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Inscription at Clapton

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INSCRIPTION AT CLAPTON.

By G. McN. RUSHFORTH, F.S.A.

(WITH PLATE).

THOSE who have penetrated to the little church of Clapton, set in a hamlet of Cotswold houses and cottages on the hillside above Bourton-on-the-Water, may have been puzzled by an inscription cut on the inner face of the abacus surmounting the northern pier of the chancel arch. The late Mr. Daubeny, who first called attention to it in his 'Ancient Cotswold Churches' (p. 114¹) assigns the building to the last quarter of the twelfth century, but the inscription may be somewhat later. The lettering is of the so-called Lombardic type, but the forms are peculiar and produced partly, it would seem, by the use of compasses. The letters are, on the whole, well preserved, and superficially give the impression of being quite legible. But it is far from easy to read off the words at first sight; and it was some time before I reached an even approximately correct interpretation. I may add that the metrical form of the inscription shows that it is complete, and that nothing has been lost.

The second line is fairly clear, and provides a clue to the general meaning. It runs

dixerit en merces [\overline{t}] *ibi m. dies.*

m is evidently for *mille*, and *t* presumably is an abbreviated *tunc*. The conditional *dixerit*, ' (whoever) shall have said ' or ' shall say,' followed by ' a reward of a thousand days,' suggests that we have to do with an Indulgence, offering a thousand days pardon for the recital of certain prayers, which in such cases were always the *Pater noster* and the

¹ I must disclaim all responsibility for the conjectural version of the second line which he prints on p. 115.

Ave Maria. The formula (generally in French) is familiar from many 13th and 14th century grave-stones and brasses (we modernize the spelling): *Qui pour l'âme* (of the deceased) *priera, quarante jours de pardon avera.* The first word of the first line will therefore be *qui*, and it continues fairly clearly: *ter devote P(ate)r Ave dixerit.* The last words of the line are a difficulty. They ought to express (like *ter* and *devote*) some other condition or qualification for gaining the indulgence. The first letter superficially resembles an S. but there is no Latin word to which *seneb* (as it appears to read) could correspond, and I therefore take it to be a G, formed, apparently, like the manuscript *g* of the period. The complicated symbol (not a letter) following B will be the mark of abbreviation by which the ablative plural in *bus* is nearly always indicated. We then get *geneb(us)*, incorrectly written for *genib(us)*, 'on his knees' or 'kneeling,' followed by *ipse*, 'in person,' compressed for want of space into IPE. The whole will then read:

*Qui ter devote P(ate)r Ave geneb(us) ip(s)e
dixerit, en merces t(unc) ibi m(ille) dies.*

'Whoever shall say three times devoutly a Pater and an Ave on his knees and in person—lo! (or 'look you') there is a reward then and there of a thousand days.'

It is unnecessary to point out the metrical and other weaknesses of the couplet, which, like the cutting of the letters, give the impression that it is the work of an amateur, perhaps the local priest, who took this means of recording and publishing the substance of the formal document which granted the indulgence. The excessive liberality of the terms is possibly to be explained by its being an accumulation of several indulgences granted by a number of bishops. Thus it might be made up of 10 indulgences of 100 days each, or 25 of 40 days. Or it might be explained in another way. We know very little

about Clapton, but, with Bourton-on-the-Water, it was an early possession of Evesham Abbey. Now when the new abbey-church of Evesham was dedicated in 1239, we are told¹ that the officiating bishop granted a series of indulgences, viz., 100 days pardon on the occasion itself, and afterwards annually 100 days on the anniversary of the dedication, and on every feast of the Holy Cross, of the Virgin, and of St. Egwin (the founder of Evesham). In the 13th century there were two festivals of the Cross (the Invention and Exaltation), five of Mary (Conception, Nativity, Annunciation, Purification, Assumption),² and two of St. Egwin (Deposition, Dec. 30th, and Translation, Sept. 10th);³ so that, with the Dedication, there were ten occasions every year on which a devotee could gain 100 days, or 1000 days in all. This at least shows the practice of the time, for perhaps the Clapton inscription is not far distant in date from 1239. It may be that the abbey secured a privilege of a similar kind for its dependency under special circumstances of which we are ignorant; in which case the Clapton couplet would be a very imperfect summary of the grant and its conditions. I have not, so far, been able to discover any parallel to this inscription.

¹ *Chronicon Abbatiae de Evesham* (Rolls series), p. 279.

² The Feast of the Visitation was instituted by Urban VI in 1389.

³ *St. Egwin and his Abbey of Evesham* (Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester, 1904),