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The Early Days of the Abbey of S. Peter, Gloucester

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THE EARLY DAYS OF THE ABBEY OF ST. PETER,
GLOUCESTER.

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Read at Gloucester, 16th July, 1888.

THE Cathedral Church which we have visited to-day was for 860 years before the establishment of a Gloucester Bishopric, the Church of the *Abbey* of St. Peter.

The early history of this monastic foundation is extremely obscure.

You will remember that Gloucester was captured in 577 by the West Saxon invaders who appear to have laid it in ruins. If there were Christian churches here in the time of the Roman occupation they were destroyed, and, like Bath and Chester, Gloucester became for awhile the habitation of the wolf and the bittern.

While the West Saxons ruled in the Severn Vale, the sound of the Gospel was unheard. The British Christians who survived either fled westward or renounced their belief in Christ.

Nor in 628 were matters improved when Penda, King of the Mercians, became overlord of the Hwiccas who inhabited what is now Worcestershire and Gloucestershire.¹

Penda was a great warrior and a devoted adherent of the gods of his ancestors. In 631 he slew Edwin the Christian King of Northumbria at Heathfield ;² and in 642 he slew Oswald, Edwin's successor, at Maserfield. The fallen King was beheaded on the field of battle, and his mutilated limbs were set up on stakes of wood.³

270 years later Ethelred, the sub-King of Mercia, and his wife Æthelflæda, the brave lady of the Mercians, brought the bones of

¹ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Church Historians of England, Vol. II., Part I. p. 14. ² Idem. ³ Idem., p. 15.

St. Oswald from Bardney to Gloucester and laid them in the monastery which they had built and dedicated to his memory.¹ The remains of St. Oswald's Priory are still to be seen on the south side of St. Catherine's Church,² and Oswald, the Christian King of Northumbria, may in some sense be said to be the patron saint of Gloucester.

The introduction of Christianity into Mercia was brought about by intermarriages between the children of Penda and the children of Oswiu, Oswald's successor. Alchfrid, the second son of Oswiu, married Cyneburh the daughter of the Mercian King, and his influence led Peda, the eldest son of Penda, to become a Christian in order that he might wed Alchfleda, Alchfrid's sister. Moreover, Æthelred, the third son of Penda, married Osthyrd, a younger daughter of Oswiu.³

In 659 war broke out between Mercia and Northumbria, and Penda was slain by Oswiu at the battle of the Winwaed.⁴

The defeat of the Mercians led to the disruption of Mercia, and the Hwiccas as well as the East Anglians came directly under the influence of Oswiu. Northumbrian missionaries penetrated far and wide through the middle of England; and, after a lapse of 100 years, the Standard of the Cross was once more uplifted in the Severn Vale. At Deerhurst, at Tewkesbury, and in the woods near Malmesbury, hermitages were erected.

Wulpher, the son of Penda, succeeded in regaining his father's supremacy; but, being a Christian, he did nothing to hinder the spread of Christianity in these parts. Oswiu died in 670, and was succeeded in turn by his sons Eggfrid and Alchfrid. Wulpher, King of the Mercians, dying in 675, was succeeded by his brother Æthelred.

I have mentioned these facts in order that I may explain the appearance of two Northumbrian princes, Osric and Oswald, as

¹ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, Church Historians of England, Vol. II. Part 1, p. 57; also W. of Malmesbury, Ch. Hists., Vol. III., Part I., pp. 43 and 109.

² See ante p. 118, and Plates IX. and X.

³ Bede's Ecclesiastical Hists., Ch. Hists., Vol. I., Part II., p. 418.

⁴ Anglo Saxon Chronicle, p. 16.

sub-Kings of the Hwiccas in 680. I have no doubt that they were younger sons of Oswiu, who died in 670, and brothers of the Mercian Queen Osthryd. I am led to think so for two reasons : first, because Osric succeeded to the throne of Northumbria after the death of his nephew Osred ;¹ and, secondly, because Kyneburgh, who is spoken of by various writers as Osric's sister,² is said to have been youngest daughter of Oswiu.³

Æthelred, King of the Mercians, was not fond of war like his brother Wulpher. Although the first years of his reign were marked by conflicts with Kent and Northumbria, his temper was peaceful and religious, and his activity showed itself in establishing Bishoprics and Monasteries.

In 680 Tatfrith, a pupil of Hilda, the Abbess of Whitby, was made the first Bishop of the Hwiccas, with his episcopal seat at Worcester. But he died before his consecration, and Bosel, another pupil of Hilda's, was made Bishop in his room.⁴

The influence of the Northumbrian dynasty, and the influence of Hilda, herself a Northumbrian Princess, who went to her rest that very year, 680, led to the foundation of St. Peter's Abbey, Gloucester.

There was very little in common between the monasteries founded after Hilda's pattern and the Benedictine monasteries of later times. The earlier monasteries were distinctly missionary colleges, like S. Augustine's, Canterbury, in the present day. The only difference was that men and women lived in the same monastery under the rule of an Abbess, who was, in most cases, a lady of royal birth. The object of such a life was two-fold : first, to escape from the troubles and vicissitudes of every day life at a time when warfare formed the business and the recreation of kings and their nobles ; and, secondly, to prepare for the work of Christian teachers amongst the heathen population of the land. Such a monastery or college it was that Ethelred, the Mercian King, founded at Gloucester and committed to the charge of Osric, the

¹ Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, p. 27.

² *Historia Monasterii S. Petri, Gloucestriae*, Master of Rolls Series, Vol. I., p. 4.

³ Ch. Hists., Vol. II., Part I, pp. 389, 390.

⁴ Florence of Worcester's Chronicle, Ch. Hists., Part I., p. 189.

sub-King of the Hwiccas, as patron, and to Kyneburgh, his wife's sister, as first Abbess. Such a college would revive the civilization of the past by bringing fresh life to the ruins of the Roman city. It would be a home of peace to those who dwelt within, and a centre of light and joy for those who inhabited the forests of Dean and Kingswood and dwelt on the banks of Severn or the uplands of the Cotteswolds.

The Roman church had nought to do with the foundation of St Peter's or the conversion of the Severn Vale. Hilda, the great rival of Bishop Wilfrid, clung to the traditions and the customs which St. Columba had brought from Ireland and Iona, and which Aidan and his fellow missionaries from Iona had introduced into Northumbria.

We can picture to ourselves "the family"—for thus they loved to style themselves—over whom Kyneburgh presided at Gloucester. The elder monks would be engaged in the services of the church and in reading and transcribing the scriptures. The younger monks would teach the Gospel to the heathen around, returning, at stated intervals, to report the progress of their work to the lady mother, and to gain fresh stores of knowledge and of zeal. The nuns would teach the boys and girls whom their heathen parents had committed to their charge, or whom cruel warfare had left orphans. And besides these there would be brothers of a lower grade who, under the superintendence of the monks, would be employed in reclaiming and cultivating the woodland and the marsh.

Such a community it was that Osric, at the command of his overlord, established on the banks of the ancient bed of the Severn. I say "ancient bed" because the river has now entirely receded from what was in Roman times its principal course. In these early days the river ran through what is now St. Catherine's meadow from Kingsholm past the site of St. Oswald's Priory, down what is now called Priory Road, under a bridge of seven arches which still lies beneath Westgate Street and was known as Foreign Bridge, and into the present bed of the river at the Quay.

We know nothing of the structure of Osric's monastery. It was probably built of wood, perhaps of wattle and dab; for

everything connected with the Irish missions was of the most simple description ; and oak and beech were easier to obtain than stone, for dense forests covered the hills and vale from the Bristol Avon to the gates of Gloucester.

The monasteries which were built by the Roman missionaries or by English Christians, like Wilfrid, who had imbibed Roman tastes and submitted to Roman customs, were far different.

While Osric was laying the foundation of St. Peter's Abbey at Gloucester, Biscop was completing a church of stone at Monk Wearmouth. He had crossed the seas to Gaul and had brought back with him workmen who knew how to build after the Roman method, and fill the windows of the church, cloisters, and dwelling rooms with painted glass. At the same time Bishop Wilfrid was building a church at Ripon ; and what we read of Wilfrid's church may have been equally true of the consecration of Osric's Monastery of Gloucester. "When all was ready," Eddi tells us, "Wilfrid invited the Kings of Northumbria and Bernicia, the Abbots, the Earls and all the noblemen.

After Solomon's example, they consecrated the church and its services. They dedicated the altar and marked it with the cross, the symbol of Christ's passion, and they put over it a purple cloth interwoven with gold. Then King and clergy and people received the sacrament of Christ's body and blood ; and Wilfrid, the Bishop, stood at the altar with his face to the people and read aloud the list of benefactors to the church. All being completed, the Kings and the people feasted together for three days and three nights."

Wilfrid's church was of polished stone from the foundations to the roof, and the windows were filled with the painted glass which he had brought from Rome and Gaul. I cannot picture to myself such a stately building as this at Gloucester 1200 years ago ; I like best to think of a simple, half-timbered church, with its conventual buildings, a range on the one side for the monks, and on the other for the nuns and children.

There was an altar in the early church dedicated to St. Petronilla, the daughter of St. Peter, and no doubt the patron Saint of

Kyneburgh. In front of this altar Kyneburgh was buried in 710, after a peaceful rule of 29 years. Osric, her brother, after presiding many years over the Hwiccas, succeeded to the throne of his father Oswiu. He died in 729 in advanced age, and, by his dying request, they brought his body to Gloucester and laid it in the church he had built, by the side of the Abbess Kyneburgh, in front of the altar of St. Petronilla.¹ The rude monument which commemorates him lies in a chapel of 16th century architecture. This chapel was built by the last Abbot, William Parker, for it bears his arms as well as the arms of the Northumbrian sovereign.

Kyneburgh was succeeded, as Abbess, by Eadburgh, who is said to have been the widow of Wulpher; and when she died in 735, Eva, a Mercian Queen or Princess, ruled over the Abbey till 767. Then there came a period of disaster. The nuns were driven out with cruelty and disgrace, and the abbey lay in ruins for some years uncared for and uninhabited.²

Let me say a few words in conclusion about the *site* of Osric's monastery. The history of St. Peter's tells us that Bishop Aldred in 1058 rebuilt the monastery a little nearer the bounds of the city than heretofore; and this has led some to believe that the older structure lay outside the walls of the city, close to the stream, which we now call Twyver.³ I venture to think on the other hand that it lay within the walls, a little more to the east than at present.

We know that the site of the Roman wall lies along the west side of Lower College Court, across College Green, the nave of the cathedral and the south-east corner of the cloister garth, turning to the east, where the College School now stands.

There is no doubt the writer of the "Memoriale," in *Dugdale's Monasticon*, is right when he says that a little tower in the Monk's Orchard, close to the Lady Chapel, marks the site of the ancient monastery.

¹ *Historia Monasterii St. Peter, Gloucestriae*, Vol. I. pp. 3-5.

² *Idem.*, pp. 3, 7; also "Memoriale" in *Dugdale's Monasticon*.

³ *Records of Gloucester Cathedral*, Vol. I. p. 41.

I picture to my mind the nave of Osric's church standing on the site of the present choir and presbytery, and the conventual buildings lying close to it on the north and south.

In the time of Edward the Confessor the west wall and the north-west tower at the angle of the old Roman city would seem to have been removed, and the site, as well as some of the materials, to have been given to Alred for his new church. You will find Roman bricks and Roman masonry in the structure of the cathedral.

Some documents, which are given at length in the cartulary of the abbey, tell us that Thomas of Bayon, Archbishop of York, 1070-1100 gave to S. Peter's the land belonging to S. Oswald, lying on the north of S. Peter's Abbey, for the construction of a boundary wall, and that in 1218 this land was claimed by the priory as being part of their ancient possessions. In 1222 the dispute was settled by the monks of S. Peter acknowledging the claim of the canons of S. Oswald and giving them in lieu of the land, &c., an annual value of 20s.

This fact seems to me to decide the matter. S. Peter's Abbey, the old home of the Confessor's time, stood within the walls. Osric had built it there for security against the invasions of the fierce Welsh. And S. Oswald's, the new home, had been built by the Lady of the Mercians on land which she bestowed on it lying outside the walls and along the banks of the Severn. In her time the Danes rather than the Welsh were the dreaded foe.