



SEAL OF A PRIOR OF STOKE-BY-CLARE.

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Two or three months ago, Lady Loch of Stoke College, kindly sent me a very perfect impression of the silver matrix of a seal which had recently been found when ploughing in one of the fields on Lord Loch's estate in Stoke-by-Clare; and the Literary Committee of our Society have agreed to print in the Proceedings for this last year, a record of the same, with a very excellent illustration of the aforesaid impression.

The shape of it is pointed ovoid, and the internal measurements of it are  $1\frac{5}{8}$  ins. in length and  $1\frac{1}{8}$  ins. wide. On it is represented a man dressed in monastic garb, and standing, with cap on his head, and the right hand raised in blessing, while between the left hand and the body is supported what is apparently a small book. The legend around is clear and very distinct. It commences with a cross flory, and then follows—"SIGILL: JOHIS: PRIORI: DE: STOKE."

It is rather extraordinary that such a relic of a past so distant should only recently have been discovered when ploughing, for it was on a piece of arable land and not in fresh broken soil, beneath which it is not an unusual event to turn up early curios, such as Roman coins and Saxon pottery, and it is quite possible, as Lady Loch says "That it must have been turned up by the plough regularly for at least four centuries," and yet only recently discovered.

Immediately on receipt of the impression from Lady Loch, I sent it up to the Assistant Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries at Burlington House, Mr. H. S. Kingsford, that it might there be examined,

and some fairly approximate date of it established but of this I will say more later on.

First of all, something must be said about Stoke Priory and Stoke College, and by the kindness of our worthy Secretary, I have received notes from the account given in the Victoria History of England, and he also refers me to the paper on the "Inventories at Stoke College," by Sir William St. John Hope, both of which will be referred to when the date of the seal is considered.

It appears that Earl Aluric (or Ælfric) son of Wisgar, founded the church or chapel of St. John Baptist in the Castle at Clare and placed therein seven secular canons, and Sir William Hope adds, "Having also made a charter, he committed this church and all the place into the hands of Leustan the abbot (of Bury St. Edmunds 1044-1065) and into the keeping of Wisgar his own son."

When William the Conqueror came, he seized Clare into his own hands, and bestowed it upon Richard Fitzgilbert, who had accompanied him into England, and who was better known later on, as Richard de Tonebruge, from his property at Tonbridge in Kent, and still later, after he became the owner of Clare, as Richard de Clare. He was succeeded by his son, Gilbert de Tonebruge or Clare, who in 1090 gave the Church with its endowments to the Benedictine Monastery of Bec in Normandy, wherein his brother Richard was a monk, and it remained a cell to that monastery for a long period.

In 1124 another Richard de Clare, who first had the title of Earl of Hertford removed the monks out of his Castle at Clare, apparently because he wanted to enlarge it, into the church of St. Augustine's at Stoke and afterwards into a priory there; and he bestowed upon them, a little wood, in the place

called Stoke-Ho, with a doe every year out of his great parks at Hundon; and the Priory thus established at Stoke remained for many generations.

It was in the year 1395 that Richard II released them from subjection to the Abbey of Bec, and in that same year a charter was obtained from the Crown, at the charge of 1,000 marks, on the condition that henceforth the convent of monks should be exclusively of English birth, for doubtless hitherto some of them came from Bec; however, another and a greater change was drawing nigh and in 1415, only twenty years later, it came; and how it came I will now relate.

When Gilbert de Clare the 8th Earl of Hertford fell at the battle of Bannockburn in 1313, though he was married, he left no issue, and the Clare property devolved on his three sisters and co-heiresses, of whom Elizabeth, the youngest, married John de Burgh, and the issue of the marriage was William de Burgh, Earl of Ulster, who married Maud, sister of Henry Plantaganet, Duke of Lancaster; and they left one daughter and heiress who married Lionel Plantaganet, Duke of Clarence, and then once again, of this marriage, there was an only daughter and heiress, namely Philippa Plantaganet, who married Edward Mortimer, 3rd Earl of March, who by right of his grandfather obtained the whole of the property, and so in 1415 (It is presumed because in its infancy it consisted only of secular canons) he converted Stoke Priory into a College of Secular priests, and as such it remained till the dissolution in the 16th century, and the place has always remained till to-day, as "Stoke College."

Now we will consider the approximate date of the silver matrix of the seal of "John Prior of Stoke," and first of all I will give from the Victoria History a list of the Priors of this religious institution.

Nicholas, who occurs in 1174  
 John de Havelen, temp. Henry II.  
 Hugh, occurs 1198 and 1202  
 Richard, occurs in 1222  
 John, occurs in 1247, etc.  
 Henry de Oxna, appointed 1325  
 Peter de Valle, appointed 1367  
 John de Huditot, died 1391  
 Richard de Cotesford, appointed 1391  
 William de Sancto Vedasto, appointed 1395  
 William George, appointed 1396  
 William Esterpenny, appointed 1396.

It was the opinion of all those who examined the impression of the seal when at Burlington House, that the first Prior John, who occurs in the reign of Henry II after 1174, would be a date much too early for the seal the date of which we are considering, and on the other hand John de Huditot, who died in 1391, would be far too late, and that the only possible name mentioned in the aforesaid list would be "John, who occurs in 1247."

One would imagine that a seal would be designed and wrought soon after the appointment of the owner, and this, in my opinion, makes it very early for such a beautifully wrought matrix. Now in the aforesaid list of Priors there seems to be 88 years between 1247 and the appointment of Henry de Oxna in 1325, and there must have been more than one Prior during that period, and possibly there may have been yet another named John; and thus only an approximate date is possible, namely, the latter half of the 13th century.

From the number of impressions of seals and drawings of the same which I possess I notice that most of them of the ovoid shape belong to charters of the 13th century, some with a date, but mostly

undated, many of them round about 1290, and only one or two as late as 1310, and as to the fine execution of 13th century seals, one of the most beautiful which I possess, is the seal of William de Monte-caniso, of Edwardstone, whose Inquisition after death took place in 1295—and about this period appears to me to be a likely date for the construction of the seal we have been considering.

Anyhow, it is a valuable relic, for I believe there is only one known impression of a Stoke Priory seal, and that is in the British Museum. Thus the record of it is important to antiquarians in general, and more particularly to those connected with the county of Suffolk.