

BOSTON.

BOSTON: THE CAPITAL OF THE FENS.

By JOHN E. LOCKING.

With Illustrations by W. HAROLD OAKLEY.

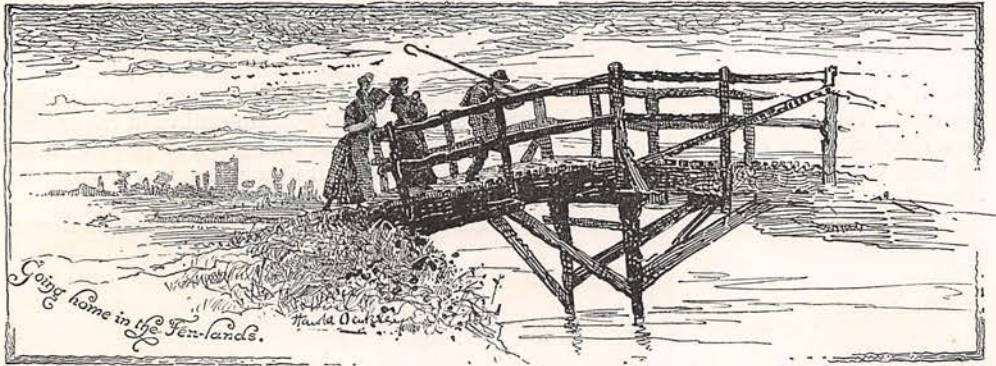
MANY years ago, when the Romans and the Saxons were fighting for this little island of ours, and the making of England had but just begun, a pious man went down into the fen country, and founded the monastery of St. Botolph at the mouth of the Witham. A town soon sprang up round the religious house, and became known to fame as St. Botolph's town or Boston. After a career of several hundred years Boston has settled down into the usual peaceful and sleepy life of an English provincial place. The artist and the antiquary will find it a happy hunting ground, and the gentle reader cannot fail to grasp the moral of its rise and progress.

A child of fickle fortune once, Boston in Lincolnshire has a history which can rival in point of antiquity and importance many a richer and many a larger place in England. For did not our Boston have its day, so to speak, long before the New World was discovered, and long before the Liverpools and Birminghams began to make a noise? In the very earliest days of England our little town was absorbing a large proportion of the trade with Germany and Flanders, and indeed was taking a place only third down the list of English ports. For a few years London even had to sing small, and Boston carried a third of the customs of the whole kingdom on its sturdy shoulders, earning then for itself the title of capital of the Fens.

Only to think of it! Here in King John's time was Boston sending out its ships to German and French and Spanish ports, bringing back wine, leather, and all the other good things of those countries, and its streets were crowded with merchants and traders from all parts of England. Who would believe it, to look at it now? No one would, when visiting the town to-day, think that this quaint, quiet, sleepy borough had ever done anything but pass the hours in peace and solitude, under the shadow of its glorious church, within sight of the treacherous waters of the North Sea.

To the early history of Boston or Botolph's town we have numerous references. The first historical notice is in the "Saxon Chronicle," which states that St. Botolph "built a monastery here upon a desert piece of ground given him for that purpose by

Ethelmund, king of the South Angles." In consequence of unfriendly visits from marauding Danes, who sacked the place, there is no mention of it in the Domesday Book. These Danish days saw many changes in Lincolnshire. Hordes of foreigners came then, many but to plunder and depart, and a few to remain and make their mark on the face of the land. Of these latter were the Romans, who built a station somewhere near the site of the present Boston, though probably it was merely a fort or



GOING HOME IN THE FEN-LANDS.

garrison to defend the mouth of the Witham. Considering that Lincoln (Lindum), further up the river, was a Roman station of the very first rank and importance, we can rest assured they would never have left such a door open to the enemy; for the Witham, then a much more navigable river, was the highway to Lincoln. The Romans left some permanent works in the county. Their drainage and land improvements were stable and of truly Roman solidity. These were planned and executed under their guidance by a colony of foreigners brought over possibly from Belgium, a country of similar formation. There was the Car-dyke from the Welland to the Witham near Lincoln, some forty miles; the West Lode, made to carry off the upland waters by its communications with the Welland at Spalding; and the old sea-dyke, by popular tradition put down to the credit of the Romans. To render it safe from the sea inroads, a bank was built. That bank is there to this day—a bank that has weathered many a storm, and withstood many a run. Its broad back makes a fine road, and such is the peculiar flatness of the country that people walking along it seem to be silhouetted against the sky, and to stand out strong and dark in the clear air. Dr. Stukely, the antiquary, a Lincolnshire man, says:—"It was performed in Severus his time, for he had it in his particular care to make passes over the fens that his soldiers might stand firm and fight upon hard ground, for many places in Britain are marshy through the frequent overflowing of the ocean, over which the inhabitants would swim or walk, though up to the middle in water."



A FEN BARGE.

Again he says:—"I have often considered and admired the length and breadth and depth of their canals, the vastness of their gates and sluices. But all things necessary for the comfort of life are here in great plenty, and visitants ever go away with a better opinion of it than they bring. That great soul Charles I., himself undertaking the glorious task and others under him, had projected and made such stately works of sewers as would have rendered this country before now, for trade and beauty, the rival of its namesake beyond sea. But the licentious times that succeeded gave

the unthinking mob an opportunity to destroy them ;” and he winds up, “that fish and fowl is here plentiful, no one will wonder, but particularly the pigeons are noted for large and fine.”

Henry of Huntingdon, in 1154, wrote :—“This fennie country is passing rich and plenteous, yea and beautiful to behold, watered with many rivers running down to it, garnished with a number of meers both great and small, which abound in fish and fowl, and it is firmly adorned with woods and islands.” William of Malmesbury, writing fifty years later, and still more enthusiastically, says :—“The fens were a very paradise and seemed a heaven for the delight and beauty thereof ; in the very marshes bearing goodly trees which for tallness, also without kusts, strived to reach up to the stars. It is a plaine countrie, and so level as the sea, which with green grass allureth the eye. There is not the least portion of ground that lies waste and void there ; here you shall find the earth rising somewhere for apple trees, there you shall have a field set with vines, which either creep upon the ground, or mount on high poles to surmount them.”

The land reclaimed from the sea is cultivated to a degree, for Lincolnshire farmers



BOSTON FROM THE MEADOWS.

go in for high farming. The fertility of the soil, rich black earth, is taken every advantage of, and made to yield its utmost. There's not a square yard lying waste ; from oats, wheat and barley, down to parsnips and parsley, all are represented ; and in the market-place at Boston on market day, the numberless stalls, loaded with the good things of this earth, are a testimony to the industry of the men and of the women, and to the productive qualities of the fen lands.

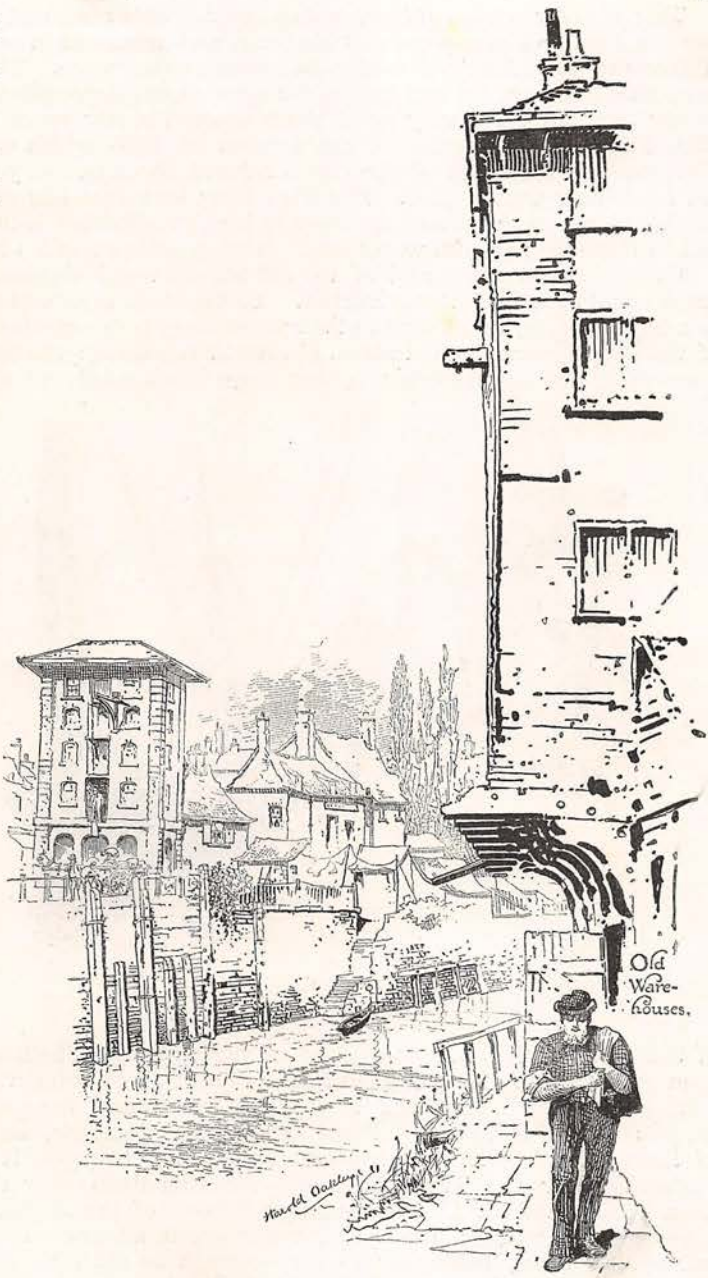
To comprehend the system of drainage would be impracticable without maps and plans ; to take a lively interest in it impossible, save to an engineer or to a fenman. After leaving Peterborough on the way north, one is struck by the changed aspect of the country. Its levelness is astonishing and impressive. You can see for miles over the fields and farms—all in a state of high cultivation. “Out of slough and bogs accursed, they have made a garden of pleasure.” Of the salutary effects of this Kingsley tells in his “Idylls” :—“There will be no more typhus and ague, and it is to be hoped no more brandy drinking and opium smoking, and children will live and not die. For it was a hard place to live in, the old fen ; a place wherein one heard of unexampled cases of longevity for the same reason that one hears of them in savage tribes—that few live to old age at all, save those iron constitutions which nothing could break down, and now when the bold fenmen, who had been fighting water by the help of wind, have given up the more capricious element for that more agreeable servant fire, they have replaced their windmills by steam engines, which will work in all weathers, and have pumped the whole fen dry, too dry.”

So much for the fen country, and now as to the people. They are popularly supposed to be a mixture of Danes, Saxons, Normans, Scotch and Flemings, with

what truth I do not know. Anyhow they come of a good stock according to Emerson: —“ England yielded to the Danes and Northmen in the 10th and 11th centuries, and was the receptacle into which all the mettle of that strenuous population was poured. The continued draught of the best men in Norway, Sweden and Denmark to these piratical expeditions exhausted those countries, like a tree which bears much fruit when young, and these have been second-rate powers ever since. The power of the race migrated, and left Norway void. King Olaf said, ‘ When King Harold my father went westward to England, the chosen men in Norway followed him; but Norway was so emptied then, that such men have not since been to find in the country nor especially such a leader as King Harold was for wisdom and bravery.’ It took many generations to trim and comb and perfume the first boatload of Norse pirates into Royal Highnesses and most noble Knights of the Garter.”

Pirates or not, they very early settled down to a quiet life of agriculture and trade. As early as 1200 there is a record of a valuation of the Richmond property at Boston. According to this document:—

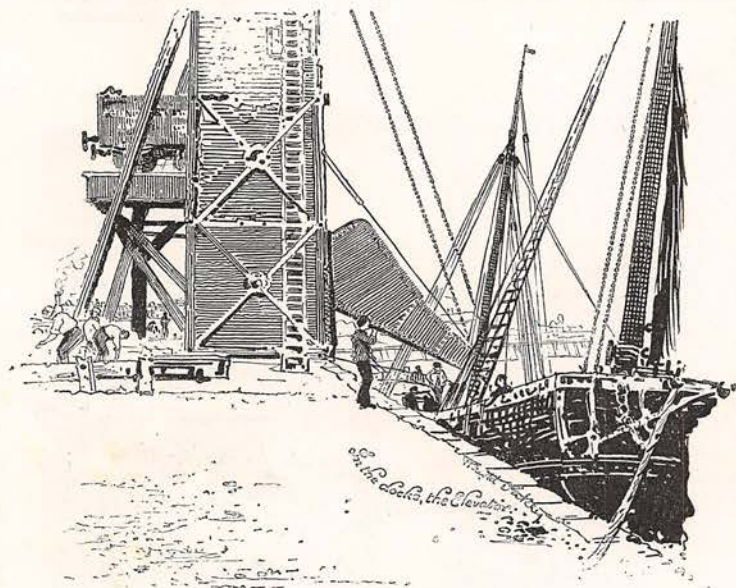
	£	s.	d.
306 acres of arable land let for	10	0	0
A windmill for	2	10	0
Certain cottagers pay 60 fowls' worth		5	0
161 acres of arable land worth 1s. 3d. per acre let for	10	5	0
The free tenants pay		18	2
And one pound of cummin worth			1
Rent of houses let to merchants of Ypres	20	0	0
" " " " Cologne	25	10	0
" " " " Caen and Ostend	11	0	0
" " " " Arras	13	6	8



OLD WAREHOUSES.

This £10 for 306 acres represents a considerable rent, and shows that at that early day the land had been put to its best use, and enhanced in value. There are plenty of farms to let in England to-day, but none at that price. The Lincolnshire farmers have been amongst the last to feel the agricultural depression, and they are feeling it keenly now, after the very good times enjoyed a few years back. A property was offered for sale at Boston in the autumn of 1886 which was bought in 1855 for £11,000, and for which £16,000 was refused about twelve years ago. The highest bid made now was £4,800. But it's a long lane that has no turning, and with the pluck and perseverance so engrained in him, the fenman will yet weather the storm, and sail into that smooth water which is his privilege and his birthright.

Of its modern aspect and of the old houses which suggest memories of the past much could be written about Boston. To-day there is an odd mixture of old and new, in many respects, which strikes the eye at every turn—old-fashioned ways and habits of the people, new-fangled ideas, old-world houses on the banks of the river, steam flour-mills, and even electric lights; huge black-sided, red-roofed corn warehouses,



IN THE LOCKS, THE ELEVATOR.

empty many of them, alas! the docks, on which the people have spent much good money (may they get a quick return for it), with its fish-houses and coal-elevators; and the grand old church, with its lofty tower standing like a sentinel over all, these five hundred years. Then there is the Town-hall, which has the appearance of a bit of an old monastic building. Within its walls are transacted all the weighty and important business of the Corporation of the Borough of Boston. Originally it was the Hall

of the Guild of St. Mary—the last of the trade guildhalls—for many years it has been given up to the solemn deliberations of the Common Council. The solemn deliberations are sometimes broken by feasts and banquets. The Corporation records tell of a variety of subjects, some domestic, some political, and most of them charming in their ingenuous detail. "In 1552, it was ordered that the kitchens under the Town Hall and the Chambers over them shall be prepared for a prison, and for a dwelling house for one of the sergeants." The gaoler was appointed to "order, dress and make clean all such arms, harness and other artillerye or arms, belonging to the borough as shall be delivered to him by the Mayor," for which he was to be remitted £4 of rent, and "to have a chaldron of lime for repairs for his house, and to receive 40s. yearly and a linsey gown," such as the sergeant-at-arms wore. In 1670 appears a list or inventory of "properties" in the prison or "little ease," "10 horselocks, 4 pairs of cross fetters, 2 chains, 3 pairs of handcuffs, a pair of *pothooks*, with 2 rivets and shackles, 5 pairs of iron fetters and shackles, and a brand to burn prisoners in the hand." In 1547 brewers were ordered to sell good ale at 1½d. per gallon, and single beer at 1d. per gallon. A few years later persons licensed to sell ale and beer are alluded to as "tipplers." In 1680 "every journeyman of the art sciences misteries and occupation of clothiers, fullers, saddlers, tanners, felt-makers, bowyers, arowhead-makers, cookes, etc., being able to take charge as foreman of the shoppe or work, shall have and take for his yearly work £4." Wages by the day for skilled work was "6d., with meat and drinke."

Reapers in the summer were to have "good meat and drinke;" a common servant of husbandry by the year, £1 6s. 8d.; and a common servant "able to keepe a dayre and doth take charge of it, soe as the same be of 10 kine at the least, and doth take charge of brewing and baking, by which is meant that they shall make good what they loose or spoil, either by negligence or willfullnesse, shall have and take by the yeare £2 and her living." The price of an oath was fixed at 2d. for an Alderman and 1d. for a Common Councillman. A resolution on the subject says, "If any Alderman swear either by the Masse or any other part or member of God, in the Hall or any other place, he shall pay 2d." In 1552 the Hall would not allow Mr. Fox, the late Mayor, "24s. 8d. charged in his account for the eatynge of venyson." In 1657 they spent at the Red Lion at the "eating of the buck sent to the Corporation by Sir Anthony Irby £8 18s."

The dear old Corporation found itself in trouble at a very early age, in its infancy I may say, for in 1552 Mr. Nanton brought suit against the town for his fee for



THE MARKET PLACE.

attendance at the Parliament House; he afterwards agreed to compromise the suit for twenty nobles. This was a lesson to them, and for the future candidates had to undertake to ask for no remuneration.

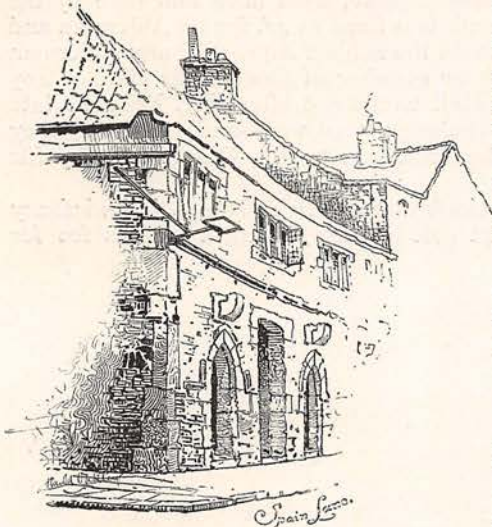
As to payment of members of Parliament, there are a number of resolutions and discussions. One runs:—"an Assemble holden by the maior, the Aldermen and Common Councill the 27th day of January, 1552:—

"Also, there was a wryte redde, sent from the sheryffe of Lyncolnshire, for the chosyng of two burgess for this next parliament, to be holden at Westminster the 1st day of Marche, Anno 6 Edward VI., whereupon it was agreed that Leonard Irby should be one of the said burgesses, not having or takyng any fee or wage for the same, according to his promys, as may appear by his letter, bearing date the day hereof."

Strange to say, the subject of water supply greatly agitated them for a long period. Why here they were, one may say, up to their knees in it, water, water, everywhere, and yet they must argue and wrangle and debate as to where they were to get water. They were just two hundred and seventy-seven years deciding this simple—simple to outsiders—question. It was first discussed in Common Hall in 1568, and finally settled in 1849, when a copious supply was obtained from Miningsby, twelve miles distant.

Politics have always had a foremost place in Boston affairs. Party feeling runs high even now, though nothing, of course, like the following can possibly occur. In 1835 the Municipal Corporation Commissioners wrote:—"A consequence of the exclusive

system upon which the Municipal Authorities have acted is apparent in their inability to preserve the peace of the town at periods of political excitement. The inhabitants will not co-operate in support of the magistracy, and when special constables have been sworn in, they have refused to act. Persons have declined to become members of the



SPAIN LANE.

Of the trouble that the townsfolk have had with their river, the Witham, books innumerable, by engineers and others, have been written. It is a sad tale, that struggle with the water, and bravely have the Lincolnshire people won the battle, and no one grudges them the spoils. It was during a function at the opening of a sluice that a scoffer from the south wrote the doggerel that to this day is remembered :—

“ Boston, Boston,
Thou hast naught to boast on
But a grand sluice, and a high steeple,
A proud, conceited, ignorant people,
And a coast where souls are lost on.”

The Grammar School is under the wing of the Corporation, and was built in 1567. Over the entrance is a florid inscription in Latin, and over the door of the schoolroom, “A° 1567—Reginae Elizabethae nono, maior et Burgenses Bostoniae uno et eodem consensu puerorum institutionis gratia in piis litteris hanc aedificaverunt Scholam Gulielmo Ganock stapulae mercatore et tunc maiore existenti.” In 1578 it was “resolved that a Dictionary shall be bought for the Scollers of the Free Scoole; and the same boke to be tyed in a cheyne and set upon a desk in the scoole, whereunto any scoller may have accesse as occasion shall serve.” In 1601 they bought two more dictionaries, a Greek and a Latin one.

And now for the church which is first and foremost the most important feature in all the attractions of Boston. It should have been mentioned long before this, indeed it deserves an article, nay, more than an article, a book, to itself. It is, I believe, the third largest parish church in England, St. Nicholas, Great Yarmouth, and another being slightly larger. The enormous tower, over 300 feet, stands like a giant erect, and can be seen for miles across the fen lands. It is graceful, too, and when viewed from

Corporation, nor is this matter of surprise considering the character of the police. The head of that police is one of the most active partisans who prepares himself for election riots by composing election squibs, and piques himself upon this accomplishment. The constables under his command are all selected from the same party. Charitable distributions to the poor have been regulated by the same party feeling.”

Money was dispensed liberally, as became a rich borough. We read of several gratuities to poor scholars. In 1610 Ralph Hearinge, “wishing now forthwith to send his son to Cambridge,” was voted £5, “giving good security for the same.” Again, “agreed that Sydrach Sympson, being a poor scholar at Cambridge, and born at this town, shall have given him 20s. quarterly for five years, provided he remains so long at Cambridge.” Richard Cooper (1638) had £5 as a gratuity towards his commencing Master of Arts.



THE TOWN HALL.

within the bounds of the borough, it is distinctly awe-inspiring. There is a sense of architectural proportion in the great length of the nave and the great height of the tower. Another thing too strikes the stranger—the massive stonework of the buttresses, and the capital state of repair the whole place is kept in. In this latter respect it is a contrast to some other Lincolnshire churches. Every detail of the elegantly groined ceiling is clear, and the pillars are not yet discoloured by time. Somehow or other the church does not look *old*. The lines of the stonework are almost as clean cut to-day as if they had only left the mason's yard a week ago. But it is old, nevertheless, for the foundation-stone was laid in 1319. The stained glass windows are worth noticing, and the brasses, though few in number, are quaint.

The Cotton Chapel, built at the expense of Americans in memory of Dr. John Cotton, the first vicar of Boston in Massachusetts, is a strong link that helps to bind the friendly relation between the two countries.

Boston has, of course, lost many of its old-world buildings, but there are a few left, which with the market-place help to make the town curiously Dutch-like in first appearances. From almost every point it is picturesque, from the river bank or from the bridge, though the most suggestive view is from the meadows at the back of the Grammar School. High up the grey tower stands like a guardian above the town, rising three hundred feet, square and grand, while the lower mist of the distance, and the smoke from the factories, render the red roofs of the houses imaginative and indistinct. The market-place bears the peaceful air of most English towns. On ordinary days it is empty, save for a stray waggon or a farmer's "trap"; and the small knot of men in white jackets, who stand near the foot of the bridge, with their hands in their pockets, and pipes in their mouths,—thinking hard apparently, for they do not seem to talk much. When a cart passes they stare at it vacantly and turn slowly, watching it out of sight, and then solemnly "as you were!" This goes on all day and makes one wonder, How do they live? They are sturdy fellows enough, with a strong whiff of the sea about them. Are they waiting in the market-place to be hired? Yes. In days gone by, when the big cargoes of corn were to be loaded, owners of vessels came there to look for extra hands, and found them, always.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays it is market day; then indeed comes the tug of war. All the rest of the week people take life more or less quietly, but on Wednesdays they rouse themselves, put on their Sunday best, and prepare to do a bit of "business." The great open space is covered with stalls, reminding one strongly of a foreign town. All is noise and bustle. There are shouts from the drovers with sheep and cattle, there are the cries of the sellers of every imaginable thing, from boots to butcher's meat, from vegetables to sailors' slops; there is the rumble of the country waggon as it wends its way over the bridge and down the High Street, and there is the babel of the butter market where the farmers' wives sit, all in their Sunday clothes, with clean baskets of butter, eggs, and fowls in front of them. Rows and rows of them. I counted four rows of about thirty in each, and all talking at one and the same time. Then in the autumn there is the open fruit market, plums, blackberries, pears and apples (the Lincolnshire apple is of remarkable flavour) being sold in the open. The sellers are unsophisticated and slow, and take their time. Occasionally a big fruit buyer will come over from Nottingham and wake them up with his quotations, but as a rule they sit and chat with each other and you must wait till all is told about what "she says," and "I says."

On Saturday night the stalls are lighted up with those weird naphtha lamps, and auctions of cheese, potatoes, crockery, butcher's meat and vegetables go on apace till twelve o'clock. Then the noise and hubbub ceases, the stalls are removed, and early on Sunday morning all the wide space of the market is swept and garnished for



JEAN INGELOW'S HOUSE.

the Sabbath—the good Bostonian likes to see his town clean and tidy on a Sunday morning, when he goes to church or chapel. Above the noise and bustle and the lights of the stalls and of the lamps the old tower looms darkly, like a giant warden watching over the town and its people.

To-day Boston has taken a renewal of the lease of life, for after years of stagnation we are once more in the thick of a brisk business with Germany, and a prospect of still greater things. The docks, built by the enterprise of the people, the Steam Trawler Company, and various new mills and factories all go to help to make it a busy town now. Down at the docks there is a constant coming and going of the steam trawlers and fishing smacks. There is the bi-weekly steamer from Hamburg, bringing its cargo of cheap and nasty German goods for consumption by our midland folk ; there is the great coal-heaver, or should it be called coal-elevator ? a tower of strength, wherein are shot truck loads of coal, to be noisily and easily slid into the hold of a ship, accompanied by the thunder of the blocks against the iron sides and clouds of coal dust ; and there is the steam-saw, for ever, it seems, revolving and cutting railway sleepers, which have come from Norway, and are intended for use on the Great Northern. Only on Sunday is the noise hushed. All through the week the work goes on. The sleepers are tumbled into the dock from the timber ships, and dragged on by an endless chain, which cleverly catches them, and guides them up to and over the circular saw, running at a terrific rate. The sleepers hum and sing as the saw goes through them, sometimes wailing in a high key as the metal first meets the wood, and coming down in slow gradations of many tones to one of genial satisfaction, like the hum of a giant bee.

The impetus given by steam trawling has done much for Boston, and no doubt will do more, and people living in the inland towns, like Sheffield and Nottingham, should be getting their fish cheaper and better than before.

At the close of the day, when those glorious sunsets in the fen-land light up our beautiful tower and glow through the lofty lantern, when the noise and bustle of the day is hushed, when the song of the lark and the hum of the bee in the hedgerows have ceased, and when the tired fen-man tramps to his cottage by the "drain," our thoughts go back to the days of old, when Boston gallantly carried all before her, and her merchants were princes and her ships were known in every port. And now at the eve of the long day she can look back on the bright picture and resolve, with the aid of that stout will which has often supported and never failed her, to rise once more strengthened by the trials of the past and confident in the promise of the future.

