

## TITCHFIELD ABBEY

**I**N a verdant field, bespangled with daisies, stand the ruins of a noble mansion once known as Palace House, Titchfield. A little to the right may be seen the soft grey tones of a Gothic window in a ruined wall, the relics of an ancient Abbey that once stood upon this site. At the rear is a large pond, formerly part of the Abbey Fishponds. High brick walls surround the turreted mansion with its Tudor chimneys, whilst an older stone wall abuts the ruined archway.

The spot is peaceful and serene beyond compare; here and there are ancient timbered barns, whilst hard by flows the 'silver Meon': the stream whose praises were so often sung by that famous fisherman, Izaak Walton. The river is spanned by an old bridge, at the side of which snugly lies a little Inn, 'The Fisherman's Rest.' The undulating land is well wooded. Between the trees may be seen the old roofs of Titchfield village and the shingled spire of its Saxon Church.

Sea-gulls swooping over the fields proclaim the nearness of the sea. Titchfield was once an important harbour in Hampshire, until the river was artificially blocked at its mouth and the sea marshes reclaimed for cultivation.

A high embankment in the background reveals the existence of a railway. Not half-a-mile distant is the motor-thronged main road to Chichester and Brighton. Titchfield has a great tale to tell, since the time when the White Canons first came and built the beautiful Abbey dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Assumption.

At the time of the foundation of the Abbey, Peter des Roches, Bishop of Winchester, was an all power-

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ful Counsellor of Henry III. It was this Bishop who obtained a grant of the Manor of Titchfield from Henry III, for the purpose of endowing an Abbey of the Premonstratensians in Hampshire. Peter des Roches was a great patron of the Religious Orders in England; he is held in particular remembrance as the first Patron of the Order of St. Dominic in England. The Dominicans it will be remembered on their first arrival in this country, reached Oxford on the 15th of August, 1221, hence the Feast of that day, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, became and still remains the Feast-day of the Dominican Priory in Oxford.

In a similar manner Providence guided the Premonstratensians or White Canons to reach Titchfield on the 15th of August, 1231, and therefore we are told, they dedicated their new community to Our Blessed Lady of the Assumption. The White Canons at Titchfield did not however come from abroad but were sent from the senior house at Halesowen in Shropshire and when the new Abbey had been built took final possession thereof on the 3rd of May, 1232, being the Feast-day of the Invention of the Holy Cross.

Henceforward until the time of the Reformation, the Canons lived in undisturbed possession of their Abbey and were renowned for their piety and learning. The Abbey was noted for its fine library and the Abbey Fishponds were remarkable for their extent and for their abundant supply of carp.

In the fourteenth century Richard II was feasted with his Queen when twelve mighty pike were brought to table in the Great Guest Hall. The Abbey was greatly favoured by Royalty and indeed most of the sovereigns of England have visited this privileged spot. Prior to embarking at Southampton for the famous field of Agincourt, Henry V stayed with his suite at the Abbey, beseeching the prayers of the good

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Canons for his victory. Within the Abbey Church Henry VI married Margaret of Anjou, the daughter of René, King of Anjou, Sicily and Jerusalem. In reward for the services of the Abbot and Canons on this occasion, Henry VI granted many new privileges to the Abbey.

Time sped swiftly by. Monarchs came and monarchs went and this and that Abbot was laid in the dust, but one thing did not change and that was the nightly prayer of the Canons to the 'Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.' Its wording has come down to us through the centuries: 'In Monte Celyon requiescent Septem Dormientes, Malchus, Maximus, Constantius, Dionysius, Serapion, Martinianus atque Johannes. Per istorum merita det michi Deus noctem quietam et soporem quietam. Amen.'<sup>1</sup>

There came a day when that prayer was no more recited by the White Canons for in the year 1537 their Abbey was dissolved. Fortunately the Abbot was able to save some of the books from being appropriated by ignorant and malicious persons and eventually several of these precious manuscripts found a resting-place in the Bodleian Library. The Library Catalogue of Titchfield Abbey has also been preserved.<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Wriothesley, a powerful counsellor of Henry VIII, cast an envious eye upon Titchfield Abbey, which he had visited with a view to its suppression. In 1537 Wriothesley obtained a grant of this Abbey from the King and partly demolished it, utilising the old walls as far as possible for his new magnificent mansion. The nave walls were left standing and some of the consecration crosses may still be seen *in situ*. Wriothesley called his new residence Palace House. After the death of Henry VIII,

<sup>1</sup> *Victoria History of Hampshire*, Vol. II; Religious Houses, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> *Ancient Wessex*. J. H. Cooke, F.G.S., F.L.S., p. 85.

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Wriothesley fell into disfavour owing to his opposition to the regime of the Protector Somerset. Although created Earl of Southampton, he was deprived of the Chancellorship and of the Great Seal, and died, so it is said, of a broken heart, in the year 1550 at his house in Lincolns Place, London. His son, Henry Wriothesley, was destined to be one of the few Catholic nobles, who openly espoused the Catholic cause during Queen Elizabeth's reign and who spent the best years of his life either in prison, or with Protestant custodians.

Henry Wriothesley does not appear to have been a man of vigorous mind or robust constitution, yet by his fidelity, he was a constant support to his Catholic tenants and neighbours who trusted in his protection. The withdrawal of that protection was keenly felt at his death in 1581, when soon afterwards, Lord Burleigh, High Treasurer, obtained the wardship of his infant son Henry, and on pretext of enquiring into his estates caused many of the Hampshire recusants to be severely penalised.

It is probable that Henry Wriothesley (Senior) used his influence in support of the English Mission of the Society of Jesus, for his cousin, Thomas Pounder, S.J., appears to have attempted to contrive an interview between the Earl of Southampton and Campion. If the Earl and Campion indeed met in the year 1581, it was to be the last time on earth, for towards the close of that year the hand of death fell upon both. The Earl, after a life of imprisonment and suffering, surrendered his soul to God; whilst Campion met a glorious martyrdom at Tyburn.

When Henry Wriothesley died, he left directions in his will for a monument to be raised to himself and his family in the ancient Parish Church at Titchfield. This elaborate monument is still extant and the effigies of the first Countess of Southampton, her husband

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Thomas Wriothesley, her son Henry Wriothesley, and her grandson, Henry Wriothesley are finely wrought in alabaster and marble.<sup>3</sup> Incidentally the inscriptions on the monument help us to trace a probable connection of the martyr Robert Southwell with the Wriothesley family. It appears that Michael Listar, a nephew of Henry Wriothesley (Senior), married Elisabeth Southwell, a sister of Robert Southwell.<sup>4</sup> The stepfather of Michael Listar was William Shelley of Michelgrove, Sussex, who was related to the Shelleys of Hampshire. Another sister of Robert Southwell's, Mrs. Mary Bannister, lived at Idsworth House, not ten miles from Titchfield and it is likely therefore that she was acquainted with the Wriothesleys, as being also of the old Faith.

Henry Wriothesley, son of Henry Wriothesley, succeeded his father as Earl of Southampton and was generally known as 'The Prince of Hampshire' on account of his influential position and courtly manners. He is better known as the Patron to whom 'William Shakespeare' dedicated two of his earlier works. Was he the Mr. W.H. to whom Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed? This vexed problem has been fully discussed by Fr. Herbert Thurston, S.J., in a recent article in *The Month*. Another interesting question is this: 'Did the author of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice* ever stay in the neighbourhood of Titchfield?' From the allusions in these two plays there is good reason to suppose that he did and that he borrowed much of his local colour from the surroundings of the old Abbey.

It is said that the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* is drawn from the love romance of young Henry Wriothesley and Elizabeth Vernon, a maid of honour to Queen

<sup>3</sup>Vide *Henry Wriothesley, Third Earl of Southampton*; C. Carmichael Stopes.

<sup>4</sup> *Victoria History of Hampshire*, Vol. IV, p. 28.

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Elizabeth. 'The dim monument of the Capulets' may well refer to the Wriothesley monument at Titchfield Church. The villagers of Titchfield relate with horror that centuries ago a nun was stabbed to death in an old mansion near Palace House. Was this tale associated with the dagger-thrust of Juliet who in the Play was discovered, 'bleeding warm and newly dead'? There seems to have been a nunnery on the site of an old house in Titchfield Parish. (Hampshire Field Club and Archaeological Society, Vol. V, pp. 203-9). It is also asserted that the first performance of *Romeo and Juliet* took place at the Abbot's Great Tithe Barn at Titchfield.<sup>5</sup>

Titchfield was visited by Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth. It was here that the beautiful 'Gloriana' the bride of Charles I, spent five weeks in the early days of her marriage. Charles I manifested a great liking for the place. When, in the year 1647, he was a weary prisoner in Hampton Court in imminent peril of his life, his thoughts instinctively turned to Titchfield as a haven of refuge. In a marvellous way he escaped at night from Hampton Court and with two companions made his way to the South Coast. He made a 'bee-line' for Titchfield and in the absence of Thomas Wriothesley, 4th Earl of Southampton, was received by Elizabeth Wriothesley, the aged widow of Shakespeare's patron, with her two daughters. The royal fugitive spent a few nights here whilst his companions made their way to the Isle of Wight to secure him a refuge. In the meantime, the friends of Charles I advised another course of action and attempts were made to procure a ship from Southampton to France. Too late! Ashburnham, the friend of Charles I, arrived at Titchfield with the news that he had brought with him Colonel Hammond, the

<sup>5</sup>*Historical Guide, Parish and Church of St. Peter's, Titchfield*; B. W. Watkins, Ph.D.

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Governor of Carisbrook Castle. 'Oh! Jack,' exclaimed the King, 'you have undone me, for I am by this means made fast from stirring!' True it was, for Charles I never regained his liberty, nor saw again the friends he loved so well. The walls of the Great Chamber where the dramatic interview between Charles I and Colonel Hammond took place, may still be seen in the ruins of Palace House.

These walls, once Abbey walls, had suffered sacrilege and it has been many times proved that those families who laid hands on the ancient monasteries came to an untimely end. So it was with the Montagues at Cowdray, so it was with the Wriothesleys, for in four generations their name and lineage died out through want of a male heir. Titchfield Estate passed to the Earls of Gainsborough, the Dukes of Portland and the Delmés. The Delmés built themselves a new house at Cams Hall, leaving the Abbey to the 'ghostly chanting' of the White Canons.

'The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus' it seems once more reign over Titchfield Abbey, for in spite of the Patronage of H.M. Office of Works, there are few who come and disturb its spiritual serenity.

In the green meadow with its ancient Abbey wall, one is reminded of the legend of Our Lady's apparition to St. Norbert at Prémontré. It must have been just such a meadow in which she directed the Saint to build a monastery in her honour. Surely it was more than a coincidence, that the Premonstratensians, like the founder, St. Norbert, should set their Abbey in a verdant stretch of grass, and by the banks of the River Meon with its sweet and precious memories of an ancient and honoured civilisation.

AGNES MOTT.