

KERSEY. THE PRIORY.

After luncheon a drive was taken to the site of Kersey Priory, where the Rev. W. B. Gray, vicar of Kersey, and Mr. W. Fickling awaited the visitors. The latter gentleman, who is a tutor at the Normal College, Peterborough, acted as guide, both at this spot and at the church. He has kindly contributed his notes for publication. They are as follows :—

Of the foundation of Kersey Priory no certain facts can be given ; it is the tradition that the Priory was founded in the reign of Henry III., by Nesta de Cokefield.

"Grant by Nesta de Kokefield to the canons of S. Mary and S. Anthony Kersey, of pasture of six cows at the time of pasture in her park of Kersey, in frank almain." (No date). Record Office A 3749.

"Sale of land by Henry, Prior of S. Antony of Kerseye to Alexander, son of Ralph." 3 Henry III. (1218).

"Grant of lauds in Kerseye and Leleseya and advowson of Kerseye by John de Bello Campo and Nesta, his wife, to the Priory of S. Antony of Kerseye." 24 Hen. III. (1240).

Reference has been made to the existence of the Priory in the year 1190.* In Dugdale's "Monasticon," six charters referring to grants to the Priory are printed *in extenso*. Four of these are in the name of Nesta, the other two in the name of one of her husbands. Her four husbands were Thomas de Burgh, John de Bello Campo, Mathew de Leyham, and Gilbert Florence. The key to the mystery appears to lie in the fact that some of the charters refer to "fratres," the others to "canonici," which fact seems to allude to a re-founding or re-construction of what was probably a "free chapel" or "hospital" into a Priory of Austin Canons. Whether the foundress, or not, Nesta de Cockfield was the greatest benefactor. She may

*An early mention of the Monastery occurs in Abbot Sampson's Register, 1185.

"Lete of Kersey—The small monastery is one-half, and Kersey is the other half." V.B.R.



From a Photograph by G. Calver Mason, Esq.

KERSEY STREET FROM THE CHURCH HILL.

be identified with the infant daughter of Adam de Cokefield.*

"Adam, son of Robert de Cokefield *v.* Sampson, Abbot of S. Edmund's, of half of the hundred of Cosford." (Suff. Feet of Fines, 3 Richard I., 119).

In 1431 John Holland, Earl of Huntingdon, was patron of the Priory; shortly afterwards, 25 Henry VI., Sir Henry de Grey, Lord Powis, gave it with all its revenues to King's College, Cambridge. It is probable that the Black Death, which raged so fiercely in the immediate neighbourhood, fell heavily upon this Priory, causing its inmates to be in severe stress of poverty. Circumstances seem to point to the fact that when the monastery became the property of King's College, the church tower was completed, and the building was ornamented and enlarged as a compensation to the villagers for the loss of their religious house. At the suppression of Dodnash Priory, a century later, Cardinal Wolsey enlarged the church of Bergholt for the accommodation of the parishioners.

Of the buildings of the Priory there remain:—

(a) The south aisle of the choir, widened to permit the building to be converted into a private chapel.

(b) Contiguous fragments of tower, choir, and transept.

(c) The west wall of the nave.

(d) The kitchen, which has undergone many alterations of recent years.

The Conventual buildings lay to the north of the Priory Church, as at Bury St. Edmund's; there was no aisle to the south nave. This absence of an aisle on that side of the church connected with the domestic buildings, is noticeable in the house of Austin Friars at Bolton, co. Yorkshire.

The interior walls of the chancel were 49 feet long. There were two bays with arches, each 11 feet wide. The arch from transept to choir was 10 feet wide; the transept itself was 21 feet long. Within the chapel was a piscina,

* Carlyle's "Past and Present," Bk. II., cap. xv.

now remaining. The bays of the outer wall do not correspond with those of the inner wall; evidently there was no vaulting.

THE CHURCH

Looking at the chancel we can easily discern the great alterations made in the fabric in the year 1862; the line of roof was retained, but many details suffered greatly. The nave, on the other hand, was carefully and conservatively repaired in 1887-9. Beyond new tracery to the windows, whose mullions had been destroyed by the ravages of time, no conjectural restoration was permitted.

Basing our information upon the character of the building as it now is, we may assert that the early edifice was a simple parallelogram, with walls of the same height as those of the chancel. It cannot be definitely stated whether a tower existed or not. It appears then from the structure, that efforts were made about the year 1340 to replace the small ancient church by one capable of supplying the needs of an increasing population. The fact, that at this period churches were never closed to the public for ceremonies were of daily observance, necessitated that the work should be done gradually, a portion at a time. The first part to undergo alteration was the north side, to which an aisle was added without the existing north wall, and at the same time a tower was built. When the new aisle was complete, the old north wall of the nave was removed, and the arcade inserted. At this point we may conjecture that the work suddenly ceased never to be resumed. To this day the ornaments of the upper part of the walls are imperfect, unfinished tool-marks are visible throughout the arcade. We may attribute this sudden failure to carry on the intended work to the ravages of the Black Death within the district.

Unlike the generality of work to be seen on the walls



From a Photograph by G. Calver Mason, Esq.

KERSEY CHURCH.

of a village church, the erection of the arcade bears most strongly the impress of an individual mind; the architect was a genius of no small talent, an English Orcagna. The subtle proportions, the delicate mouldings, especially noticeable in the door and the outside base of the wall, the singularly impressive tracery and the masterly composition of the north wall, were the work of no mean hand, whose skill is further betrayed in the noble sedilia, the remains of the reredos, and in the carving throughout. When the work was suspended, there stood the old nave with a new aisle wider than itself, and with a roof lower than that recently erected; the tower was incomplete, having but one storey.

The next step towards church enlargement was made in 1440. The tower was raised to its present height, to it were added twelve pinnacles; the masonry above the first string course differs from that below, and the passage made through the wall for the door is rough. The arch between the tower and nave was moved and finished, but with a different kind of stone; the roof was raised, and a half hammer-beam was substituted for the original ceiling. About the same date as the tower are the two porches; there is evidence that the original north door was not provided with a porch. Upon the south porch is a curious carving, locally ascribed to a *fishwoman*, who paid for this porch. The panelling of the porch is remarkably good.

The recess in the north wall was a frame for an *alto-relievo* picture, probably (judging by what remains of the carving) of the crucifixion. There is also a recess in the south wall. During the progress of the restoration in 1887-9 many fragments of mural paintings were revealed; one forming part of a subject representing the legend of St. George. Of the old furniture there remains an interesting lectern, and a portion of the rood-screen, on one panel of which is the figure of St. Edmund. A description with illustration of the Church and its screen, before the restoration of 1862, is given in a small pamphlet published in 1846 by the Suffolk Archæological Association.