beauty which we have learned to associate with the names of Birket Foster and Mrs. Allingham.

The church contains many points of interest. As we enter we cannot but be impressed by the simple arches of the Norman nave, the carved pews of mediaeval date, and the Jacobean monuments—their once gaudy colouring mellowed by age. Few churches have been treated with such gentle consideration, and rarely do we find the true Gothic

feeling so carefully preserved. A beautiful Saxon cross, intricately carved, and the ancient altar stone, lately discovered buried beneath the floor, are two valued treasures.

Page 35

CHAPTER X

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

The town of Evesham is most conveniently situated as a centre from which to visit the broad vale and the surrounding hills. Within a comparatively short distance a great variety may be noticed in the general aspect of the country, and this is due not only to the contour of the surface and the nature of the soil, but also to the manner of cultivation; and, as has already been indicated, to the material employed in the buildings. The vale itself is sheltered, and the soil productive and capable of high cultivation, consequently the greater part has been utilised for agriculture. Lately the market-gardening industry, originating possibly in monastic times, has increased enormously, and the appearance of the country for many miles round Evesham has been transformed. In springtime the effect of the plum-blossom is surprisingly beautiful; and in the autumn a luxuriant effect is given by the heavily-laden trees bending beneath their weight of yellow or purple fruit. But against these transient effects we must place the tiresome regularity of the fruit-trees, their uniform size and height, and the absence or monotony of colour during a great part of the year, when the ground, the bushes, and the trees are bare.

The prosperity brought to the inhabitants of the vale by this staple industry is “writ large” in the towns and villages wherever it is practised, and, from the picturesque point of view, the gain is more than doubtful.

But though fruit-growing has spread in every direction, we can with ease escape beyond its limits, and even within them we may still find cornfields, rich pasture and woodlands, thriving farms, and villages still unspoiled by the modern “jerry-builder.”

The hill country does not come within the limits of this volume, but it may be easily reached—the nearest points being Broadway, and the villages of Ashton-under-hill and Elmley Castle, both lying under Bredon. The value of the hills as a shelter and background to the vale has been touched on in former pages; and the debt which the valley owes to the stone which they provide, and the architectural style which grew up amongst them, cannot be overestimated.

[Illustration: St. Egwin's Church Honeybourne]

Close to the town many of the field-paths have been bereft of their charm, and almost lost in the intricate maze of currant bushes and plum trees; but the river meadows are still untouched, and without going far afield we may find villages yet retaining much of their old-world character, and offering much that is picturesque and interesting.

Hampton, which has been described in the last section may be approached as easily by road as by river; from the top of the village Clark's Hill may be gained, and from here the ferry may be crossed and the town re-entered by Boat Lane.

Page 36

Badsey, and Wickhamford, with the hamlet of Aldington, are all in their different ways worth a visit. Badsey in addition to its church has many interesting old houses; and at Wickhamford the church and manor form an attractive group. In the church are some fine canopied monuments, of Jacobean style, of the Sandys family, who owned the adjacent manor house—a building of stone and timber, much of it dating from the sixteenth century. The circular dovecote belonging to monastic times is carefully preserved.

Bretforton, with its church built by the monks of Evesham, lies on the road between Badsey and Honeybourne.

The villages of Middle and South Littleton have been little affected by modern enterprise. They may be reached by way of Offenham or Bengeworth, or from the village station. In South Littleton the long, narrow church though much spoiled by restoration tells of the care of the parent Abbey at least as far back as the thirteenth century. Opposite the church is a striking brick house, dignified even in its present degraded condition. With windows blocked, neglected garden, and used only as a storehouse for the farm at the back, it suggests the haunted mansion of the imagination. The building dates from about the year 1700; and the beauty of the design, especially of the roof with its chimneys and its dormers, is worthy of a better fate. A field path at the end of the street soon brings us to Middle Littleton. Among the ricks and outhouses we catch sight of the grey stone gables of the manor house, with the perpendicular church tower so familiar in the district, close beside it. The old cross is thrown into relief by the dark and spreading yew, and a natural picture is completed by the sombre walls and tower of the church.

To the lover of architecture, or mediaeval history, the greatest interest will attach to the large tythe barn which we come to on emerging into the field from the further side of the churchyard. The beautiful masonry and mouldings, the fine doorways and delicately designed finials at once mark the work as belonging to the fourteenth century, and in the chronicles of Evesham Abbey we read that it was built in the time of John de Ombresley who held the abbacy from 1367 to 1379.

In addition to the churches already mentioned St. Egwin's Church at Honeybourne was also in the "Deanery of the Vale," and under the special charge and jurisdiction of the Abbey. It may be reached either by road or rail. The fine tower and spire stamp it, at a glance, as different in style from the other churches of the neighbourhood; and these belong probably to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The porch, like that of Hampton, has a solid stone roof and dates from a century later. The chancel we learn was built by Abbot Brokehampton about 1300. The beautiful timber roof, of the Tudor period, has lately been most carefully repaired, and the interior replastered in the true mediaeval manner.

Page 37

Almost within sight of this churchyard, and not many minutes' walk from it is the church of Cow Honeybourne which, with the exception of the tower, has been entirely rebuilt. For many years the nave and chancel were occupied as cottages.

On the Evesham side of the river there is only one church which seems to have been entirely the property of the Abbey. This is the church of Saint Egwin, at Norton, between two and three miles along the main north road. Here we may see a lectern of Norman date, carved out of a block of alabaster with curious forms of beasts and foliage; and in the centre, rudely cut is the figure of a bishop, holding in his left hand a crozier, his right in the act of benediction. This lectern once graced a chapel in the great church of Evesham; and the figure portrayed is Bishop Egwin, the first Abbot, to whom we owe the beginnings of the great and powerful Abbey.

The north chapel, with its monuments of a fashion long passed away, and its heraldic adornments, suggestive of the age of chivalry, forms a picture at once imposing and pathetic. The monuments are of considerable interest, and are good examples of Renaissance ornament and sculpture of three successive periods. The Bigge family, to the memory of whom they were erected, inherited through Sir Philip Hoby much of the Abbey land in this district. Early in the seventeenth century their mansion and estates were purchased by Lord Craven, and it is to the family of this nobleman that the funereal flags, tabards, and arms suspended above the monuments, belong.

From Norton church we may return by a field path which leads into and crosses a lane known as King's Lane, and possibly connected with some cavalier episode. The hamlet which we see before us is Lenchwick, and if we take the village street, after passing the lane to Chadbury we presently come to a steep but short descent with a group of old barns on our left. Near this spot stood, until about a hundred years ago, a stately mansion built by Sir Thomas Bigge, whose tomb we have but now visited.

A letter is still extant from Sir Philip Hoby requesting permission from the King's agent to purchase stone from the Abbey ruins for building, and there can be little doubt that this house was constructed of the same material. By the "irony of fate" this mansion, born of the spoliation of that institution, in its turn fell a prey to the destroyer, and fragments of carved stones telling of Elizabethan days may be found in these and other farm buildings within the area of the parish.

THE END