

## ON THE ETYMOLOGY OF BECCLES.

AGREEABLY to your request, I send you a few notes on the etymology of "Beccles." I am, however, inclined to think, that without first arriving at an earlier orthography of the name than has yet been arrived at, or the probable period at which the place was named (which would suggest the language from which the name was derived), that all must be considered as guess-work. Suckling derives the name from *Beata Ecclesia*. His words are :—

"The christian temple—the *Beata Ecclesia*—which has since given name to the spot, was then unbuilt, but a rude and lofty watch tower occupied the site, which, commanding a seaward view of the turbulent estuary, blazed forth the fearful notice of invasion to a beacon placed on the peninsula of Bungay."

Two other etymologies have, I am informed, been given; the one from *Bella Clivis*, the other from *Bec Clivis*; from the Danish *bec*, a point; and it has been remarked that there is an abbey of *Bec*, in Normandy. This, of course, refers to the ancient bourg and great and wealthy abbey of *Le Bec* (*Bec Crespian* was also the name of a bourg and baronial title in Normandy), which was named from its situation upon a *bec* or tongue of land at the confluence of two rivers; and, I would here note, that the word *bec* in old French, also denoted a cape or point of land advancing into the sea; as the *Bec du Ras*, in Bretagne; and that the term was likewise applied to the confluence of a river; at least, so says Lamartiniere (*Dict. Géog. et Crit.*) I will now attempt a few other etymologies, first premising that the name is found written *Bekeles* (3rd Richard II), and *Beckelys*, in a memorial found in the archives of the Corporation (Cf. Suckling). If the name is of Celtic origin, I would suggest the British *bych-eglwys*, the little church; *bych-llwys*, the

little court, hall, or palace; *bych-klais*, the little rivulet, ditch, or trench; *bel-eglwys*, the fine church; and *bek-llas*, the blue or green brook. Supposing the name to be derived from the Norman, it might come from *beal-egglise*, the fair, handsome, or good church; if from the Danish, from *bæck-lys*, the shining, bright, or fair rivulet; if from the Saxon, from *becc-læs*, the lesser rivulet; or *bece-læs*, the beech pasture. I may also add, that there is sometimes a tendency to pluralize local names: as Lyons for *Lyon*; Orleans for *Orlean*. An earlier orthography of the name may have therefore been *Beccete*; and a still earlier one, that of *Beccene*; from the Saxon *beacen*, *beacn*, *becen*, *becn*, signum, a beacon; and it may have been so called in allusion to the lofty watch tower referred to by Suckling. My own impression is, that the most probable etymology is either that from the Norman *beal-egglise*, or that of Suckling, from *Beata Ecclesia*. The latter is indeed, to some extent, confirmed by the name *Eccles*, which is found simply, and in composition of many local names in England. Instance, *Eccles*, the appellation of two parishes in Norfolk; the one in Happing—the other in Shropham—hundred, which are clearly corrupted from the Gr. *ecclesia*. *Eccles*, in Shropham, is often called in French deeds, about the time of Edward III, *L'Eglise*, the church par eminence; and the name is found otherwise written *Eccles Episcopi*, or *Bishop's Eccles*, to distinguish it from *Eccles*, in Happing hundred, on the north sea (Cf. Blomefield). With regard to the first part of the name, "*Beata*," I would remark that hundreds of instances might be adduced in which only one radical (the first or last) of the original word now exists. For example: the surname *Pott*, which some have gone out of the way to connect with an old German *Poto*, from *bote*, a messenger, is evidently merely an abbreviation of *Philpot*, a French or quasi-French diminutive of *Philip*, by contraction *Philp*. The name *Beccles* might even be derived from *Eccles* simply, with *B* prefixed, almost equivalent to the Æolic digamma.

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I do not find the Dan. *bec*, a point. Thre renders the Su-Goth. *backe*, collis, margo, terra, quæcunque; *bak*, tergum; *bæck*, rivus; and *lös*, solutus, liber, *ljus* (anc. *lys*), lucidus.

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[The following extract from a MS. of the late Rev. W. T. Spurdens, once a resident in Beccles, and well known in the locality as a learned archæologist, was read by the Rev. James Bulwer, as helping to explain the subject under discussion.]

The name of this place has been subjected, I think, to much misapprehension. In Domesday Book it is written as we write it to the present day, "Beccles." This word is usually regarded as having reference to the magnificent church, "Ecclesia;" and as the name has been Latinized "Becclesia," most etymologists have thought that all they sought was found; and therefore sought no further. Others have varied the matter a little, and fancied the name might be from "Beata Ecclesia," though why this church should be "beata" beyond others they tell not. Others have sought it in Norman French, as if it were "La Belle Eglise": and even "Bella Ecclesia." Now there does really appear, at first view, some considerable plausibility in this; notwithstanding the unusual circumstance of a town deriving its name from its church. It is reasonable to suppose that the town preceded the church, and consequently must have had a name before it had a church. The original *may* have been suffered to fall into disuse, and a new one may have been invented; but although we do certainly find one or two instances of this kind, yet they are too rare to have much stress laid on the fact. Besides, we have good proof here that the word is older than the "fine church," if not than any church. There was, indeed, a church here at the Conqueror's survey, but that it was distinguished in any way from the older churches of the period, we have no evidence at all. I am mistaken if it was even a large church, for the remains of that which occupied the western side of the Old Market, shew it to have been an early Norman, if

not Anglo-Saxon structure; and as mention is made in Domesday Book of "i eccl'ia"—*one* church, this must have been *that one*. And existing remains shew that this was probably a *small* church—too small perhaps—which induced the wealthy society, who were Lords of the town, to provide a larger, when the population had increased.

There was, as usual, an ancient family, who had possessions here at the time when surnames began to be derived from possessions, and who assumed from their possessions the name of *de Beccles*. When this family wrote their names in Latin, they called themselves *de Bello clivo*. Of these, Alanus de Beccles, whose name is conspicuous in the controversy between the Pope and Grostestè, Bishop of Lincoln, is as commonly called by one of these names as by the other. It is plain then that this family regarded their name, taken from the town, as derived from the situation of the town on the "Fair Cliff," overhanging the Waveney. In their time this was the traditionary interpretation of the "Beccles" in Domesday Book: and their time preceded the erection of the present fine ecclesiastical edifice. The word "Beccles" seems to be itself, in spite of its antiquity, a corruption of some more ancient word. What that word was, it may seem fruitless now to enquire: but whatever it was, it was very early regarded as descriptive of the position of the town on the high and steep bank of the river. I will hazard an etymological conjecture, but merely as a conjecture, that the word may have been derived from the Anglo-Saxon *Bæc*, tergum, and *Clif*, littus; quasi "tergum littoris," or, more properly "tergum ripæ"; referring to the site of the town at the back of the steep shore or cliff of the Waveney. *Valeat quantum.*