

SIR ROBERT CURSON, OTHERWISE LORD CURSON.

BY JOHN GLYDE.

Among the residents of Ipswich, during the early part of the sixteenth Century, was a man who occupied a mansion larger, as it seems, than that of Sir Anthony Wingfield, or any other inhabitant of the Borough. On one occasion he entertained the proud, unattractive Katherine of Aragon, and her retinue, and a few years later had the pleasure of welcoming the accomplished Henry VIII., who stayed a night under his roof on the only occasion that he visited Ipswich. For treasonable conduct he was with five others proclaimed at S. Paul's Cross as a traitor to the King, but nevertheless was afterwards hand and glove with royalty, and became a recipient of royal bounty in the shape of an annual pension, whilst his companions were either publicly executed, or confined in prison for long periods. I allude to Sir Robert Curson, Knight, called Lord Curson.

We know something about his Ipswich residence, since Mr. B. P. Grimsey, in the 7th Vol. of the "Suffolk Archæological Proceedings," gave, with his usual painstaking accuracy, a full description of it drawn from documents in the British Museum. This published account is accompanied by a ground plan, which shows that the Mansion was of no mean pretensions, having many large and beautiful rooms, a porch under which a carriage could pass, and extensive stabling and coach houses. Moreover, in accordance with the custom of the age, there was within its grounds, a chapel which stood due east and west, with a devotional closet on the south side. Sir Robert's establishment included two chaplains. All this indicates the home of a gentleman of such large means,

that to dispense hospitality even to Royalty, would make no serious inroad on his purse.

Who then was Sir Robert Curson? The size, if not the beauty, of the shell excited my curiosity to know something of the nature of its inhabitant. It seemed at first however that the curiosity was doomed to disappointment. It was tantalizing to find that of even the early life of this Suffolk chameleon of the Tudor age, so little could really be ascertained. One fact I soon learned, that I was not the only one who had been puzzled by disjointed accounts, for when I began to make enquiries of my friends, Dr. Jessopp wrote to me, "I wish I could tell you, or you could tell me, something definite about that old enemy of mine Sir Robert Curson, otherwise called Lord Curson." It was patent that he was not a sufficiently conspicuous figure to occupy much of the attention, or the pens of English Historians. His career forms, as it were, one of the bye-paths of history, which are attractive chiefly to students of the district in which the subject was born or resided. Knowing that a large number of the dusty documents at the Record Office had been arranged during the last few years, I conjectured that the "Calendars" would indicate where new materials could be found. These however indexed very little that answered my purpose, but the research revealed other documents in the Office of more value, for although they added nothing to the scanty details of Sir Robert Curson's early life, and failed to clear away the mist that envelopes a portion of it, they enlightened me as to the relation in which he stood to the occupants of the English throne.

The Curson family are recorded as having come out of Normandy with William the Conqueror, lands and possessions were granted to them for their valiant services. In the sixteenth century there were many branches of this family, but I have been unable to trace to which of these the subject of these remarks belonged. That he in some way or other was connected with Suffolk, I infer from his coming to Ipswich to reside when he retired from

foreign service, and from the further fact, that in addition to the Mansion in Ipswich he had lands and tenements, freehold and copyhold, which he had purchased in the parishes of Blaxhall, Kelsale, and Tunstall, all of which were left to his wife Dame Margaret and her heirs. Blaxhall was particularly favoured, as by his Will dated October 31st, 1534, and proved at Hoxne, in the month of March following, Sir Robert bequeathed a Vestment and a silver Chalice to the church of that parish. The actual extent of his property is unknown, as in his Will his purchased property only is named. He had no family; and the plate, jewels, furniture, cattle and all moveables, with a few exceptions, were bequeathed to his wife, with power to give or to sell.

Henry VIII. was quite conscious that his legitimate claims to the throne of England were far from strong. The direct male line of the House of Lancaster died with Henry VI., and the first Tudor King had to base his right to the throne on a parliamentary title,* which was by no means satisfactory to the old fighting Barons. Moreover, great nobles and wealthy squires had been stripped of their estates to the King's profit, by attainder and confiscation, and this created a host of enemies. Under such circumstances it was unfortunate for him that the adherents of the House of York were still numerically strong, and their movements gave the King great uneasiness. Among these the de la Poles were shrewdly suspected of promoting or fostering disloyalty. Edmund de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, was by the disaffected Yorkists recognized as the coming man, and he was ready to become their champion if opportunity offered. Various matters had stimulated latent discontent. When he should have succeeded to a Dukedom, he found the estate so reduced by confiscation that he was ready to make a compromise with the King, and accepted the title of Earl instead of Duke, on the understanding that some of the forfeited lands would be restored to him.

*Green's "Short History of the English People."

He fretted greatly over this loss of rank, but he nursed his discontent in secret.

Suffolk was a man of violent temper. In 1498 in a fit of passion he killed a peasant. Being indicted for the homicide, he reluctantly applied to Henry VIII. for pardon. The King granted his request, but being no ways disposed to exhibit more indulgence than was politic to any member of the de la Pole family, he commanded him to appear openly in court to plead for his pardon. The haughty Peer felt that to plead for forgiveness in open court was an indignity he could not brook, and resenting the command as an affront he fled to Flanders, taking refuge with his aunt Margaret Duchess of Burgundy. This lady, being the sister of Edward IV., was bent upon the restoration of the House of York, and did everything in her power to encourage intrigue against Henry. But Suffolk's exile was not prolonged. Through some unknown source, a promise of forgiveness from the King was conveyed to him, and returning to England he obtained pardon.

It was not long, however, before his ambitions and his uneasy temper entangled him in traitorous schemes. Once again he felt it necessary to flee from England. By order of the King, the coasts were well watched to prevent escapes, but Suffolk succeeded in eluding official vigilance and crossed the channel to Calais, or rather to Guienne, where one of his friends, Sir James Tirrell, was then Captain. He soon after found his way to the Emperor Maximilian. Henry knew that the elements of a White Rose agitation had been secretly fermenting among some of his Barons and their adherents, and this second flight of the Earl of Suffolk gave him an opportunity which he was not slow to embrace. The Wars of the Roses were succeeded by an elaborate system of espionage, and learning through its operation that many of his nobles were ready to join the Earl in revolting against his rule, he determined to bring Suffolk and his friends within the meshes of his spies, and thus circumvent their machinations.

At the time of the Earl's first flight from England in

1499 Sir Robert Curson was Captain of Hammes Castle, a place near Calais, and of such importance to the English King that Curson had not only to give security himself to the amount of 800 marks, but to obtain Matthew Brown and others as sureties for his good behaviour in that office. The King, however, knew his man, and seems to have induced Sir Robert to ingratiate himself into the good graces of the Earl, and thus obtain his confidence as a prelude to betraying his secrets. To enable him still further to carry out his nefarious schemes, the King granted him a Licence to resign his charge, in order that under pretence of going to fight the infidels, he might offer his services to Maximilian I., whose territories were harassed by the Turks. So highly were his services esteemed by the Emperor that the latter created him a Baron of the Exchequer. In the early part of 1501 Curson is said * to have made known to Maximilian, that Edmond de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, meant to try and recover what he called his rights to the Crown of England, and Maximilian, according to the Chronicler, at once declared, that if Suffolk would come to him he would assist him in obtaining the object of his ambition. This news was in some way conveyed to the Earl, and probably was the cause of his second flight.† Mr. Gairdner (perhaps the best authority we have for this period of English History) informs me that a very trustworthy MS. states that Suffolk left England secretly in August, 1501, and joined Curson on the Continent, and it was in November, 1501, only three months after, that Suffolk and five others were publicly proclaimed at Paul's Cross ‡ as conspirators in treason and traitors to the King. Sir Robert Curson was one of the five, but the inclusion of his name in the

* Gairdner's Henry VII., English Statesmen Series.

† Mr. Moberly, in his *Early Tudors*, says that after the second flight of the Earl of Suffolk, Sir Robert Curson was instructed to go over to Flanders, pretend to join Suffolk, and gain information as to his confederates at home. This must be an error, as Curson was in Flanders long before August, 1501.

‡ St. Paul's Cross was a small open-air Pulpit, at the Cheapside end of St. Paul's Churchyard, and was considered the most public place in London.

proclamation was a strategical trick, designed to divert from him the suspicion of having betrayed his confederates.

As may be anticipated Curson's labours as a spy did not end simply by his companions in treason being proclaimed traitors. From information which was secretly conveyed to the King, William Courtney, eldest son of the Earl of Devonshire; William de la Pole, brother of the Earl of Suffolk; Sir James Tirrell, Sir James Windham, and others, were arrested and cast into prison. Windham and Tirrell were hurried to the block, Courtney and William de la Pole were thrown into the Tower, and endured for several years the horrors of prison life, under the merciless rule of Henry VII.

As far as local history is concerned, the earliest date of Sir Robert Curson's connection with Ipswich is given in Wodderspoon's *Memorials*, where it is stated that Katherine of Arragon came to Ipswich in 1517 on a visit to Sir Robert Curson. He also mentions that Henry VIII. came here and stayed a night with Sir Robert in 1522, and adds that the Corporate Body, according to custom, presented a purse of money to Katherine and also to Henry on the occasion of their visits, but Bacon's *Annals* contains no entry referring either to the presents, or to the visits of the King and Queen at the specified dates. Nevertheless the statements as to these visits is correct. They were made in 1517 and 1522. In April, 1521, a Commission was appointed by the King to enquire into a disputed boundary in the Borough, and Sir Robert Curson was named as one of the Commissioners, his associates being the Abbot of Bury St. Edmund's, Sir Robert Drury, Sir Richard Wentworth, Sir Philip Tylney, Lionel Talmash, Esq., and John Sulyard, Esq.

I will now glance at the reward Sir Robert received for his services. I cannot discover at what date he returned to England. Neither can any entry of payment to him be found in the Patent Rolls during the Reign of Henry VII.; where such payments are entered, or in Auditor's letters of Great Seal, for Writ for Grant. The Orders to the

Exchequer for issue of payments and the Teller's Roll of Exchequer were searched with no better success. When the reign of Henry VIII. was reached, the searcher was rewarded for his pains. In the first year of this Monarch's reign, there is in the "King's Book of Payments," under date 3rd June, 1509, an entry as follows:—"Sir Robert Curson, half year's fee £200." Henry VII. died April 22nd, 1509, and just *six weeks* after his death, a half-year's fee is paid to Sir Robert Curson. What does this mean? Was it left in arrear during the late King's illness? Similar entries for quarterly or half-yearly payments follow until 1520, when at page 408, "Royal Household Expenses," there is "Quarters Wages, Lord Cursons fee, £100." This is the last entry of annual payments that could be found. That the King, however, remained on the best of terms with Sir Robert is evident not only from his nominating him on the Royal Commission in 1521, and from the visit which he paid to him in Ipswich in 1522, but also from an entry at a later date as follows:—Royal Household, "The Kings New Years Gifts, Account of Plate received of the following Goldsmiths and given away in New Years Gifts—Of John Freeman, in Gilt Cups &c to . . . Lord Curson."

Sufficient evidence I think, has now been offered to enable us to sum up. It has been shown that in 1501, the Earl of Suffolk and five others were publically proclaimed in London as traitors to the King. Two of them, Sir James Tirrell and Sir James Windham, were speedily executed. William Courtenay was cast into prison and not released whilst Henry VII. lived, and William de la Pole, had to endure for many years all the misery which invariably accompanied imprisonment for treason in the Tudor age. Two more of the proclaimed traitors have to be accounted for, one, Edmund de la Pole, ventured some time after the death of Henry VII. to return to England, having been in exile ten or eleven years, but only to meet the same fate as Sir James Tirrell and Sir James Windham, being marched to the scaffold in 1513.

The remaining conspirator, if he can be so called, was Sir Robert Curson. At what date he returned to the British shores I have no evidence, but whenever it was, instead of losing his life, or enduring long imprisonment, he at once basked in the sunshine of Royal favour. The money lost by the forfeiture of his recognizances was restored to him. He was placed on the Royal list for a pension of £400 a year. When it was possible to confer any distinction upon the man, distinction was conferred. In the Royal commission of 1521, appointed to consider the boundaries of the Borough of Ipswich, upon which Commission were various county magnates. The name of Sir Robert Curson is second on the list, being next to the Abbot of Bury St. Edmund's. When costly new year's gifts were distributed by the King, Sir Robert Curson was one of the recipients; and, lastly, both Henry VIII. and his queen, Katherine of Arragon, bestowed upon him the highest favor in their power by honoring him with personal visits at his Ipswich home.

Is more evidence needed to show the treachery of Sir Robert Curson? Why should he alone of the six proclaimed traitors become an object of Royal favor, and be in the receipt of a handsome pension, whilst his five companions either suffered the horrors of a long imprisonment, or were speedily led to execution, unless the favors bestowed were to reward him for having played the part of a spy for Henry VII., and betrayed the secrets of his companions?
