

VIEW FROM THE BATTLEFIELD, EVESHAM.

## “ THE VANISHED ABBEY.”

BY THE VERY REV. H. DONALD M. SPENCE, D.D., DEAN OF GLOUCESTER.

With Illustrations by DETMAR J. BLOW and E. H. NEW.

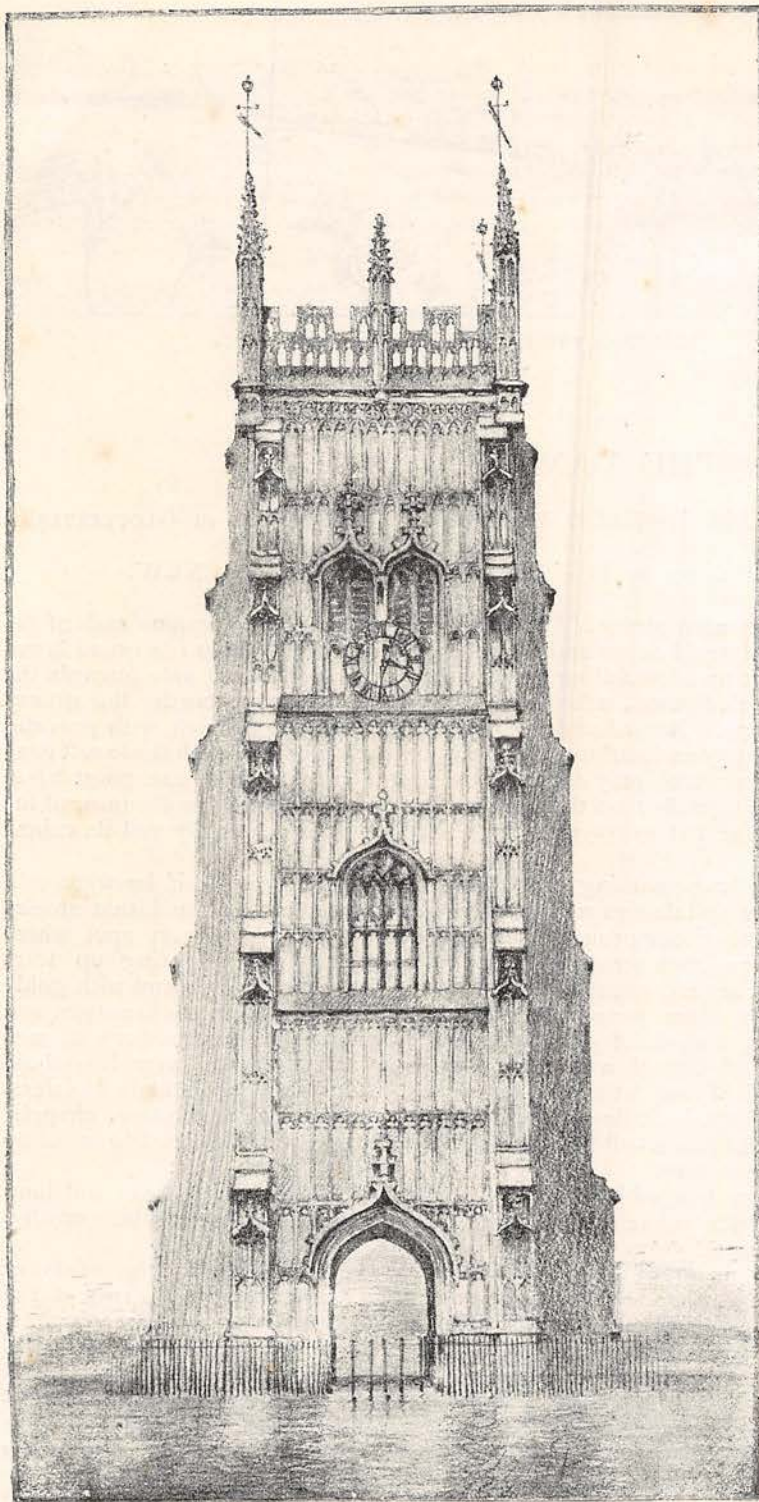


IN a remote corner of Worcestershire, between the green uplands of the Cotswold range and the solitary Bredon Hill, there is a broad lawn-like meadow falling somewhat sharply on the east side towards the storied Avon, which as a silver fringe seems to border the grassy slope. Immediately on the left is a lofty tower rich with graceful tracery and sculptured fancies, tenderly coloured with those soft gray hues which only centuries of storm and sunshine can paint upon white walls; on the right a long irregular ruined wall, uncared for and unbeautiful save for the gray-green moss and lichens which partly veil its ruined broken stones.

The stranger who knew nothing of its story would surely smile if he were told that beneath the grass and daisies round him were hidden the vast foundation stories of one of the mightiest of our proud mediæval abbeys; that on the very spot where he was standing were once grouped a forest of tall columns bearing up lofty fretted roofs; that all around once were altars all a-gleam with colour and with gold; that besides the many altars were once grouped in that sacred spot chauntries and tombs, many of them marvels of grace and beauty, placed there in memory of men great in the service of Church and State—of men whose names were household words in the England of our fathers; that close by him were once stately cloisters, great monastic buildings, including refectories, dormitories, chapter house, chapels, infirmary, granaries, kitchens—all the varied piles of buildings which used to make up the hive of a great monastery.

That green meadow fringed by the Avon stream with its solitary tower and long ruined wall is indeed the scene of a long and eventful story—a story which reaches back well nigh a thousand years.

When central and western England was slowly emerging from the mists of confusion which seem to have covered it for more than a century after the ruin of the short-lived British rule which succeeded the departure of the Roman military colonists, the Avon-washed meadow of our story was part of the forest land which stretched from the Cotswold range to the Severn banks. In the forest in those far-back days a swineherd named Eoves, in the service of Ecgwin, one of the earliest Mercian bishops—so runs the quaint old legend—saw a vision of a woman in the midst of a shining cloud of glory. The swineherd related the strange sight to his master. The same appearance was vouchsafed to Ecgwin. The bishop recognized in the vision the Blessed Virgin Mary, and determined to erect on the hallowed spot a church and home of prayer. This was the beginning of the famous holy house of Evesham—“Eoves-holm”—named after the poor swineherd, whose eyes had been allowed to



THE SOLITARY BELL TOWER, EVESHAM.

gaze on the radiant vision of Mary. The date of the vision and subsequent building of the church and monastery was in the early part of the eighth century.

The fortunes of Bishop Ecgwin's foundation at Evesham for several hundred years vary but little from those of Gloucester, Pershore, and a number of other more or less renowned religious houses in the Mercian kingdom—subject now and again to Danish depredation, then by the help of pious Mercian princes and nobles again restored and renovated, doing its quiet beneficent work of teaching, prayer, of almsgiving and ceaseless hospitality. In some periods the exclusive home of monks, in others the abode of a college of seculars, of canons or unclioistered ecclesiastics, until the days of Dunstan (tenth century) the famous reformer archbishop, when the long rivalry was decided generally throughout Saxon England in favour of the monks.

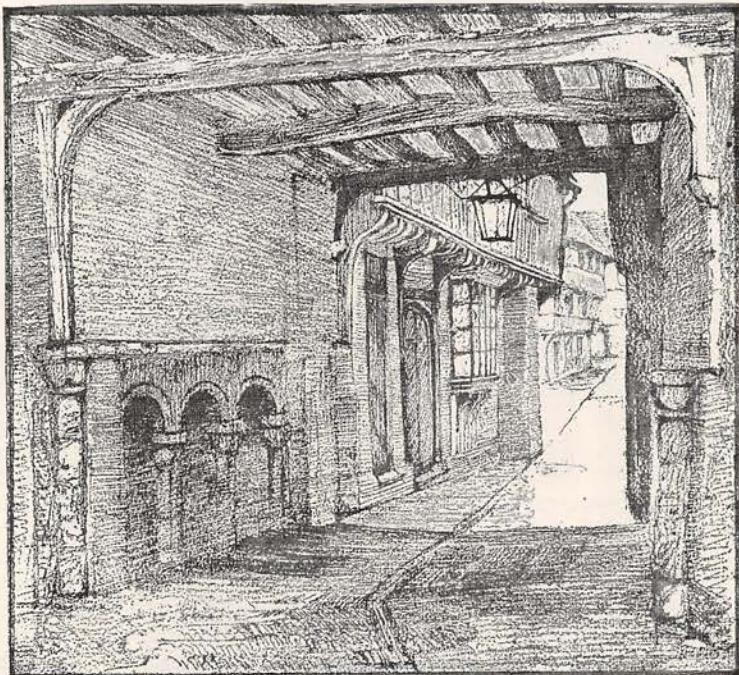
From very early times the "House of Evesham" was rich; successive Mercian kings endowed it with fresh grants of land. Their example was followed by their

greater successors who ruled as overkings in England. Domesday Book tells

us that in the days of King Edward the Confessor Evesham possessed in central and western England some 33,000 acres. After “Hastings” the Abbot Aegilwyn was one of the few great Saxon ecclesiastics who retained the confidence of the Conqueror William. His successor, the Norman Walter of Cerasia, preserved the abbey and its possessions by the cession of a third of its great estates to Odo, Bishop of Bayeux and Earl of Kent, the Conqueror’s half-brother, and Urse d’Abitot, the well-known sheriff of Worcestershire.

The Norman Walter, chaplain to Lanfranc, a monk of Duke Robert of Normandy’s Abbey of Cerasia, was appointed by the Conqueror himself, and eleven years after “Hastings,” like so many of the great French ecclesiastics who received abbeys at the hands of the Conqueror, he determined to rebuild the abbey church of his great house in a style befitting the great position of Evesham. It was a wonderful moment

to obtain contributions to such a work. Many of the Normans were dismayed at the sight of the woe and misery in Anglo-Saxon land, the first visible result of their great conquest, and were ready and willing to lavish gold and treasure for the building of what were looked on as “abbeys of expiation” by not a few in those days of ruthless deeds, followed after by swift and sharp remorse. The building of the new Norman abbey went on rapidly, much of the crypt and the great eastern limb of the new church was completed before the



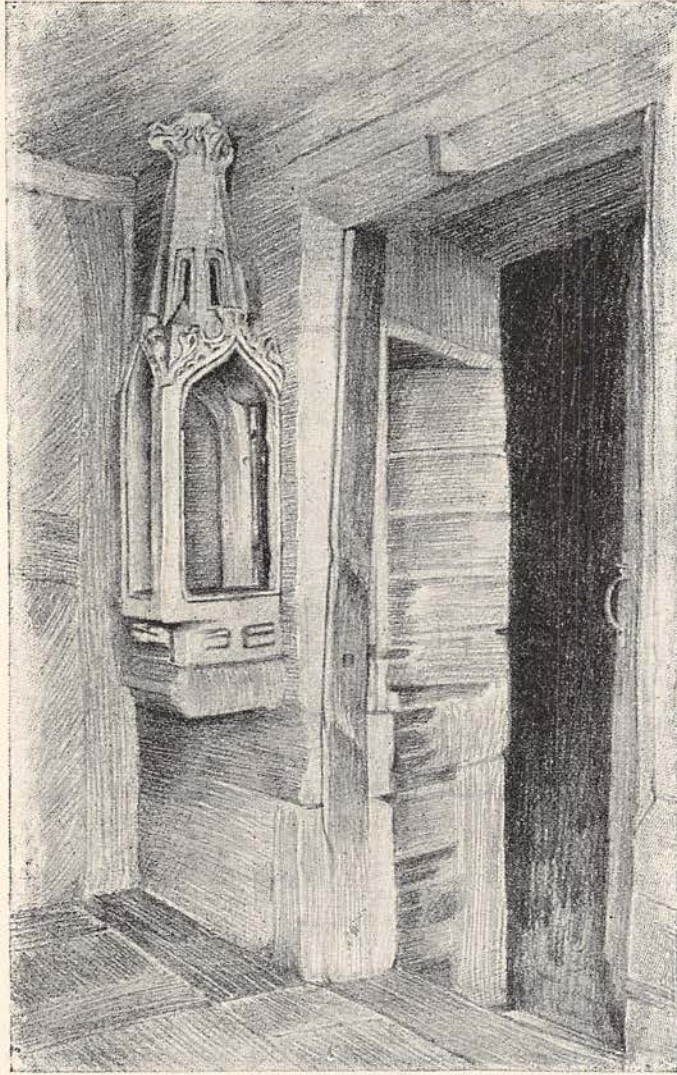
NORMAN GATEWAY.

passing away of William the Conqueror. The massive Norman work went on in the nave and tower and mighty transepts during the next hundred years. Vast buildings were added to the already existing religious house, refectories, dormitories, abbot’s lodgings, chapter house, kitchens, granaries, stables—all the various and varied parts of a great Benedictine monastery. But the abbey was the loved centre of the whole ; successive abbots added to its splendour and stately appearance. Like Gloucester, and other similar noble Norman houses of prayer, graceful and costly decorative work was gradually added to the stern, grave designs of Abbot Walter and the eleventh century builders. In the fourteenth century much of the old work was recast, a noble central tower was completed. But all this has disappeared. The very foundation stories of the great abbey, massive and vast though they must have been, are hidden under the green meadow washed by the Avon. One ruined arch is really all that remains<sup>1</sup> of the past magnificence, and antiquaries only dare to guess at the original use and position even of this one sad and solitary relique of a vanished City of God.

From the time of the Norman Conquest until the days of the Reformation, from William I. to Henry VIII., a period of well nigh five hundred years, Evesham Abbey and the great Benedictine house beneath its shadow occupied a foremost position among the great religious homes of England. Nor by any means did it date the

<sup>1</sup> The solitary “Bell Tower” was only completed just before the dissolution.

beginnings of its great position and influence to Norman William and his great minister of religion, Lanfranc; for centuries before the Conquest Evesham had ranked among the chiefest of the Anglo-Saxon houses of prayer. It had undergone varied changes and had endured various fortunes, but the unerring record of Domesday tells us that this great house far from owing its high position to the Norman Conquest rather suffered in its fortunes after the arrival of the French strangers. In some respects it was a typical great religious house, for it owed its



STONE LANTERN IN ALMONRY.

far-reaching influence to no powerful family like Tewkesbury, to no court favour like royal Gloucester, so often in Saxon and Norman times the residence of the kings of England. It was simply one of those monasteries in a purely rural district which during so many storm-filled years educated, comforted, helped in a thousand ways all classes and orders of the commonwealth.

In its palmy days the interior of our famous abbey must have been inexpressibly solemn and imposing. It was beautiful with the strange rich beauty of splendid symbolism in times when a great church like Evesham was the sculptured and coloured text-book of Christianity. We read of the grand Norman nave of eight bays, the crossing of the same date, the aisleless transept, the delicate early English presbytery of five bays, square ended and without a projecting lady chapel—but all enriched with perpendicular additions. "We are at a loss to portray the tall and splendid rood screen with images of the holy cross, St. Mary and St. John, the high altar and its screen, the splendid shrines of St. Ecgrwin, St. Credan, St. Odulph and

St. Wistan. The unquenched lamps burning before the many pendent tabernacles and lighting the fretted vaults, the solemn dark-browed crypt, and the upper avenue, all filled perpetually with the mingled sounds of the bells, the organ, the instruments, of music and sweet choral song,"

"Where erst, the long procession swept through Evesham's minster pile,  
And brightly, banners, cross and cope, gleamed through the incensed aisle."<sup>1</sup>

A writer some 250 years ago<sup>2</sup> tells us that at Evesham "the abbey and cloisters

<sup>1</sup> McKenzie Walcot, "Mitred Abbey of Evesham," *Journal of the Archeological Association*, vol. xxxii.

<sup>2</sup> Habyngdon—*temp.* Charles I.

were of curious workmanship, and had withinside one hundred and sixty-four gilt marble pillars. There were also in the church sixteen altars, all in so many chapels dedicated to their respective saints.”

But the story of Evesham would never have risen in interest above the story of other abbeys—the equals of Evesham in wealth and influence, equals too in the grandeur of their stately churches, and in the magnitude and beauty of the surrounding buildings—had not Evesham been the closing scene of a mighty struggle, the effects of which has left a lasting impress upon English history; had not the “vanished abbey” been the grave of the far-seeing chieftain of the struggle who passed away like many another great one has passed away, amid defeat and seeming failure.

Inseparably connected with Evesham and its famous abbey is the memory of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester. To the vast majority of his countrymen De Montfort is now but the shadow of a great name, who in the reign of King Henry III., in a bloody death on the stricken field received the well-earned guerdon of his rebellion. But

De Montfort was no ordinary rebel. By birth a Frenchman and heir to the great traditions of the house which had won for itself the position of sovereign lords in the sunny south of France, and the reputation of being the successful defender of what was then reported as orthodoxy, Simon in early life, as heir through his grandmother to the Leicester estates, had



RUINED ARCH-ENTRY TO CHAPTER HOUSE.

elected to become an English subject, and in time won the love and the hand of Princess Eleanor, daughter of King John, sister of Henry III. His royal marriage, his famous name, his great estates, and, chiefest of all, his splendid abilities as a statesman and general, in time won him the acknowledged supremacy among the great English nobles.

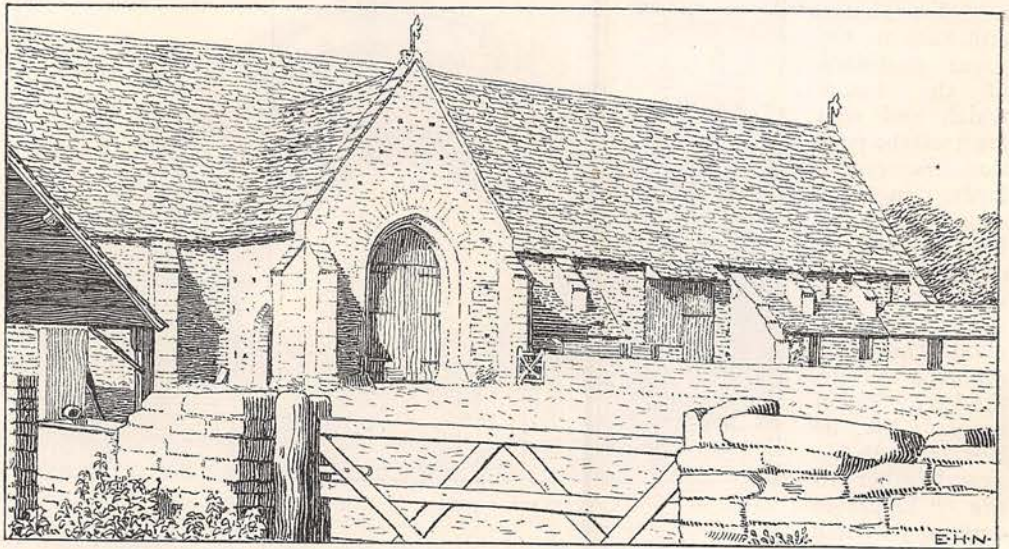
It was a critical period in the story of England. The king, Henry III., utterly failed to understand the temper of the country which had wrung Magna Charta from his father. He aimed at establishing a despotism in England, and regarded the great country over which he ruled as an estate which should provide the materials for a splendid and luxurious life for himself and his favourites, who were mostly chosen from foreign houses. De Montfort, who had become a true Englishman, dreamed of an England very different from the country which Henry III. misgoverned, and for a time he succeeded in creating a great party composed of barons, clergy, and private citizens sharing his views. In his far-seeing mind the elements of the popular government which has since made England free and great and strong were first thought out.

For a brief season he was master of the destinies of the country, and his great work was the summoning of a Parliament in which *representatives of the towns* were called upon for the first time to share in the national deliberations.

This momentous change in the constitution—a change which has since worked with such mighty effect in the great English story—was Simon de Montfort’s real title to honour. The author of this new departure in government soon perished, jealousies in the powerful faction he had called into being rapidly undermined his influence, and

the royal party were after a brief interval enabled to meet him in the field and to crush his divided forces. De Montfort fell, and his name was branded as a traitor's. But his *great thought*, which he had been able during his brief tenure of power to crystallize into action, has never perished, and from his time onwards the towns and cities of England have always shared with an ever-increasing influence in the government of the country—have with ever-growing power held the balance between the disorderly and often selfish rule of the barons and the unchecked despotism of the Crown. Simon de Montfort may justly be regarded as the real founder of the House of Commons.

The scene of the fatal battle in which this great patriot statesman lost his life was on the abbey lands. Evesham, in the neighbourhood of his famous castle and broad estates, was well known and loved by Simon. It was the "Mother Church" of his vast possessions. It was in its sacred walls that Simon lodged the night before the battle. It was from the tall abbey tower that his watchmen saw the royal banners of Prince Edward's host approach. It was in the holy precincts that he made his dispositions for the fatal battle. It was from its gates that he rode forth for the last time. De Montfort entered the abbey he loved again it is true, but it was as a disfigured corpse, to be laid to sleep before the high



EVESHAM ABBEY TITHE BARN, MIDDLE LITTLETON.

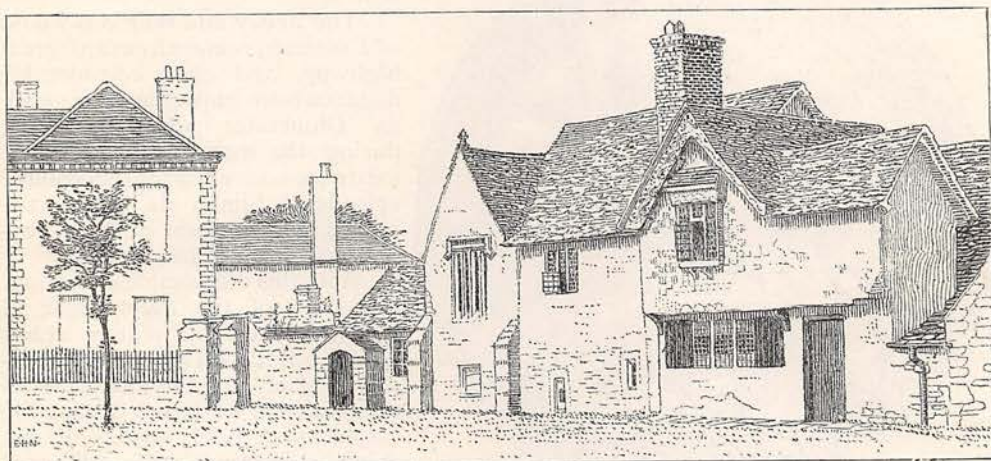
altar of the storied pile. For a long period the tomb of Earl De Montfort was the object of popular pilgrimage. Thousands have knelt at the grave of the patriot earl. That hallowed sepulchre, and the memories which clustered thickly round it, has served to raise the "vanished abbey" to the peculiar position which it occupied among the crowd of abbeys and religious houses then so plentifully scattered over England.

Was Simon de Montfort after all a patriot hero, or a turbulent traitor baron? *Vae victis*—Clio has no respect for the unfortunate! His memory, like his mutilated corpse, has been often treated with scant honour. But surely he was no ordinary rebel, his work has been strangely enduring and has contributed not a little to the matchless fortunes of his adopted country. Still those who admire him most, mourn least over the rout of Evesham and the death of the warrior statesman. His temper and disposition ill fitted him for over much prosperity. Had he been victor in the contest it is hard to imagine what line of conduct he would have pursued. He would have been too powerful to have lived on the steps of the throne. Perhaps fortunately for the weal of the England De Montfort loved so well, he was encountered by a prince who became the greatest king (he was Edward I.) who ever ruled in England. Prince Edward, who met De Montfort and routed him in the bloody Evesham field, had ever been the friend—to some extent he ever remained the pupil—of De Montfort. It was from De Montfort that Edward learned the art of war. It was the same great master

who showed the future king<sup>1</sup> “ what was to be done for England, and showed him the spirit in which only the work could be accomplished.”

The victors in the fight of Evesham—with that savage vindictive spirit of the old Pagan Norsemen which lived still in the children of the Norman and the Anglo-Saxon, and which was only thinly veneered over with the coat armour of mediæval chivalry—cruelly mutilated the body of the vanquished De Montfort. The head was severed from the trunk and the hands were cut off. The body thus disfigured was given over to the Evesham Abbey monks, who laid him to sleep tenderly and reverently before the high altar of their noble church. The head and hands, cruel trophies of the bloody victory, were sent to Lady Mortimer, his relentless foe at Wigmore.

Very soon legends of their dead champion began to be woven round the people's firesides. The messenger—who runs one popular story—who bore the poor mutilated hands sewn up in a cloth, found Lady Mortimer, Montfort's enemy, at mass in the abbey hard by the Wigmore Castle. He whispered to the lady the glad news of the Evesham fight, pointing to his awful trophy. *At that moment the priest was elevating the Host, as the bystanders gazed, the hands all bloody were seen to clasp themselves as though in prayer above the messenger's head; terrified and appalled at the dread sign, Lady Mortimer*



THE ALMONRY AND ABBEY GATEHOUSE.

*sent back the hands to Evesham Abbey still sewn up in the blood-stained cloth, which apparently they had never left.*

The abbey tomb of Simon de Montfort in its fresh glory of white and gold and tender colours was the scene of many a passionate prayer and of not a few—so runs the legend—miracles of healing.<sup>2</sup>

The enormous popularity of De Montfort among the people is abundantly testified to, by the remains which we still possess of “folk-lore” of that period. In the songs of the time current among the lower classes of the English Earl Simon's name constantly occurs and recurs. He was especially the people's loved hero, and their love endured beyond the death of their champion. He was even invoked and received a kind of worship from his countrymen who came in numbers to the tomb in the abbey and kneeling there, prayed their passionate prayers to their dead patriot saint. A liturgy was positively written in his honour, and hymns were sung in his praise.

This strange cult of Simon de Montfort in the Abbey of Evesham has a curious parallel some sixty years later in the neighbouring Benedictine house of Gloucester, only Gloucester Abbey held in its favourite shrine a very different saint in the person of King Edward II., the unhappy son of Earl Simon's conqueror.

It is singular that both the neighbouring abbeys of Evesham and Gloucester owe much of their fame to the cult of the dead which so strangely sprang up in their storied minsters after the violent deaths of Earl Simon de Montfort and King

<sup>1</sup> Bishop Creighton, *Simon de Montfort*.

<sup>2</sup> No fewer than two hundred and thirteen miracles are traditionally said to have been worked at the tomb in the abbey and in the spring on the hillside where De Montfort is said to have fallen in the battle.

Edward II. The monks of Gloucester profited largely by the rich gifts offered at their shrine. At Evesham the pilgrims were probably more numerous than even those at Gloucester, but they were of a different order in the social scale; the Evesham pilgrims were too poor to offer costly offerings. The lovers and mourners of Simon were the people whom the great popular tribune loved so well—so well as to give his life for them.

The stranger as he stands on the green meadow which slopes down to the bright Avon waters near the noble unfinished tower of the last abbot<sup>1</sup> of the great abbey, is pressing hallowed ground. He is on the site of the desecrated ruined choir of the vanished abbey. Beneath his feet moulder the remains of many a great churchman, of many a mighty baron, whose names once rang through England.

And among the graves hidden in that broad green field, where the daisy-starred grass veils the mighty foundation-stories of the once glorious abbey church, is one hidden grave-stone which once bore the knightly effigy of Simon de Montfort, rebel and traitor according to the chronicles, but canonized as martyr, patriot, saint in the hearts of thousands of grateful Englishmen. His works do follow him.

The abbey and religious house of Evesham, remote from any great highway, and at a considerable distance from important cities such as Gloucester and Worcester, during the many centuries of its existence—save for the remarkable episode of Simon de Montfort—played but little part in the many-coloured story of England.

With this memorable exception, the story of the holy house of Evesham with its stately abbey was an uneventful one. Its chronicles told of long periods of self-renunciation, of brave devout life—told too of brief periods of disunion, of internal strife, of greed and self-seeking, but on the whole of duties well and bravely done; of many a young bright life trained in this quiet holy home to take

its part in the fever and stress of the world of the day. Evesham during the long period of its existence, in common with the larger proportion of English monasteries, was on the whole occupied by men who lived simple God-fearing lives, according to the rule prescribed to them, doing their useful task of educating the young entrusted to their care, industriously keeping alive the torch of learning, zealously ministering to the poor by whom they were surrounded. Like so many of its sister houses it was for ages a very well-spring of learning, of thought, of personal religion—a home and school of art, and, highest far of all, a home and school of prayer—of prayer constant and unremitting. What would England during those rough wild Norman and Plantagenet days have been without Evesham and its sister sacred houses of consecrated work and worship?

The end came at last—the necessary end; the times changed. The invention of printing, and the great and general diffusion of knowledge consequent on the great invention, took out of the hands of the monk-dwellers in these houses of prayer one of their chief occupations. The monastery ceased to be the only or even the principal library and school. In England especially there was another cause at work which not a little contributed to the final ruin of the monastic orders. Gradually from the time

<sup>1</sup> I cannot bring myself to call "the Abbot of Evesham" the time-serving man who sleeps in Worcester under the style and title of dean of that great minster church; he only took up the abbot's mitre and staff to resign it to King Henry VIII. in exchange for a deanery.



SEAL OF SIMON DE MONTFORT.



of the first great Edward the monastic houses of England began to separate themselves from the national life.

Once the monastic institutions with us had been strongholds of patriotism; as time went on they became more and more alienated from the national religious organization and from national feeling. In their longing to be independent of all episcopal and State control they looked to the Pope for protection, and thus they became too often instruments of a foreign power, “colonies,” as it has been well said, “of Roman partizans,” and so they fell. We dare not regret the great Revolution of the sixteenth century, but we may deplore the bitter accompanying circumstances. As was the case with so many of the innocent dwellers in the religious houses, ruthlessly destroyed, the fair and candid historian can find no grave fault with the monks of Evesham, can advance no plea for the wanton destruction which was the sad fate of their holy house and its glorious abbey.

Only a few words will be necessary to describe the last sad scene of havoc.

When the suppression of Evesham had been decided on, the then abbot—one Clement Lichfield—a man evidently of devoted piety and passionately devoted to his great church and religious house, was compelled to resign his crozier. The abbey was formally surrendered in the November of 1539. During the next three years the work of destruction was rapidly proceeded with, church, cloister, chapter house, library and monastery were dismantled and partially taken down; Mr., afterwards Sir Philip, Hoby—a favourite of King Henry VIII.—became the purchaser from the Crown, for a comparatively small sum, of the abbey land and property, and the vast dismantled buildings in which the abbey was included, were *rented as a quarry for stone*: more than a hundred years later—according to the borough records of 1657—these sad remains appear not to have been entirely worked out.



SEAL OF EVESHAM ABBEY.

The lower division represents Eoves and his swine—the upper, his vision of the Virgin Mary.

In the words of one of the chroniclers of the fortunes of our abbey—“The buildings of the noble church and the monastery grouped around it became a quarry in the hands of lessees who did not prosper by their sacrilege, the very site a waste, and only the antiquary with mattock and lynx-eyed experience can read the little which is left of what was once a glorious house of God, and a triumph of architectural art.”

*This is why the reverent student of the past wanders regretfully over the Avon-washed meadow of Evesham, and looks, but looks in vain, for even fragments of ruined arch<sup>1</sup> and sculptured tracery which in most cases still sorrowfully mark the hallowed site of our ruined houses of prayer.*

<sup>1</sup> There is no trace of the old abbey. The solitary ruined arch belonged to the Chapter House.