

DUNSTER AND THE CASTLE.

## DUNSTER AND ITS CASTLE.

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**D**UNSTER is a considerable village in the west of Somersetshire, a mile from the Bristol Channel, and just beneath the first of those brown heather-covered hills which somewhat further on begin to be called Exmoor. A tiny river makes here a valley about half-a-mile in breadth, which carries a steadily-narrowing strip of rich water-meadow some miles up towards Dunkery Beacon. The silt of this river has formed between the village and the sea a stretch of flat marsh-land which used to be covered by the spring tides, but has now been reclaimed by the diversion of the mouth of the stream and the formation of a natural "pebble-ridge."

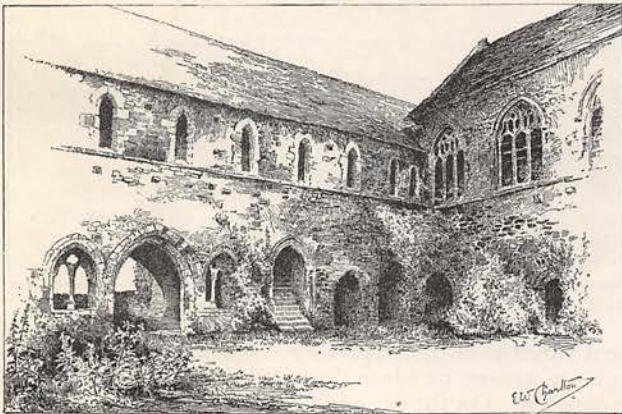
Just at the opening of the valley are two isolated conical hills, and on the smaller of these stands Dunster Castle, more than half surrounded by the houses beneath. If the river were broad enough to fill the whole valley, these hills might pass for any two of the long series on the Rhine banks above Coblenz. Some such idea may have occurred to that eighteenth century Luttrell of Dunster Castle who erected on the higher hill (called Conygar) a sham tower of ragged stone-work which from all parts of Dunster is at first sight the most conspicuous object against the sky-line. But when the newly-arrived tourist has been a few hours in the village he is pretty sure to adopt the mental attitude of the inhabitants, and to look on Conygar as a mere appendage to that wooded pyramid of winding walks and yew-hedged terraces which carries the castle.

On the barren ridge that faces the castle from the other side of the valley is a well preserved Roman camp, from which the sentry could see the coast as far as Minehead on the west, and Watchet on the east, as well as the long valley behind him, and the Welsh hills or the islands of Flat Holm and Steep Holm hanging above the misty sea in front. These trenches and earth works with their wide zone of observation and the sharp distinction between peace and war implied by their temporary and strictly military construction add somehow to one's general impression of the essential modernness of the old Roman state.

But when the *Pax Romana* had been broken up, the steep little hill in the valley beneath was more suitable than the site of the old camp for a fortified dwelling house strong enough to keep off robbers from the sea and private war from inland. Accordingly the Domesday surveyors found the castle hill already scarped at the sides and flattened at the top to serve as the foundation of a Saxon keep. William de Mohun, who had come over from Moyon in Normandy, became lord of the fortress, and the surrounding lands, in place of an unknown Saxon Alaric, and from the Mohuns the Luttrells in the fourteenth century bought the estate. But the dark and narrow keep fifty yards away from the scanty well on the hill-side must have been about as pleasant a place to live in

as a bomb-proof casement, and the subsequent history of the castle shows a steady development in the direction of domestic comfort checked up to the end of the seventeenth century by gradually weakening military considerations, and since then by a growing passion for historic continuity and æsthetic amenity.

In the Conqueror's time there were in Dunster only seventeen heads of families



DORMITORIES AND REFECTORY, CLEEVE ABBEY.

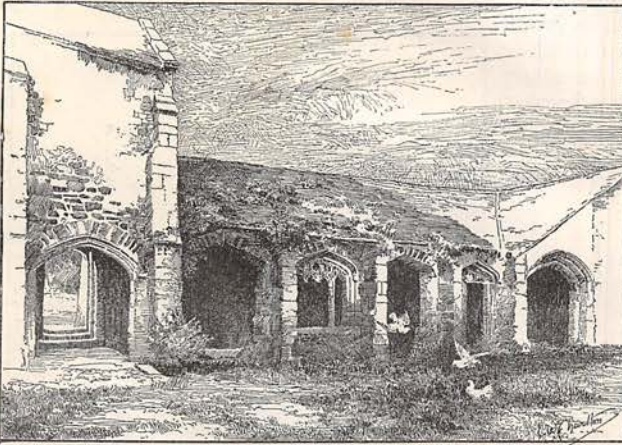
paying rent and service to the castle, being fifteen cottagers and two millers. But within ten years of the survey, William de Mohun, granted to the Benedictines at Bath tithes of the ploughlands and flocks in Dunster and the neighbouring parishes, and of the vineyards on the slopes of Grabhurst Hill, as well as lands in Alcombe, and the fisheries of Dunster and Carhampton, on condition that they should establish a church and priory at Dunster, and keep them supplied with monks. There were however never more than four or five



THE PRIORY DOVECOT.

monks in the Dunster priory, and the mother-abbey at Bath always received the greater part of the revenue. The huge tithe-barn still remains, and a roomy dovecot, whose size suggests that the prior's pigeons levied an extra tithe upon his neighbour's crops. The monks appointed a vicar on extremely economical terms to serve the parishioners. This arrangement, as usual, produced constant quarrels,

and in 1498 the Abbot of Glastonbury, who had been appealed to as arbitrator, ordered the tower arch of the then newly-restored church to be walled up, so that the monks and the vicar should hold separate services. One fortunate result of this decision was



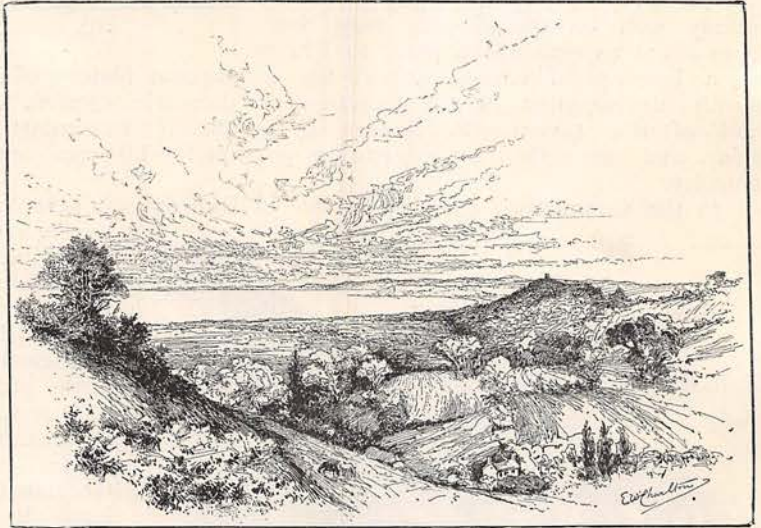
THE CLOISTERS, CLEEVE ABBEY.

that the townspeople, in order to make for themselves a chancel, cut off part of the nave by a most elaborately and delicately carved screen which still remains. Forty years later the three remaining monks were dispossessed and the monastery dissolved. In the matter of the vicar's stipend things were not much improved by the dissolution, for not long afterwards the inhabitants complained to Queen Elizabeth that the lay impropriator would only offer £8 out of the tithe, and that no one could be found to take the post. The priory half of the church remained

deserted and dismantled from that time till about twenty years ago, when the present owner of the castle restored both it and the nave, and took down the partition wall.

When the Benedictines had been established for a century in Dunster, the Cistercians, or White Friars, whose origin had been a protest against Benedictine corruption, set

up (A.D. 1181) an abbey in the Vale of Flowers at Cleeve, some four miles off. It, too, was visited by King Henry VIII.'s commissioners, and now stands a gaunt and dreary ruin, gaunter and drearier because the buildings, after serving for generations as pig-sties and cow-sheds, have been in late years carefully cleaned and emptied. The Abbey Church has been razed to its foundations, but the living and sleeping

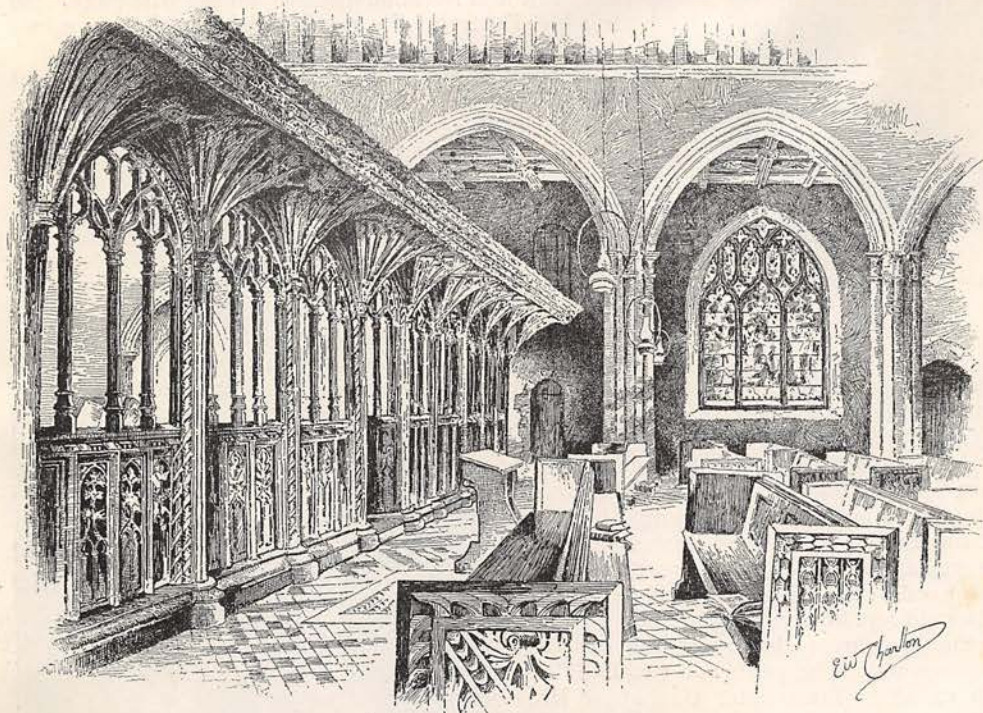


BRIDGEWATER BAY AND QUANTOCK INLET, FROM DUNSTER.

rooms of the monks remain in most cases with their roofs on. Their arrangement is very like that of an Oxford college—a grassy quadrangle with cloisters running all round and doors opening into the cloisters. On the ground floor are the day-rooms, the chapter house, the parlour (to be used on occasions when the rule of silence was inconvenient), the calefactory, or room with a fire, and the kitchens. Up stairs are the great dormitory which extended along a whole side of the quadrangle, and the splendid dining-hall with its carved roof and raised dais for the "high table." Still among the fragments in the fireplace an ancient wine flask and an ancient medicine bottle keep melancholy company.

The Cistercians always chose such solitary valleys as this of Cleeve in order that

they might be removed from temptation. Other monks became rich and powerful men of the world; they would live in the desert and support themselves by the labour of their own hands. Thirty generations later Robert Owen's followers tried the same experiment at New Hampshire, and found how difficult it is for a body of unpractised enthusiasts to make a livelihood by the difficult art of agriculture. They held excellent land rent-free, and were under no temptation to buy expensive machines which only professional skill could make pay. But just as in all the early communist experiments the employment of outside paid labour was always the first sign of disillusionment, so in time the Cistercians came to depend more and more upon the "converts" or lay brothers, who were expected to give their undivided attention to the crops, and who did not join the sleepy little procession that descended every night at 2 A.M. down the narrow night stairs from the dormitory into the Abbey Church. But unlimited lands farmed by "converts" for the abbey brought unlimited wealth,



THE SCREEN, DUNSTER CHURCH.

and the dissolution found the Cistercian monasteries only distinguished from the rest by a denser ignorance due to their rules of silence, the remoteness of their abbeys, and a certain ineffective tradition that they were, or ought to be, agriculturists.

Meanwhile, the few cottages at the foot of the Castle Hill had grown into a considerable market town, whose prosperity was largely due to the fact that Henry III. had held it for some years as guardian of one of the Mohuns, and had sternly suppressed an attempt to set up a rival market at Watchet. Two burgesses went up from Dunster to the Parliament of Edward III., and when the west of England began to compete with Norfolk and the Flemings in the spinning and weaving of woollen goods, the master clothiers of Dunster became for a time more important than either the castle or the church. "Dunster makyth cloth," says Leland in 1540; and an act of James I. fixes the measurement and weight of "every broad cloth commonly called Tauntons, Bridgewaters, and Dunsters." In 1620 was built the pretty octagonal yarn market which still stands in the middle of Fore Street. Local tradition generally fixes the number of master clothiers in olden times at twenty-four, though another version supplied by an aged and bright-eyed inhabitant of Fore Street speaks of twenty-one clothiers and "twenty-four public houses."

In the time of the Civil War stone walls could still resist artillery, and Dunster

Castle stood two sieges. Mr. George Luttrell first held it for the Parliament, and then, in spite of his wife's influence, handed it over to the king. Finally, after a desultory



OLD WINDOW, LUTTRELL ARMS INN.

siege of half a year, the king's garrison surrendered to Colonel Blake. The hole made by a cannon-ball during this siege is still to be seen in one of the rafters of the yarn-market. While in the hands of Cromwell's government the castle was used as a place of imprisonment for William Prynne, whose controversial style was as distasteful to the Protector as it had been to the king. Having nothing more exciting to do he elaborately arranged the chaos of papers in the castle muniment room, and drew up a neatly-written catalogue with a spiteful reference to "Mr. Bradshaw and his companions" on the title-page. In 1651 Mr. Luttrell, who had again changed his mind, was restored to his possessions.

Perhaps the master clothiers of Dunster did not seriously object to the temporary eclipse of the castle influence. The yarn market was restored in 1647, and the period immediately following the Civil War seems to have been that of their greatest prosperity. But early in the eighteenth century the west country wool industry began to decay.

No one seems able to form any probable guess as to the reason of this decay. It was not the want of coal, for the change was complete before steam began to be used for either spinning or weaving. Nor was it due to the roads and canals, which half a century before the introduction of the factory system began the development of a larger industrial organization in the north of England—for even at that time the west country wool trade was nearly dead.

In the early years of this century there were still some traces of the old industry to be seen. The waterwheels of an old fulling mill stood useless and decaying, and one of the cottager's children who lived in the mill house still remembers in her old age how as a child she wondered at the broken machinery in the deserted back rooms. The posts for racking cloth still stood in lines upon Grabhurst Hill, and two or three old women still span yarn and knitted it into stockings. But Dunster had already ceased to be a town and had become a village. The craftsmen had either followed their industry into the few west country towns which were erecting factories in imitation of Bradford and Leeds, or had drifted into agricultural labour. "The trade had left the country," and that seemed a sufficient explanation for the cruel sufferings of the years between the French war and 1850. The theory of Cobbett and his like that such suffering might be due not to irresistible fate but to the wickedness of government could hardly reach a place where, as Brougham's Education Commission were told in 1818, "there is no school and the poorer classes would be grateful for any means of education afforded them." But the villagers shared from a safe distance some of the excitement of the months preceding the great Reform Bill. For in October, 1831, John Noble, the carrier, made his usual weekly visit to Bristol and came back wounded.



THE BUTTER CROSS, DUNSTER.

He had got into the way of a cavalry charge, and being conscious of innocence, had been slow to run, so that a trooper caught him and cut through his box-hat on to his scalp. The hat with the great slash across is well remembered to this day by the older inhabitants. At the same time a subscription among the farmers and landowners, and a free distribution of flour and bacon, confirmed the general belief that the best way to escape starvation was to avoid offending one's employer. Soon came the first and sternest result of "The Bill, the whole Bill, and nothing but the Bill." The village poor-house was disestablished. This in its outward semblance was a long low two-storied house facing the village elm tree. The ground floor was divided into two frowzy rooms, called the "parlour" and the "kitchen." It had been built in the time



HIGH STREET AND THE YARN MARKET, DUNSTER.

of the prosperity of Dunster for thirty inmates, but was seldom more than half full. Here the paupers lived golden days. There was no matron or master to impose troublesome regulations. The chief authority among them was Mrs. Webber, herself a pauper, who ruled by the natural right of a strong character and a sharp tongue. Each had a private allowance of turf and firewood, and once a week the overseer brought to each the parish pay, with which food was bought to be cooked at the huge fireplaces. He lived close at hand, and it was the custom to make him arbitrator in case of any serious dispute. But it was not a good place for children, and the family of that sawyer who lived in the poor-house while he worked in the squire's yard did not turn out well. When the poor-law commissioners shut up the old house the inmates went voluntarily away to stay with their indignant friends, though afterwards some few of them drifted into the new union at Willaton.

After the staple industry of the place had departed, the rights of the burgesses to the common lands, which might have checked the descent from craftsmen to agricultural labourers, were gone also. The monks of the priory and the lords of the castle between them had left no arable fields or water meadows unenclosed. The old salt marsh remained, and there the burgesses of Dunster had the right to pasture nine ewes and a ram for each man. But the right belonged only to such families as could show unbroken usage, and among the old weavers and fullers and clothiers few had had continuously either spare money with which to buy sheep, or time to tend them. Some thirty years ago one or two aged claimants were bought out, and the neighbouring farmers drained and divided the land.

But the minute subdivision of function among individuals and localities alike, which is the distinguishing mark of modern "great industry," while it has destroyed the old character of Dunster has rigorously assigned to it a new one. Dunster has become a "show place." The little yarn market, having remained for more than a century deserted and useless, must now have a large annual value as a source of æsthetic gratification and historical instruction to a constant stream of sightseers from just those districts where woollen yarn is at present made and sold, and where antiquity and beauty are not. Dunster will probably never be a fashionable watering-place; there will always be a mile of meadow between it and the sea too flat for romance and too fertile for golf. But besides those



DUNSTER CASTLE FROM THE LAWNS.

who stay in the season at Dunster as a convenient base for the Exmoor stag-hunting there are always some at all times of the year who are glad to enjoy for a few days its unspoiled beauty before they pass on to the grander but gloomier hills and bluer seas of Porlock and Lynton.

The castle is now a very comfortable modern house which no one would ever dream of attacking or defending. The site of the old keep was already a bowling green a hundred years ago, and is now a garden from which we can look down into the rooks' nests on the trees beneath. In the valley east of the castle is a peculiarly rich piece of park land called "The Lawns," which shines in springtime with alternate silk and satin stripes as the roller has laid the grass this way or that.

Inside the house is a splendid old staircase where the clear outlines of seventeenth century wood-carving have been preserved to our time by eighteenth century coats of paint. Some workman from Italy carved it in the time of Charles II. He had been told by the squire to represent a fox-hunt and a stag-hunt. He did so, apparently under protest, and the fat little dogs and beasts look curiously incidental among all the wealth of conventional foliage.