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## **Sanctuary Knockers**

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## SANCTUARY KNOCKERS.

By MARY ELLEN BAGNALL-OAKELEY.

UPON the doors of a few old churches there still remain large bronze escutcheons representing the head of a gruesome monster with locks flowing and jaws extended, and in some cases the head of a man within them. Through the monster's mouth hangs a massive ring which in days gone by served as the Hagoday or Sanctuary Knocker, at which when "offenders dyd come and knocke, streightwaie they were letten in at any time of the nyght."<sup>1</sup>

On the south door of St. Nicholas Church, Gloucester, there is an example of one of these knockers, and the head of the fugitive is represented enveloped in his hood, with tongue protruding and breathless with haste, escaping into the Church from between behind the animal's head. It is a fine specimen of 14th century bronze work and is in excellent preservation, though the iron bronze ring is modern. (*Fig. 3.*)

At St. Nicholas Church, Gloucester. *Fig. 3*At Adel Church. *Fig. 4*

<sup>1</sup> Rites of Durham, page 35.

NOTE.—All mention of the cities of refuge, and of any other Sanctuary which existed before Christian times, has been purposely omitted from this Paper.

The Knocker is still upon the door of Adel Church, near Leeds, (*fig. 4*) and a very similar specimen exists at St. Gregory's, Norwich, (*fig. 5*) but this latter has been removed from its original position to a door inside the church. There is another at All Saints', York (*fig. 6*).



At St. Gregory's Church Norwich. *Fig. 5.*



At All Saints' Church, York. *Fig. 6.*

All of these have a similar ornamentation of foliage encircling the escutcheon, and as in the Adel Knocker the ring is original and similarly ornamented; all these are 14th century work.



At Durham Cathedral. *Fig. 7.*

The earliest example of a hagoday is the magnificent specimen on the south door of Durham Cathedral, which is said to have been placed there in the time of Bishop Geoffrey Rufus, A.D. 1140 (*fig. 7*), and this Knocker has an additional interest attaching to it, as its purpose and use are fully described in the *Sanctuarium Dunelmense*, which will be quoted later on.

The Sanctuaries or Asylums were places to which either the Church or the Sovereign had given the right of sheltering those who claimed protection, and from which no one could be forcibly taken without sacrilege. At first this privilege was not intended to shelter the wicked from justice, but as a refuge for the innocent and oppressed, and to give a man an asylum till he could have a fair hearing. The only people to whom this protection was denied were apostates and heretics, for they had deserted the Faith which made the Sanctuary sacred; but as time went on, murderers and traiters<sup>1</sup> sought and obtained shelter within the sacred spots, and the Sanctuaries of Mediæval Christendom, which, originally, were necessary remedies for a barbarous state of society, became when that state had passed away, almost unmixed evils.

The privilege of Sanctuary in Churches or other sacred places was recognised from very early times, though there are no laws relating to it older than those of Theodosius (A.D. 401 to A.D. 450.) It is plain, however, that these laws were not made to establish any new right, but rather for the regulation of one which was then in use, and in the life of St. Basil (A.D. 329) it is recorded that he protected a widow who had taken refuge at the altar against the Governor of Pontus.

In Roman times other places besides Churches were allowed this privilege—the statue of the Emperor, his standard in the camp, and the graves of the dead were all considered sacred, and in later times the cross by the highway,<sup>1</sup> hospitals, and even some schools were added to the places to which a fugitive might fly for safety.

We are told by Geoffrey of Monmouth that in the time of the Druids asylum was allowed in their sacred groves, and the rather mythical King Lucius (A.D. 180) is said to have conferred it upon the Church of Winchester, but it is not till A.D. 633, that Pope Boniface V. confirmed and authorised Sanctuaries, and he is generally considered as the founder of Sanctuary, as it afterwards prevailed so extensively in the West. Soon after this we

<sup>1</sup> Si qui ad aliquam crucem in via persequentibus inimicus, confugeret, liber ac si in ipse ecclesia permaneat.

Concilium Claramont 1093,

Apud Du Fresne tom II, Col. 1184.

find laws were made in England with reference to this privilege, and about A.D. 690, Ina King of Wessex enacted "that if a person who had committed a capital offence shall fly to a Church, he shall preserve his life, and make satisfaction according as right requires. If any deserving of stripes shall fly to a Church the punishment shall be forgiven him."

By a law of King Alfred, made A.D. 887, the privilege was for three days, and it was enacted that "if anyone took a malefactor from a church, it should be considered Sacrilege, and the offender was to pay a fine of 120 shillings to the Church. William the Conqueror altered this law, and made a difference between places of greater or less sanctity—thus a man who took a person from an Abbey (*Ecclesia Religiones*) was to forfeit 100 shillings and restore the person, if from a parish Church 20 shillings, if from a Chapel 10 shillings; and this law states that Sanctuary men may go 40 paces from the more sacred place, and 30 paces if it be only parish Church.

In Edgar's Canons, A.D. 959, priests are admonished to suppress "cultum voluntarium et necromantiam et auguria, et incantationes et divinum hominis cultum, et plura quæ exercentur in variis præstigiis, et in cathedra pacis, et in ulmis, et etiam in aliis variis arboribus et in saxis et in multis aliis phantasmatis quibus multi eorum qui non deberent diciantur.<sup>1</sup>

The laws of Edward the Confessor made many references to Sanctuary, and by the 5th Article it is enacted that a malefactor repeating his injustice, and making a practice of getting into Sanctuary, must not only make restitution, but must abjure the country, and renounce the right of Sanctuary in those precincts.<sup>2</sup> Quicumque reus vel noxius et ecclesiam causâ præsidii, confugerit ex quo alrium tenuerit, a nemine insequente nullatenus apprehendatum nisi per Pontificem aut ministrum ejus."

William I., in his 4th year, made express laws respecting Sanctuary. When he founded Battle Abbey, he made it a Sanctuary even for murderers, and ordained that "if the Abbot came upon anyone at their place of execution, he should have power to save

<sup>1</sup> Edgar Canon, No. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Collier, Vol. I., p. 537.

them." From this time the laws of Sanctuary remained in much the same state till the reign of Henry VIII., when they were materially altered, and restricted by various acts of parliament, and ordered that it should not be allowed to those who had escaped from the hands of the sheriff, and as religious houses had been dissolved, asylum was now confined to Cathedrals and parish Churches.

At first the altar and inner buildings of a Church were alone considered as Sanctuary, but soon these limits were enlarged, and all the space between the Church and the outer walls, that is the houses and lodgings of the abbots and the monks, and the cloisters, were allowed the privilege, and this extension no doubt arose from the fact that a refugee had to eat and sleep in the Church itself, which they were expressly forbidden to do.

The space which was considered sacred, varied in different places, the more sacred the shrine or building, the greater was the space allowed around it. At Beverley a mile around on every side was safe; at St. Edmondsbury one mile in the direction of each cardinal point, terminating with a cross, was the limit. At Hexham there were four crosses, set up in four ways, leading to the Church, and between these the malefactor was safe.

The Welsh appear to have had a very largely extended Sanctuary, and, we are told, "that they allowed all criminals, even murderers, this privilege, and that they were allowed to take their servants and cattle with them, for which purpose large tracts of pasture land were assigned, and were held sacred and inviolable."

Geraldus Cambrensis speaking of this subject in his own days, A.D. 1146 to 1223, says: <sup>1</sup> "We observe that they show a greater respect than other nations to Churches and ecclesiastical persons, to the relicts of saints, bells, holy books and the cross which they devoutly revere; and hence their churches enjoy more than ordinary tranquility. For peace is not only preserved towards all animals feeding in churchyards, but at a great distance from them, where certain boundaries and ditches have been appointed by the bishops in order to maintain the security of Sanctuary.

<sup>1</sup> Bohn's edition, p. 507a.

But the principal Churches to which antiquity has annexed the greater reverence, extend their protection to the herds as far as they can go to feed in the morning and return at night."

In the laws of Hoel Dha, A.D. 928, fighting is forbidden in churchyards and sanctuaries under heavy fines. For fighting within the churchyard £14 are to be paid, if out of the churchyard and in the sanctuary £7 are to be paid. This seems to have been the cause why fairs were often held in the churchyard or sanctuary, as at such meetings fights were likely to take place, and the sacredness of the situation was more likely to restrain the passions or feelings of revenge.

The ceremonies connected with the taking of sanctuary are recorded with great minuteness in the Sanctuarium Dunelmense, where they are thus described—"A man from Wolsingham was committed to prison for theft, and escaping, sought refuge at the Cathedral of Durham, having sounded the Knocker on the great door, he was admitted, and took his stand before St. Cuthbert's shrine, the Galilee bell then sounded to inform the city that a man had taken Sanctuary, and that a coroner was required to hear a confession. John Racket, the Coroner of Chester Ward, soon arrived to do this duty, and having heard all the culprit had to say in self-defence, he sentenced him to abjure the realm. The sacrist, sheriff, under sheriff, and other officers being present, the man took a solemn oath that he would perform his sentence. He then stripped himself of his clothing to his shirt, and gave it to the sacrist as his fee, the clothing was at once restored to him, and a white cross put into his hand, a black gown, with a yellow cross (called St. Cuthbert's Cross) on the shoulder was put on him, and he was handed over to the sheriff, who gave him in charge of the nearest constable, whose duty it was to pass him on to the next in the direction of the sea, and so on, till he reached the shore, where he was put on board a ship, and for ever bade farewell to his country."

These ceremonies appear to have varied in different places, for in some Sanctuaries a man could go alone to the sea if he carried in his hand a crucifix, and took the most direct route. If he got

to the port and failed to find a ship, he had to go every day into the water up to his knees (it does not say how long he was to stay there) and this he had to do for 40 days, when no ship arriving, he must return to his Sanctuary.

It appears that, occasionally, the refugee remained permanently in his place of asylum, for in a charter of one of the Saxon Kings to Crowland Abbey granting to it the privilege of Sanctuary, it expressly declares that criminals who take refuge there shall become the slaves of the abbot.<sup>1</sup>

It was ordered in most Sanctuaries that the fugitives should be guarded by lay keepers, because the expense of feeding, clothing, and watching them would have been too great a tax upon the funds of the Church, and as the strictest watch and ward had to be maintained by night and day, the city authorities were held responsible for the personal care of the fugitives. There must have been considerable danger to an unarmed community when several of these criminals had to be admitted together, and we find, as early as the Laws of Theodosius, before referred to, A.D. 401 to 450, it is especially provided that all who claimed the protection of Sanctuary should be unarmed, except with a blunt knife for their food, and they enacted "that if any refused to lay aside his arms on entering the Sanctuary, it should be lawful to send for a magistrate, and with the consent of the bishop, the officers might come armed into the Church and take the refugee by force, and if he chanced to be killed in so doing, it should be reckoned his own fault."<sup>2</sup> This seems to have been almost the only cause for which an armed force might enter the Sanctuary. But for these precautions, a number of armed ruffians might have gained access to any Church or Religious house, and slain and pillaged its inmates. (If during any man's residence in these asylums he did damage, even of 1d. value, he was according to the Laws of Hoel Dha to leave at once, and seek another Sanctuary.)

It has been suggested that the rooms over the lofty porches in some Churches, were used by the men whose duty it was to admit the fugitive, and that a light was kept burning all night to guide

<sup>1</sup> *Archæologia*, Vol. II., p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> Hoel Dha's Law, A.D. 907.

them to the refuge. At Durham Cathedral two rooms similarly situated were undoubtedly used for this purpose, and tradition says that a light was placed behind the Great Knocker, and shone through the monster's eyes. A very improbable story!

The violation of Sanctuary appears to have been very rare, and when it did occur was looked upon as flagrant sin. The few accounts which we have, show what a commotion it caused, and what serious results arose in consequence. In early Irish History it is related that a criminal had taken Sanctuary at the Abbey of St. Ruan, or St. Ruadon, (now the Abbey of Lorha, near Roscrea). From this place he was taken, and dragged to Tara, the Abbot demanded his restitution, which King Diarmed obstinately refused, and finally put the man to death. The enraged abbot, and a bishop that was with him went in solemn procession to Tara, and "they took the bells that they had, which they rang hardily, and cursed the King, and the place, and prayed God that no King or Queen ever after should or could dwell in Tara, but that it should be waste for ever." This actually occurred, and the last assembly of the tribes took place in Tara, about A.D. 562,<sup>1</sup> since which time the scene of festivity and song has been silent and deserted, and those who have seen the bleak desolation of Tara's halls, can fully realise the consequence of the Saints' curse. The name of this monastery commemorated the malediction, as it was afterwards known as the "Monastery of the Curses of Ireland."

The Sanctuaries of Ireland must have been very numerous, if we care to judge by the following passage, from the ancient ecclesiastical Law of Ireland.

*Sinoclus dicit : Ubi cunq;ue inveneritis signum crucis Christi ne læseritis.*

*Locus sanctus no excedet longitudinem et latitudinem atrii exterioris labernauli et templi Salamonis, qua meteber per c cubitos manus virilis in longitudine quinquaginta cubitos.*

*Hibernensis Lib. xlv., cap. 34*

*Wasserschleben II. 2nd Edit. Leipzig, 1885.*

<sup>1</sup> Bingham, Vol. II., p. 580.

Ancient Laws of Ireland, Rolls Series, Vol. II., p. 255.

The laws go on to state that the Church would be liable for loss, if she protected fugitives, except under certain conditions as to time and crime.

In 1378 two English knights named Shackle and Hawle took Sanctuary at Westminster, and fled to the Choir just at the time of the celebration of High Mass; the Deacon was reading the Gospel of the day, when suddenly the clash of arms was heard, and the pursuers regarding neither time or place burst in upon the Service. One of the knights escaped unhurt, but the other named Hawle was pierced with twelve wounds, and sank dead in front of the Prior's stall; he was regarded as a martyr to the injured rights of the abbey and obtained the unusual honour of being buried within its walls. The abbey was shut up for four months, and parliament was suspended lest its assembly should be polluted by sitting within desecrated precincts, and the whole case was heard by the King himself. The abbot William of Colchester pronounced the the excommunication of the two chief assailants and the payment by them of £200 by way of penance. This tremendous uproar took place in the early days of Richard II.<sup>1</sup>

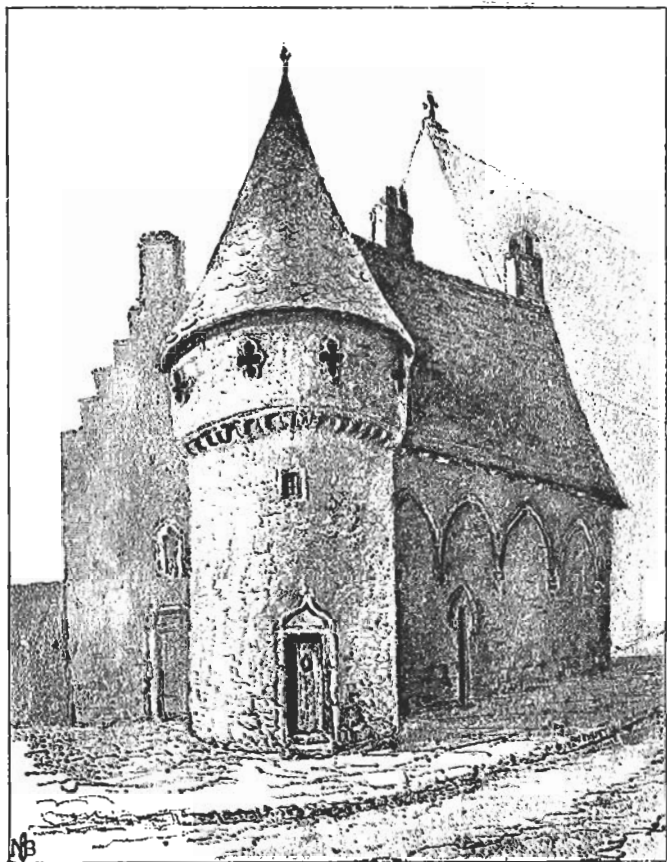
The Sanctuary of Westminster occupied a very prominent situation, and though few of the actual buildings remain, a part is still called "the Broad Sanctuary." There are few more romantic stories in English History than the one which relates how Elizabeth Woodville Queen of Edward IV. with her three daughters, her mother and Lady Scrope came and knocked at the great door of the Sanctuary of Westminster, and having registered themselves as Sanctuary women took up their abode within its sacred walls. Soon afterwards the Queen gave birth to a son, the future King of England; there was no one to tend the little Prince but a nurse who happened to be within the walls, and he was baptised by the sub-prior, with the abbot as his godfather, and the Duchess of Bedford and Lady Scrope as his godmothers. A few years passed away and the Queen again sought the shelter of the abbey; the little King was not with her, but hoping to keep her other son the Duke of York, she carried

<sup>1</sup> Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*, Vol. II, p. 375 et seq.

him into the Sanctuary. The Lord Protector however had determined to get possession of the boy, and not daring to violate the Sanctuary, he held a Council at which it was decided that it might be a protection for men and women, but could not be so for children, as they could not commit a crime for which it was required, and that he might take his nephew from thence if he pleased, this he accordingly did, but with the Queen's consent.

Sanctuaries continued in full power till the Reformation, but if we are to believe contemporary accounts they had become most dangerous refuges for the lawless and disaffected in all classes of society. Speaking of the terrible state to which the Sanctuary of Westminster was reduced in the 16th century, the Duke of Buckingham is said by Sir Thomas Moore to have thus described it. "There they build, there they spend, and bid their creditors go whistle for them. Men's wives run thither with their husband's plate, thieves bring thither their stolen goods and live thereon. Nightly they steal out, they rob, they reave, and kill, and then come in again." The right of Sanctuary in fact rendered the whole precinct a vast cave of Adullum for all the distressed and discontented of the metropolis who desired, according to the phrase of the time, to "take Westminster."<sup>1</sup> When things had come to such a state as this, it was time for the law to interfere, and various Acts of Parliament were passed by which the privileges were lessened, and at last finally suppressed, 21st James I. A few buildings and precincts in London still gave shelter to debtors, but this also ceased in 1697 and the only Sanctuary which remained in the Kingdom was the precincts of the Abbey and Palace of Holyrood, Edinburgh (*Pl. VIII.*) Here until a short time ago a debtor could still knock at the door and register himself a Sanctuary man, defying his creditors to arrest him. The limit of safety was a large one and included the whole of the Queen's road round Arthur's seat, and a considerable distance in the other direction. When Sunday morning came these Sanctuary men could go where they pleased, and when night came they returned to remain in safety for another week. At last this became such a public scandal that a law was passed in 1880 to do away with the Sanctuary of Holyrood, and nothing now remains of the Right which in mediæval time exercised such a powerful influence in Christendom.

<sup>1</sup> Stanley's Historical Memorials Westminster Abbey, p. 365.



THE SANCTUARY HOLYROOD.