

THE HISTORY OF THE BENEDICTINE PRIORY OF MONK SHERBORNE.

BY MISS FLORENCE DAVIDSON.

Henry de Port, the founder of the Priory of Monk Sherborne (now known as Pamber Priory) was a son of Hugh de Port by his wife Orance, that great Norman noble to whom William the Conqueror gave fifty-six lordships in Hampshire. His son inherited most of this vast property, which included Basing, the head of this great Barony, and West and East Sherborne, and at once founded a Priory of Benedictine monks in West Sherborne, which henceforth was known as Sherborne Monachorum (Monk Sherborne).

Henry de Port, who was a Baron of the Exchequer under Henry the First and a witness of the Great Charter of Liberties in 1101, gave his new Priory with its tithes, to the Abbot and Convent of St. Vigor Cerisy, close to Bayeaux and to his old home at Port-en-Bassin, in Normandy.

The exact date at which the Priory was begun is not known, but it must have been a small building at first with a tower, which still stands, while the Monastic buildings lay on the south side, where the present farm house is built. The Church was consecrated by William Giffard, Bishop of Winchester, between 1107 and 1129, and was dedicated to the Holy Trinity, Our Lady and St. John the Baptist. Henry de Port's first charter is still in the possession of Queen's College, Oxford, and in this document he says he founded and endowed the Priory so that perpetual masses should be said for the souls of King Henry and his son Prince William, and for the souls of himself, his wife, children, father, mother and friends and all the people of Monk Sherborne. And he further endows his new foundation with a Mill at East Sherborne Pool (now Sherborne St. John)

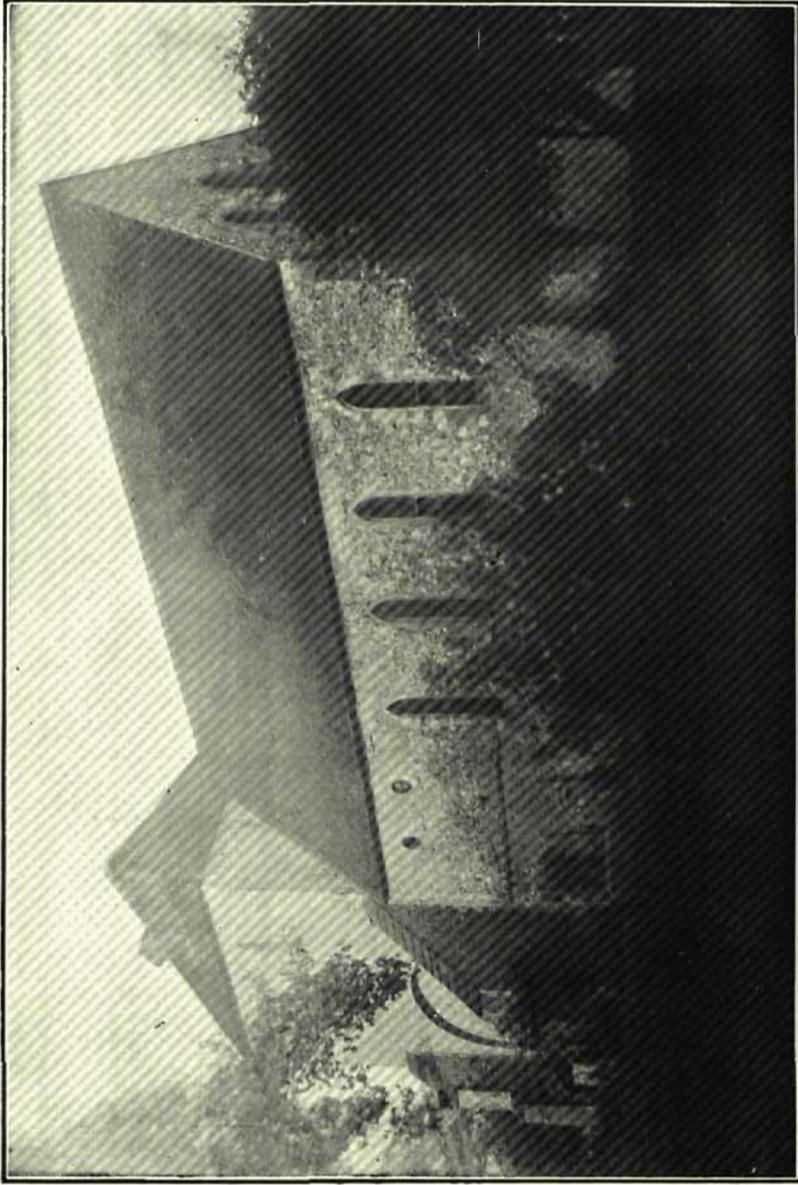
the churches and tithes of West Sherborne and of Bramley and tithes of Basing, Upton Grey, Woodgarston, etc. His wife Hadvis and his two sons are witnesses, and the deed is in as good preservation as it must have been when first executed. Henry de Port directed that he is to be buried in his new church.

The next two charters are those of his son John and his grandson Adam de Port (deeds at Queen's College), which enlarge and confirm his gifts. Adam de Port died in or about 1213, and his son William, who took his maternal grandfather's name of St. John on succeeding to his property, confirmed the charters of his ancestors and continued their gifts to the Priory. Many grants of land were made to it in the 12th and following centuries by John de Boltere, Thomas Salville, Thomas Martyn, Richard atte More, Robert Peeche, John de Walwys, and Gilbert de Stokes, while the monastic buildings were enlarged and added to.

The first Prior whose name is known to us was William, about 1203 or earlier (deed at Queen's College). The Priors were chosen by the Abbot of Cerisy and sent over from the Abbey of St. Vigor Cerisy, but they had to be approved of and instituted by the Bishop of Winchester, under whose direction they were. But it was never a large "house," nor was it ever a rich one, even in the days of its prosperity.

St. Benedict made wise rules for his Order, which were carried out by the monks here. They were to be obedient, cheerful, gentle and prudent in speech, remembering that silence saves many a sin, and that meekness shows the fear of God, and they were to laugh and talk seldom, being always ready for prayer. The Prior was commanded to teach through deeds and words, and to be just, kind, and strict. They rose for their first service soon after midnight, and they had their last one before they went to bed for the night. One of their daily duties was to pray for the souls of the de Port family, and five tapers were always kept burning before their tombs.

Their food consisted principally of soup and fish, meat being eaten only twice or three times a week. Each monk



PAMBER PRIORY, SOUTH-EAST VIEW. [Photographed by H. C. Davidson.]

was given at his one heavy meal a day, five eggs, four small or two large fish, or a mess of meat ; with cheese, bread, and stewed fruit in its season, with a mug of convent-brewed ale or cider. On Feast Days they had wine, which was allowed to come to their convent with other goods from France, free of any tax (deed at Queen's College, 1160 A.D.). For breakfast each monk had bread and the quarter of a pint of ale. For supper, a dish of meat or a bowl of soup, with bread and nuts in their season. On all Fast Days and through Lent and Advent they were fed on bread and water, with fish on certain days of the week.

The monks lived in the open cloisters of the Monastery, only eating and sleeping in the building itself, and they were buried in the open space in the centre of the cloister, when they died, uncoffined, in their black robes, laid on sackcloth and ashes. Their bones are often dug up to this day at this spot. Besides their religious duties, the Brothers worked on the Priory Farm, while the Prior gave daily relief to the poor in money, food, medicine and legal advice. The game of bowls was allowed to be played on Feast Days as a pastime.

The Church was strewn with rushes, and there were only seats for the Prior and his monks, everyone else stood or knelt. The Priory was at the height of its prosperity in the 12th and 13th centuries. The Prior held the tithes of the churches of Shaw, Aldermaston, Padworth and Sulhamstead Bannister (Berks) and of St. Frideswade at Wallingford and of Lavington, Wiltshire (Ecclesiastical Tax for Winton Diocese), while in 1246 (Patent Rolls) Henry III. allowed the Prior two cart loads of dead wood once a week from Pamber Forest, and in 1309 (Patent Rolls) John de St. John confirms the grant made by his grandfather, Robert de St. John, to the Priory, of the right shoulder of every deer killed in Sherborne Park.

We find Michael was Prior in 1260 and Richard de Bourdigney in 1273, and in 1293 we have the value of the Priory and its farm given as £87 14s. 10d. (Woodford). There were 115 sheep, 91 ewes, 65 lambs, 25 horses, 10 oxen,

10 coves, 40 bullocks, and 8 score hogs. In the Priory kitchen were 6 brazen cooking pots, a wash basin and jug and some wooden tables. We are told that there was a good store of corn and oats for seed for the next year, but no hay, as it had been "sopped and spoiled" by the rain of the same summer.

Early in 1300, Nicholas, a monk of Cerisy, was made Prior, and it was after this date that the value of the Priory lands began to decrease, till in 1329 Thomas Galouber, who was then Prior, had to borrow £26 to meet expenses (records at Queen's College), and this debt grew as the years went on. One of the chief debts was the yearly sum paid to the Crown for being an Alien Priory.

In 1339 after the Priory expenses had been paid, only £60 was left to pay this tax, which now amounted to £80, and though the Prior borrowed money and let his farms, they were still in debt (Close Rolls, Ed. III.).

So poor had they become that in 1340 (Close Rolls) the King ordered the Sheriff of Southampton to pay to Thomas Symeon of Monk Sherborne, a pension due to him from the Prior, as the latter had not the money to pay it with. The climax to their misfortunes came in 1348 and 1350, when the Black Death had desolated England, and Prior Robert Corbel and many of the monks died from the pestilence. A new Prior, Denis, came to replace the old one, but in 1350 the Bishop of Winchester wrote to the Abbot of Cerisy to tell him the Priory had fallen into great poverty (Bishop Edyndon's Register)—"The Oblations of Sacrifice have ceased, and for very hunger the devotions of the monks have grown tepid. The buildings fall to ruin and its fruitful lands are barren." So with the consent of the Prior, he begged the Abbot to recall four of the monks to Normandy, the Priory then containing the Prior and seven monks, and there not being money enough to support them all. "The sacred buildings," the Bishop adds, "are left to beasts and birds."

Prior Denis was succeeded in 1367 by William Barnard, who tried to get the Priory into some of its old order, appoint-

ing a confessor for himself and his monks in 1368. After Prior William died in 1374, Ingleram de Duino, a monk of St. Vigor, was proposed as Prior (Wykeham's Register). We have an account of how he brought a letter sealed with green wax from the Abbot of Cerisy to the Bishop of Winchester, asking to be made Prior. Legal difficulties delayed his election, but at last these were set aside and he was elected Prior "for his many virtues." But debt still hung heavy over the monks, and when in 1380 (Patent Rolls) the King remitted this custody tax it was a great relief.

A Benedictine monk of Bristol, Walter Marshall, was the next Prior in 1397, but only for a few months, while the Priory was in the hands of the King during one of the frequent wars with France; and William Trenchfau, a monk of Cerisy, succeeded him. William died in 1408, and Benit was appointed Prior.

He was the last Prior, as in the middle of this century, after France had taken Normandy, all the Alien Priories remained in the hands of Henry VI., who had seized them as soon as the war had begun. He gave these Alien Priories to various English Foundations. Monk Sherborne Priory, with all its revenues, he presented to Eton College. This was not a very valuable gift, as at the time it came into his hands its value was only £58 7s. 4½d. (Queen's College Deeds).

Eton was ordered to provide a priest to say daily Matins and Mass, and to pay 23s. 4d. a year for five tapers to burn before the de Port tombs, while five Masses or more were to be said for the founder's family.

This priest was to have £6 a year and £1 3s. 4d., was to be given once a year to the poor and £1 14s. od. to support the Vicar of Monk Sherborne. When Eton obtained possession of the Priory, the College turned out the Prior Benit, and it also turned out all the monks and carried away all the jewels, relics, charters, etc., with all the goods and cattle, and the greater part of the Church was thrown down and the stones carted away. Great complaints were made in later years of this, and how the carts and horses were

allowed to pass daily over the graves of the people buried in the Nave and Transepts "of whom more than thirty were sometime worshipful barons, knights and squires." Also the prayers for the founder had ceased (deeds at Queen's College). When Edward IV. came to the Throne, he gave the Priory to the Domus Dei (God's House) at Southampton, so that its revenues should be used for Masses for the souls of his father and grandfather, Richard, Duke of York, and Richard, Earl of Cambridge.

When Henry VI. was king again for a short time, he gave the Priory back to Eton, but it finally returned to the Domus Dei, when in 1471 Edward IV. got back his kingdom, and this grant was confirmed by Edward VI. in 1547 (deeds at Queen's College). Many years before this time the Wardenship of the Domus Dei had been conferred on Queen's College, Oxford, who hold it and the Priory to this day. The Domus Dei seems to have neglected to provide service at the Priory as in 1475 (Queen's College deeds) a petition was sent to Parliament saying "The devout religious place commonly called the Priory of West Sherborne is left without any priest to say service, to the displeasure of God and the prejudice of Henry de Port and his heirs." So Parliament ordered that an honest priest of good conversation, who could read and sing, shall be appointed before June 24th, 1475, and that hereafter he is to say daily Matins, Mass and Evensong, praying especially for the King and Royal Family. And that the Priory Church and the churchyard be repaired and kept in order and that books, bread, wine and lights are to be provided for the services. And once a year, on the 1st of January, a dirge was to be sung, and on the 2nd of January, Masses were to be said for the souls of the Founder and his descendants; with five candles burning before the tombs of his family. And at these Masses £1 3s. 4d. was to be given to the poor.

As years go on, we have various accounts (deeds at Queen's College) of money spent on the Priest at the Priory. But in 1556 and 1564 suits were brought into Chancery to compel Queen's College to repair the Church and to pay the minister.

The College tried to excuse this neglect by declaring that it was the Parish Church of Pamber, and that as such it was the parishioners who must do the repairs. But it was proved that it was not and had never been a Parish Church, but a Priory Chapel with a priest to pray for the founder, and that henceforth Queen's College was to pay all expenses connected with it and at once they must give £120 to put the buildings into proper repair as they were falling into ruin. It was also found that stones were being carted away for building purposes and that Mr. More, of Wyefords, had carried away the bells, which he was ordered at once to return.

Only a portion of the Priory Church now remains.* Though at first small, in the 12th and 13th centuries it was added to and greatly enlarged by the founder's descendants and other benefactors, till when completed it must have been a fine though rather plain building. The nave and north and south transepts have now entirely gone, though the foundations can still be traced. The original choir is now used as a chancel. The date of the choir is about 1220 or 1230, while the tower which is the oldest part, has window mouldings of the very early years of 1100.

The four circular windows over the recessed tombs are exactly like some that are to be seen to-day at the old Monastery of St. Vigor Cerisy, Normandy. In the East wall of the chancel are three lancet windows, of fine proportions. Below the first window on the South is a fine example of a Piscina, at the back of which is a narrow shelf. Under the third window on the same side is a small old doorway, and though the stonework outside is new, the step into the church is deeply worn by the tread of many feet. Some authorities seem to think that small chapels used to exist behind the recessed tombs; but the late Sir Gilbert Scott, who restored the church, does not agree with this idea, and thinks that the recesses were always there instead, as he could find no indication of any side chapels. The arches

*It used to be said the farm house next to the church was haunted and strange noises were heard from the cellars. This suggests that this farm was on the site of; or part of the Priory buildings.

in the north wall have a filleted bowlet instead of the usual keeled row. The central tower is built over large reeded head arches, and is a fine piece of work, and there is a stringed or moulded cornice to the windows in the tower. The original west door is thought to be the one now at the School House, as all the wood used in its building had been stored for many, many years in the outhouses of the Priory Farm. The turret is 12th century, though it has been patched with modern brick.

Two processional doors to the cloister may still be seen in the ruined wall of the nave. And a path can still be traced from one of these to the site of the old monastic buildings, the gravel of which is beaten down as hard as stone. It is a very narrow path for one to walk on, and is to be seen under the present shrubbery.

The screen is a plain, ordinary one of the 15th century, and the old solid oak benches with poppy heads are about the same date. Traces of mural paintings of angels coloured red can still be seen on the north wall, and there is also a Consecration Cross to be found. There are four recessed tombs to be seen, very plain slabs, but we have no record as to which of the de Port family they were erected to. But we have documentary evidence (Queen's College deeds) that the founder, his son and his sister were all buried here.

The wooden effigy of a knight in armour is a fine piece of work, date about 1310. Mr. Fryer ("Monumental Effigies") says that it was probably carved by the same sculptor who carved the effigies of William Combmartin at Alderton and John Hastings at Abergavenny. And he conjectures that they were made in London. It is thought that the figure represents one of the St. Johns of the Vine, who were benefactors at that period to the Priory as their ancestors had been before them.

There are four bells—a treble, dated 1598, recast in 1851 by Taylor; the second by Joseph Carter, dated 1579; the third by the same maker and dated 1582; the tenor dated 1579, also recast by Taylor in 1850.



WOODEN EFFIGY IN PAMBER CHURCH.

The Plate consists of an Elizabethan chalice, a paten cover, and an alms dish, as well as a late silver gilt service.

The Priory was restored in 1843 by Sir Gilbert Scott at the expense of Queen's College, as the church before this time seems to have been much neglected. A low ceiling was found blocking up the roof of the choir, while the east window was filled in with bricks. In the last few years much has been done to keep the church in proper order for the services.