

SOME NOTICES OF THETFORD PRIORY.

[READ SEPT. 27, 1849.]

It is well known to persons acquainted with the ecclesiastical history of Norfolk, that Thetford was anciently an episcopal see, and that it was from Thetford that the see was transferred to Norwich in the year 1094. It is also known that when the Cluniac monks were first brought to Thetford they were located within the precincts of the church of St. Mary, which had been the cathedral church previously to the removal of the see to Norwich. As, however, the locality first chosen by the founder of the Cluniac Priory was found inconvenient, it was decided to remove the Priory out of the town into the position which is now occupied by the few ruins that remain of that once flourishing house. The transferring of the monks from the site of St. Mary's church, brought with it the necessity for erecting a new church, within the Priory; and an extract from the Register of Bermondsey, given by Martin¹, informs us that "the monks of Thetford entered their new church on the Feast of St. Martin" (Nov. 10), in the year 1114.

That this church was consecrated before it was used for the celebration of divine service, the unvarying practice of that time would naturally lead us to regard as certain; but it was not until the discovery of the letters of Herbert de Losinga, the first Bishop of Norwich (and which were printed, for the first time, so recently as 1845), that we became acquainted with some particulars connected with the consecration of the new Priory churchyard. A recital of them, it is hoped, will not be without interest to the antiquaries who meet at Thetford on the 27th September.

Before, however, proceeding further with this communication, it will be proper to bring to recollection that Bishop Herbert so far yielded to the evil practices common in the reign of William Rufus, that he purchased the See of Thetford from that monarch for a large sum of money*.

* Herbert de Losinga's simoniacal practices were the subject of many epigrams, of which the following is a sample:—

"Filius est praesul, pater abbas, Symon uterque;

Quid non speremus si nummos possideamus.

Omnia nummus habet; quod vult, facit, addit et aufert.

Res nimis injusta, nummis fit Praesul et Abba."

The Bishop appears, also, to have been less scrupulous in other matters than he might have been. It is related of him, for example, that as soon as he heard of the death of Roger Bigod, the founder of the Priory at Thetford, he sent to Thetford, and hurried off the body of the deceased nobleman to Norwich, in spite of the remonstrances and entreaties of the widow and friends of the dead. And although the Prior and four monks followed the body to Norwich, in the hope of moving the Bishop to give it up to be buried in the Priory at Thetford, yet nothing could induce Bishop Herbert to attend to their wishes. It would appear, also, from the letters of Lodinga, that he had practised some delay as regards the consecration of the churchyard of the new church, for in answer to an application made to him by the monks on that behalf, the Bishop writes to them:—

“That he was quite ready to obey their wishes respecting the consecration of the burying-ground (*atrium*) of their new church, but that he could not proceed to do so without the knowledge and permission of the King, lest there should in after times arise disputes between the Bishop of the diocese and the monks, respecting the rights and privileges connected with the burying-ground of the old church,” which they had given up. “He begs them, therefore, to have patience until he could consult with the King, or with the royal Justiciaries, since until then he dare not presume to perform the desired consecration.” That the Bishop, however, was not in such apprehension of the royal displeasure as he would have the monks believe, appears by the conclusion of his letter, for he ends by telling them—

“That if, on the rights and liberties of the old church being transferred to the new church, the monks would absolutely, and without subterfuges, restore to him his ancient episcopal rights and privileges, then he would instantly, and without fear, attend to their bidding.”

It may seem to us difficult to understand why so many demurs should be made respecting the consecration of a churchyard, but it was a matter of no small consequence in olden times for monasteries to possess a consecrated burial-ground. The prevailing opinion formerly was that the souls of all whose bodies were buried within the precincts of a monastery, had a much better chance of a speedy deliverance

from purgatory, than the souls of persons who were buried in the ordinary churchyards of parishes. It is to be recollected, also, that as persons could by law bequeath their burial to what place they pleased, it was important for religious houses to make their burying-grounds popular, because the monastery in which a person was buried was entitled to the horse, apparel, and other valuables of the deceased. A burial-ground would thus become a source of great profit to the Priory of Thetford, and would as a consequence be injurious to the pecuniary interests of the parochial churches of the town.

Bishop Herbert did not, therefore, act without reason in declining to consecrate the burying-ground of the Priory: nor was it without reason that we find him stipulating for the restoration of his ancient episcopal rights, since one great evil of the monastic system was the casting off of episcopal jurisdiction*. In the case of Thetford, also, the monks were subject to the authority of the *foreign* Abbot of Cluny.

Yet, from a letter evidently subsequent to that which has been mentioned, Bishop Losinga informs Stephen, the Prior of the Cluniac monks, that circumstances had arisen which rendered it necessary to hurry on the consecration of the Priory burying-ground, and the Bishop, therefore, desires that notice should be given to the people of Thetford and the neighbourhood, that on the following Sunday, the consecration of the "*Chapel* and of the ground" would take place.

Now, although these letters are themselves without date; yet as the monks took possession of the Priory, in Nov. 1114, and Bishop Herbert de Losinga died not later than 1120, we may, perhaps, settle a point of chronology in the history of the Lady-Chapel, which was on the north-side of the choir. All that the historians† inform us of the building of this chapel is, that in process of time the old image of the Virgin Mary, which had been removed from St. Mary's church, and placed on the high altar of the Priory church, was laid aside, and a new and handsome image set up in place of the old one; that the Virgin Mary was dissatisfied,

* Martin's Hist. of Thetford, p. 118, note b. † Ibid, pp. 164, 165.

and by sundry miraculous interventions and appearances, ultimately induced the Prior to build a chapel specially for her use and worship, and in which her image might be set-up. It seems, probable, however, that "the *Chapel*" mentioned in the letter of the Bishop above referred to, could be no other than the *Lady-Chapel*; and in that case it would be within a few years coeval with the Priory Church itself.

It may, further, be observed that Mr. Martin could find no earlier record of there being a school at Thetford than 1329, when a person was collated to the office of schoolmaster by the Bishop of Norwich; yet the historian expresses it to be his opinion that a school existed at Thetford from a very early period. Now, corroborative of that opinion we find a letter of Bishop Herbert, in which he notifies to the monks and inhabitants of Thetford that he had placed the school at Thetford under the tuition of "a Deacon named *Bund*," and directed that the education of the youth of the place should be superintended solely by that person.

But besides these incidental notices of matters connected with the Priory, the letters of Bishop Herbert supply us with some delineations of the state of society at that time. In one of his letters, for instance, addressed to "the Monks at Thetford," he requires their assistance in finding out some poaching fellows who had stolen a deer from his park at Hummersfield. After having somewhat prolixly put his brethren in mind that it is the duty of christians to bear each other's burdens, the Bishop observed that he thought such a preface necessary, as he had to ask them to send round the crier to give notice that certain bad fellows "had broken into his park during the night, had killed a deer, and after throwing away the head, feet, and entrails, had by a damnable theft carried off the carcass. He, therefore, earnestly called upon all faithful christians to help him to discover the culprits, so that they might be brought to justice. In the meantime," the Bishop goes on to write, "I excommunicate the persons who broke into my park and stole my deer, with the anathema with which the offended God strikes the souls of the ungodly. I interdict them from entering a church, from receiving the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, and

from the communion of the whole of christendom. Cursed and excommunicate be they in the house, in the highway, in the fields, in the woods, in the waters, and in every place in which they may be. May the flesh of those who have eaten my deer rot as the flesh of Herod rotted, who murdered the Innocents: may they be as the traitor Judas, and as Ananias and Sapphira, and Dathan and Abiram. Let their portion be *anathema maranatha*, unless they speedily repent and make me satisfaction. *Fiat, fiat, fiat.*" Then, as if he had some misgivings about the moral fitness of uttering so solemn an anathema, on so fleshly an occasion, the Bishop added:—"I put forth this excommunication, dearly beloved brethren, not because I care much about a single deer, but because I am desirous that the robbers should repent and make confession, in order to their being corrected." That there might be no mistake however, the Bishop tells the good people of Thetford, that all who knew of, or were consenting to, the deer-stealing were liable to the same anathema as the thieves themselves.

Yet, notwithstanding this expression of detestation of deer-stealers and poaching, the letters under consideration are full of indications that Bishop Herbert de Losinga, was a prelate of great accomplishments. Most interesting notices occur of the studies of himself and other ecclesiastics of that age, and shew him to have been a scholar of no ordinary kind. It is pleasing to observe, also, that the manner in which he obtained his preferment was, in after life, a subject of deep repentance. We are informed by William of Malmesbury, that Bishop Herbert had ever in his mouth that saying of St. Jerome, "We erred when young; let us amend now we are old."*

Sept. 25, 1849.

G. E. CORRIE.

* *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, iv. § 339.