

From the *Transactions* of the
Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society

The Founders' Book of Tewkesbury Abbey

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1910, Vol. 33, 60-66

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THE FOUNDERS' BOOK OF TEWKESBURY ABBEY.

A lecture delivered in the Library of All Souls College, Oxford, on
August 3rd, 1910.

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I SHALL not tax your patience, I hope, very long by what I have to say about this book. The greater part of its contents is familiar to all students of Tewkesbury history from the two sixteenth-century MS. copies of it in the British Museum, and to all lovers of the old abbey from the use which was made of these MSS. by the late Mr. J. H. Blunt in his fascinating little volume, *Tewkesbury Abbey and its Associations*. What I have to say, then, this evening relates chiefly to the origin and the history of the book itself. There are perhaps not many books of so respectable an antiquity which can give so complete an account of themselves and their whereabouts throughout a period of 450 years. The fly-leaf and the first page of the volume give us the record of its varying fortunes—where it lived within the precincts of its monastic birthplace, and who have been its guardians since.

All visitors to Tewkesbury will remember the ancient treasury of the church (now used as a vestry), upon the south side of the choir, with its massive door, lined with irregular plates of iron, said to be formed from fragments of armour and weapons picked up upon the battlefield beyond. From the shelf-mark upon folio 1 of the MS. we learn that that was its abode. It was to be found in the treasury of the abbey church, and was the sixth book upon the first shelf. That is plain enough now, but the shelf-mark was puzzling—"Chym:e:—6. Li: "—until the Rev. H. M. Bannister, our

greatest authority upon western liturgical MSS., helped to solve the riddle. He had found, I think in the Chapter Library at Chartres, books with the press-mark "Cimiliar-chium" (of which word our "Chym" is evidently an abbreviation), indicating that they were kept in the cathedral treasury. The use of the Greek word to distinguish the treasury at Tewkesbury suggests that sparks from the "Greek fire" of the "New Learning" were kindling in the remote cloister of the Tewkesbury Benedictines. The plundering hands which executed the Royal Commission in 1540 had as little regard for classic revivals as they had for the antiquities of Tewkesbury, and a bold hand of the sixteenth century has written roughly across the top of the page, "First Sh(elf). *A Book of Armes written in velam.*" But they have left us an interesting confirmation of Mr. Bannister's reading of the monastic press-mark; for in the inventory of the abbey goods, printed among the documents at the end of Pocock's edition of Burnet, they relate that "Records and evidences belonging to the said monastery remain in the Treasury there under the custody of John Whittington, Knight, the key thereof delivered to Richard Poulet, receiver."¹

From the treasury of the conventual church at Tewkesbury the volume passed into the hands of Sir Edward Grevell, of Milcote, near Stratford-on-Avon, a son of that Gloucestershire family whose ancient home is still to be seen at Chipping Campden, and an ancestor of the present Earl of Warwick. His name is written in a large hand at the top of the fly-leaf, the name of the Tewkesbury monk who styles himself the author of the book having been erased to make way for it. Sir Edward Greville's mother was Elizabeth, daughter of John Spencer, of Hodnell, co. Warwick, and it is therefore easy to understand how the book passed into the possession of its next owner, Robert, Lord Spencer, of Wormleighton, co. Warwick, whose name

¹ *History of the Reformation*, iv. 266.

is recorded on the fly-leaf. Camden speaks of this, the first Lord Spencer, as "a worthy encourager of virtue and learning," while of his ready wit we have the well-known story that when he was speaking once in Parliament of the valour of their English forefathers in the defence of liberty, the Earl of Arundel let fall some contemptuous remark upon the origin of the Spencers, to which Lord Spencer replied: "If my ancestors, my lord, were keeping sheep, yours were then plotting treason!" The Tewkesbury book, then, entered Lord Spencer's collection of books either at Wormleighton or at Althorp, and thus became one of the earliest volumes of what was afterwards known as the Great Sunderland Library, a collection of treasures of such value that when it was sold at Blenheim some thirty years ago one London bookseller alone made purchases to the value of over £33,000. But the MS. was not destined to remain among the Althorp books. In the mind of the first Lord Spencer the literary tastes of the age of Elizabeth were blended with the chivalrous instincts of an earlier day. A touching note at the foot of the fly-leaf of the Tewkesbury chronicle records that, in a conflict between them, the finer moral quality prevailed. In the year 1586 died Henry Nevill, Lord of Abergavenny, leaving an only child, Mary, who twelve years before her father's death had become the second wife of Sir Thomas Fane, of Kent. In right of his wife, "by whom it hath pleased God to bless him with many fair children," Sir Thomas laid claim to the ancient barony of Abergavenny. This somewhat celebrated peerage case was decided in favour of the heir male, a cousin of the late lord; but by way of consolation to his heiress, a patent was issued conferring upon Mary Fane and her children the barony of *Le Despencer* in her own right. Mary Nevill, the Lady Fane, was lineally descended from the Despensers of Gloucester and Winchester, being the great-great-granddaughter of the last of the Despensers, our Countess Isabel, the founder of "the Warwick Chantry" (so called),

by her former marriage with Richard Beauchamp, Lord of Bergavenny and Worcester. And we are thus prepared to read the interesting note upon the fly-leaf, which tells us that "The Right Honorable the Lady Mary, Baroness Le Despencer, only daughter and heir of Henry Nevill, Lord of Abergavenny, is the owner of this book, the gift of Robert, Lord Spencer, Baron of Wormleighton, whose children unite with him in affectionate glad approval." The inscription is evidently in Lord Spencer's own hand. We can appreciate the delicate feeling which prompted the gift. We can picture the pleasure with which the Lady Mary received it. *And* we can imagine the discomfort with which the Elizabethan heralds, who had attempted to derive the later Spencers from the ancient baronial Despencers, would have beheld the head of that house making over this precious record of his reputed ancestors to the newly-created baroness, herself a Nevill, the descendant of the ancient Despencers *upon the distaff side*.¹

But be that as it may, the Tewkesbury book passed into the possession of the Lady Mary Fane, Baroness Le Despencer, and from her to her eldest son Francis, created Earl of Westmorland in 1623, and with his descendants, the Earls of Westmorland, it remained down to our own day.

The book itself bears no title. Of the two copies in the British Museum, one is entitled "Chronica de fundatoribus et de fundatione Ecclesie Theokusburie." The other copy is "Registrum Theokusburie." This latter copy was formerly in the Isham Library at Lamport, Northants, and Thomas Hearne has an interesting note upon it in his *Diary* under the date [1733] "Feb: 5." The former of the two copies, from the Cotton Library (now Cleop: c. iii, in the British Museum Catalogue), has been twice printed, viz. in a very condensed form by Leland, in the *Itinerary* (vol. vi, Hearne's

¹ Dr. Round might add a note to a certain excursion of his into the archives of an illustrious Warwickshire family; see *Peerage and Family History*, p. 279.

edition, 1744), and in Dugdale's *Monasticon* (vol. ii, edition 1817) in full. I may add that both these MS. copies have been slightly "edited"; one is imperfect; neither is complete. Nor do the two copies, taken together, contain all the matter to be found in the original. The Isham copy has pen-and-ink drawings of most of the figures and coats of arms in "The Founders' Book." The original MS. is written in four different hands of the latter half of the fifteenth century. Of these, two are responsible for the greater part of the text; a third, for certain notes and illustrations prefixed to it; a fourth, for an account at the end of the volume of the removal of the monks from Cranborne to Tewkesbury by Abbot Gerald, and for a list of relics. This last hand is that of the monk who describes himself as the maker of the book. Under the name of "Edward Grevell," at the top of the fly-leaf, I descried some faint traces of an erased handwriting, and by Mr. Madan's kind help I was able to recover the fact that "Joannes Evesham hunc librum fecit." Who was John Evesham? Probably *precentor* of the abbey, whose duty it would be to assign their tasks to the scribes of the monastic scriptorium. Possibly that *John Galeys* who governed the house as abbot between Abbot John Abingdon and Abbot John Strensham. "Gale" is an Evesham name to this day.

By far the greater part of the book consists of short notices of the founders and patrons of Tewkesbury Abbey and of its cells at Cranborne and Goldcliff, with their painted portraits and arms, together with the coats of the royal and noble houses to which they were allied. These latter form together a fairly large "armorial" of Mediæval England. Certain fragments of painted sculpture, preserved at the abbey, which were dug up near the high altar some years ago, are evidently parts of the originals of some of the figures which appear in the MS. These have been taken by Mr. J. H. Blunt and others to be fragments of a reredos which is supposed to have stood behind the high altar; but apart from the fact that

there is *no room* for any such structure—assuming that the high altar stands to-day at the same distance as it has always stood from the fourteenth-century screen-work at its back—is it not more likely that these figures were a part of the adornment of the sumptuous Beauchamp Chapel on the north side of the choir? My own impression is that this chapel, with its blazonry and sculpture, suggested *this book*, and that the decoration of the book was derived from the decoration of the chapel. The chapel was “The Founders’ Book” *in stone*. The figures which adorn the book range from the venerable Oddo and Doddo to the “King-Maker.” The earliest hand employed upon the MS. ceases abruptly when Richard Nevill is reached, and the book is continued in a later hand. It is natural to think that the pause in the chronicle was occasioned by the outbreak of the Wars of the Roses. The delay in taking up the thread again may have a very close connection. To the monks of Tewkesbury, whose fortunes so frequently brought them into contact with “high places,” the mercurial loyalty of their great patron may have suggested to them that it would be wiser *to wait and see*. To a similar cause, perhaps, it is due that we are told nothing about the Battle of Tewkesbury, which is dismissed in a single sentence. This, and the fact that we also learn nothing of the “King-Maker” himself, except that he *sometimes* wore a *beard*, are the great disappointments—in a contemporary document—of “The Founders’ Book.” It is needless to add that the latter defect has been supplied to the full by the captivating monograph upon the great Earl of Warwick from the pen of your distinguished ex-President.

NOTE ON PLATE II.

THIS page of the MS. is specially interesting, as the leaf is missing from the Isham copy. The originals of the group represented here probably occupied the elevated platform

in the Beauchamp Chapel. The figures were probably of wood, upon a wooden floor, traces of which appear to remain upon the painted mouldings which terminate the platform eastwards.¹ The kneeling figure of herself would be suggested to the Countess Isabel by that of her grandfather, Lord Edward le Despenser, upon the roof of the Trinity Chapel on the opposite side of the choir, the greater height of her own chapel necessitating the arrangement here adopted. The presence of this sumptuous figure in its heraldic surcoat may account for the desire expressed in the Countess' will that the effigy to be set upon her own tomb in the adjacent choir should be "quite naked," *i.e.* devoid of all ornaments and robes of state.

It is likely that the figures of the Blessed Mother and Holy Child were the cause of the complete destruction of the whole group by the hands of ignorant fanatics. Note the likeness of the decorated background of the group to the stone panelling of the west wall of the chapel, above the platform.

¹ My thanks are due to the present verger at the abbey for the trouble he kindly took to enable me to examine the upper story of the chapel.
