

## The Connection of Hitchin with Elstow.

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At Elstow—John Bunyan's Elstow—just by Bedford, was a Benedictine Abbey or Convent, commonly known as that of the Blessed Virgin and St. Helen. From Helen, in combination with "stow" (station or clearing, as applied in the Colonies at the present day), the village probably derived its name. The Rev. S. R. Wigram has published this year (1885) "Chronicles of the Abbey of Elstow,"\* and thus made it comparatively easy for us to trace the connection of Elstow with Hitchin for between 400 and 500 years.

There were twenty-four nuns at Elstow when pensions were granted in 1540; the rents, profits, and revenues of the property were valued at £232 8s. 4d. It was thus one of the greater monasteries. The nave and aisles of the Abbey church remain, and are used as the parish church. The foundations of the long eastern limb, consisting of part of the nave, a tower, apsidal chancel, and a lady chapel at the extreme east, have been examined, and laid down on plan.

*Eleventh Century.*—Elstow Abbey was founded about 1078 by Judith, half-sister and niece of William I., at that time the widow of Waltheof, Earl of Northampton and Huntingdon, who was beheaded at Winchester on May 31, 1075, for not betraying to William a plot set on foot among the English nobles. Leland had access to some document not now in existence, which enabled him to write: "The Countess Judith, wife of Waltheof, founded the Church in the vill of Helenstowe in the time of William I., and established holy nuns there." In Domesday (1085-86) it was stated that "the Nuns of St. Mary hold Elnestow of Countess Judith"; but Hiz (the name for Hitchin in Domesday) was still in the hands of William; neither the Countess Judith, nor Elstow being mentioned in connection with Hitchin in Domesday.

*Twelfth Century.*—Although we have now no contemporary record, there seems little reason to doubt that Hitchin church and the accompanying property were

\* *Chronicles of the Abbey of Elstow*, by the Rev. S. R. Wigram, M.A., of Balliol College, Oxford, with some notes on the architecture of the Church, by M. J. C. Buckley; Parker & Co., Oxford and London, 1885.

given to Elstow, within ten years or so after the Abbey's foundation. Mr. Wigram suggests that they were probably undergoing the process of conveyance to the Countess Judith (who may afterwards have made them over to the Abbey) when the materials of the Domesday Survey were being collected. In a law-suit in 1198 the Abbess claimed them as having been given by the Countess Judith. In a charter of Henry II. (1160) King William is credited with having given them—which King William not being stated. One of these statements may have been made rather lightly for ornamental purposes only, neither was needed for other purposes, as the charter of Henry I. had made the legal right to the property quite sure. The substance of the charter of Henry I., which, Mr. Wigram shows, must have been granted between 1124 and 1135, and probably either in 1126 or 1127, 1128 or 1130, is given in two deeds of subsequent date. In this charter, as it was stated in these deeds, Henry of England . . . granted and confirmed "to the Church of St. Mary of Helenstowe and the holy Nuns serving God there: The Church of St. Andrew of Hiche with lands and tithes and all liberties thereto belonging, freely and absolutely exempt from all customs, as well episcopal as archidiaconal, except that once a year the Archdeacon, with seven horses, shall be entertained." Other properties were then named, and the charter concluded thus: "Wherefore I will, and strictly enjoin, that they have and hold all these well and in peace, freely and quietly and honourably, exempt from all aids and gelds and danegeld, and assizes, and murders, and pleas, and all occasions, and complaints, and scutages, and warpeny, and all customs, and all land service, and that they have sac and soc, toll and team, and infangenethef, and all liberties which the free churches of my land have."

About thirty years after the date of this charter, another was obtained confirming all the old benefactions, and naming those which had been made in the interval. The contents of this deed are in the Confirmation Roll of 1510. Henry (II.), King of England, and Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, and Earl of Anjou . . . "granted and confirmed to the Church of Elnestow and to the Abbess and Nuns serving God there, all the lands and tenures which they had in the

time of King Henry (I.), and which were duly given to them." A number of properties were then named in this (1160) charter, each being "of the gift of" some specified donor. Near the end of the list appeared: "Of the gift of King William the Church of Hiccha, and the whole land of the Priest, namely, two hides of land and one virgate, with all tithes and customs to the same Church appertaining; and expressly its Church of Weston." The anxiety of the draughtsman to make his work thoroughly shapely, may have led to the re-introduction of the "King William."

At the end of the twelfth century (1198-99) it was pleaded on behalf of the Abbess, in a suit promoted by Reginald, of Argentain, in respect of the advowson of the Church of Wymondley, that "the Countess Judith, niece of King William the Conqueror, who founded the Abbey of Alnestowe, gave to the church of Alnestowe the vill of Hiche, with the church of the same vill, and with the chapel of Wimundesle, which belongs to the church of Hiche by Charter . . . in free and perpetual elemosiny. In which Charter also is contained the grant and subsequent confirmation of King William the Conqueror, and the assent of William, son of the afore-said King." The Abbess won the suit, and Great Wymondley was at the dissolution among the possessions of the Abbey, and was granted with Hitchin to Trinity College, Cambridge. The contention on the part of Reginald, of Argentain, was that "Wymondley never was appurtenant to the Church of Hiche, and that King William never held Wimundele in demesne."

*Thirteenth Century.*—The first presentation recorded in the Lincoln Diocesan Registers, by the Abbey and Convent to the Church of Hitchin with the Chapelries of Dynesley and Wymondley, was in 1220. The immense Diocese of Lincoln, though cut down by the formation of the Dioceses of Ely, Oxford, and Peterborough out of it, still retained a good deal of the county of Herts till 1845—all the county in fact, except Braughing Deanery and St. Albans Archdeaconry and Deanery, which were in the Diocese of London,—till a re-adjustment gave the county to Rochester.

In November, 1278, the Abbess had to appear before the justices at Hertford to support her claim to the Hitchin property. The evidence showed that the rights disputed had been enjoyed, from the time of the grant

by Henry I. (say 1130), without encroaching on the privileges of the Crown, and the Abbess obtained judgment in her favour.

The *Ecclesiastical Taxation* was finished in 1291, having been made up in order to determine the amount to be contributed towards the expense of an expedition to the Holy Land, under a grant of the tenths for six years by Pope Nicholas IV. in 1288. In it we find: "Huntingdon Archdeaconry, Hichen Deanery,—at Hicche, Dynesle, and Great Wymundele, in lands and rent £2 2s. 4d. . . ."

Hitchin, exactly as we have it now, is not so ancient as other recorded forms of the name, *e.g.*, in Domesday (1085-86), *Hiz*; charter of Henry I. (1130) and "Inspeximus" of Edward II. (1318), *Hiche*; charter of Henry II. (1160), *Hiccha*; record of trial as to Wymondley in John's reign (1198), *Hiche*; covenant between Master and Brothers of the Temple and the Abbess of Elnestowe (1218-19), *Hichene*; and in the *Taxation* of 1291, mentioned above, both *Hichen* and *Hicche*. The grant to Trinity College, Cambridge (1547) has both *Hychyn* and *Hychen*. The origin of the name will probably remain an interesting subject for the speculation of future generations.

*Fourteenth Century.*—In 1318 Edward II. granted the charter of confirmation, the earliest authentic record of the charter of Henry I. Five marks were paid as a fine.

In the *Fifteenth Century* we do not glean anything as to Hitchin from the Elstow records.

*Sixteenth Century.*—The Confirmation Roll of 1510, which supplies a good deal of history for Elstow, does little specially for Hitchin. From its tenour one would not imagine that 1539 was less than 30 years distant. The deed of confirmation states: "Now we, holding the aforesaid charters and letters ratified and secured, do, for ourselves and our heirs, as far as in us lies, accept, approve, and now grant and confirm them, to the Abbess and Nuns of the place aforesaid, as the charters and letters aforesaid duly testify."

In 1535 the returns were completed by the commissioners appointed under an Act of 1534, 26 Hen. VIII. c. 3, ecclesiastical property being newly valued in view of the granting of firstfruits and tenths of benefices to the Crown. Previously to 1534 firstfruits had been

paid to Rome; but the rupture between the King and Pope had come about. In the *Valor Ecclesiasticus Tempore Henrici VIII. Auctoritate Regia Institutus*, or "The King's Book," as the returns of the commissioners have been called, the rectory of Hitchin appears assessed at £66 13s. 4d.

On 26th August, 1539, "The Lady Elizabeth [Boyfeld (or Boyvill) instituted 1530], Abbess of the Monastery, or Abbey, of the Blessed Mary, of Elnestowe, in the county of Bedford, of the Order of St. Benedict, and the Convent of the same place . . . freely and willingly gave and granted to the most illustrious and victorious Prince and Lord, Henry VIII. . . . all the said Monastery, or Abbey, of Elnestowe aforesaid . . . also all . . . Manors, Houses . . . Lands and Tenements . . . Advowsons, Nominations . . . Vicarages . . . and other Ecclesiastical Benefices whatsoever . . ."

Dated in the August of the next year, 1540, we have a list of the pensions, amounting to £111 6s. 8d. per annum (say of six or seven times greater value than now): £50 for the Abbess, £4 for the Prioress, £3 6s. 8d. for two, £2 13s. 4d. for sixteen, £2 for four, and thus the Masters of the Manor of the Rectory of Hitchin were dispersed. The new Master in 1543 received the *Computus Ministrorum*—an account of the rents, profits, and revenues arising from the Manors, Rectories, &c., which came to the Crown on the dissolution. The whole property of Elstow Abbey was assessed therein at less than in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535 (eight years before). Other property in Hertford was put with Hitchin Rectory; and the items thus grouped together were assessed at £66 16s. 8d. The King parted with this portion of the Hertfordshire property of the Abbey in 1547. King's Hall, Michael House, and some hostels of scholars at Cambridge, were surrendered into the King's hands; and Trinity College was founded under a charter dated December 19, 1546. In addition to the older revenues, property which had been surrendered by Monasteries, such as Hitchin church and the accompanying property, was granted to the College. Additions have been made to the endowments from time to time, and the College is very wealthy: its Masters and Fellows have been distinguished men, and have made it a very powerful institution.

Information from other sources as to Elstow, and as

to events in Hitchin and its neighbourhood, are required in order to fill the gaps, and to show in other ways the community of interest with, and the differences from, other parts of the country. Of the Elstow people, who influenced strongly the history of Hitchin, no personal story seems to have come down to us. Intelligence and kindly relations can only be surmised, since for no 30 years of the time between 1090 and 1539 did any nun, with the naïve skill of Jocelin of Brakeland, set herself to write chronicles, which, having been carefully preserved, should find modern editors and commentators. Such fragments, as have been laid out in order in this brief paper, may, however, remind us that, without express design, gifts of property in other districts to Monastic communities brought different sections of the people into steady relation and contact with one another, and thus promoted, under adverse conditions, the growth of unity in the nation. The record may also remind us that such archæology as Mr. Wigram's is of great service, in enabling us to follow the regular sequence of events :

" In our land of settled government,  
A land of just and old renown."

Glance, for instance, at the beginning and end of the last 800 years (nearly 40 generations). Countess Judith in 1074 mentioned to her uncle that her husband, Waltheof, knew something about a plot of the English nobles. One of the consequences, as we clearly see, is that Canon Hensley is now the Vicar of Hitchin.