



ST. EANSWITH'S RELIQUARY IN
FOLKESTONE CHURCH.

BY CANON SCOTT ROBERTSON.

THE leaden coffer, or reliquary, here engraved, was found in June 1885, within the north wall of the high chancel of the parish church of Folkestone, which is dedicated to St. Mary and St. Eanswith.

The architectural details of this chancel are Early English, of the thirteenth century. A tall double aumbry appears in the north wall of the *sacrarium*, and east of it stood a small arched niche, 18 inches high, the head of which was acutely pointed.

In the spring of 1885 the Vicar of Folkestone commenced the decorative work of encrusting the walls of the *sacrarium* with rich arcading in alabaster. When, for this purpose, masons removed the plaster from the surface of the wall beneath this niche, they found that it occupied the centre of a large arched space (probably round-headed), which, having originally been open to the chancel, had at some period been filled in with rough masonry. The *vousoirs* of the arch were gone. A slab of stone, 4 feet long, and 2 feet broad, formed the base of this arched opening, which I should call a founder's tomb, used, probably, as an *Easter sepulchre*.

Beneath the large stone slab which formed the altar-like top of

the tomb, and would be used as the base of the Easter sepulchre, the masons laid bare a cavity within which stood the reliquary engraved above. It is about 14 inches long, 9 inches wide, and 8 inches high, without its cover.

The outer surface of this leaden coffer is ornamented, like that of Gundrada de Warenne (daughter of Queen Matilda) who died in A.D. 1085, with large open lozenges in relief. In these lozenges each side is about 3 inches long, and is formed of dots, 9 or 11 in number, and each of them lozenge shaped. Near the top of the coffer, the lozenge pattern is crossed by a horizontal line of similar dots. Of the bottom of the coffer very little was left; it had decayed away under chemical action.

The lead used as a cover for the coffer was not fitted to it, but was a rough fragment taken from some other vessel. It had probably formed part of a Roman coffin. This I gather from the fact that, upon its under side, this cover has at one end five parallel mouldings in high relief, resembling cords or small cables.* Similar mouldings in lead I have seen on Roman leaden coffins, and on nothing else. The only other mark upon the cover is formed of two simple straight lines, which meet and form a very obtuse angle.

Within this coffer were heaped together many bones of a young woman. I found amongst them nearly the whole of one jawbone (shewn in the woodcut at an angle of the coffer), with two double-teeth still firmly fixed in the jaw. Three other teeth which I found loose among the bones were sound and little worn. One of them had, all over it, a dark pink tinge, for which I cannot account. Portions of the skull, arms, hands, ribs, legs, and feet could be recognised, but much had been pulverised. On the surface of the bones there was a beautiful hue of deep crimson-like purple, and a formation of minute crystals which sparkled brightly.

This reliquary and all its contents have been most carefully guarded and preserved by the Rev. Matthew Woodward, Vicar of Folkestone, who at once caused a large glass-case to be made and placed over the whole; nor would he suffer the bones to be disturbed until the Secretary of the Kent Archæological Society came to examine them.

The position in which the reliquary was discovered is that of highest honour, occasionally accorded to the founder, or to some very great benefactor of a church. Naturally it at once occurs to us

* Similar mouldings are shewn on the Plate opposite page 10 of this volume (*Archæologia Cantiana*, XVI.).

that the bones in the reliquary may be those of the royal lady of saintly fame, whom Folkestone has ever delighted to honour.

St. Eanswith shares with St. Mary the dedication of this church. St. Eanswith appeared crowned, upon one ancient seal of Folkestone, holding in one hand two fishes strung on a half-hoop, and in the other a pastoral staff. St. Eanswith is seen still upon Folkestone's Mayoralty seal, with crown, crosier, and book, having a fish on each side of her. This daughter of Eadbald, King of Kent, was a great benefactress to Folkestone; here she founded a convent, here she lived, and here she died. She was but 26 years of age at her death. The teeth in the reliquary therefore testify that the bones may well be those of St. Eanswith.

As she died in the seventh century, on the 31st of August, her bones must have been translated if they are found in a coffer of the twelfth century, and in a chancel wall of the twelfth or thirteenth century. Happily, history distinctly states that they were so translated; and, in his *Lives of the Saints*, Alban Butler suggests that the 12th of September, on which St. Eanswith's anniversary is kept, was the day of her translation.

Leland, writing in the reign of Henry VIII., says, "They say that one paroch church of our Lady and another of St. Paule ys clene destroyed and etin by the se. Hard upon the shore yn a place cawled the Castel yarde . . . be greate ruines of a solemne old nunnery. . . The castel yarde hath bene a place of great burial; yn so much as, wher the se hath woren on the banke, bones apere half stykyng owt. The paroch church is therby . . . ther is St Eanswide buried."

Lambarde, writing in the reign of Elizabeth, speaks of "Folkestone, where, A.D. 640, Eanswide, the daughter of Eadbalde, the sonne of Ethelbert, and in order of succession the sixte king of Kent, long since erected a religious Pryorie of women, not in the place where S. Peter's Church at Folkestone nowe standeth, but Southe, from thence, where the Sea many yeares agoe hath swallowed and eaten it. And yet, least you shoulde thinke S. Peter's Parische Church to be voyde of reverence, I must let you knowe [out] of *Nova Legenda Angliæ* that before the Sea had devoured all, S. Eanswide's reliques were translated thither."* Capgrave, in his *Nova Legenda*, bears the same testimony.

Respecting the dedication of the existing church, and of the

* *Perambulation of Kent*, under the title Folkestone (edition A.D. 1576, p. 136).

church which was destroyed, Leland and Lambarde are somewhat confused. Hasted unravelled the tangle, and tells us, respecting the nunnery, "that Eanswithe was buried in the church of it, dedicated to St. Peter and St. Paul. . . . This nunnery, being reduced to a heap of ruins by the continual ravages of the Danes, lay in that state till after the Norman conquest, when Nigell de Muneville, in 1095, founded, on the site of the old church and nunnery, a new priory of monks. . . . But not long after this, the depredations of the sea had so far wasted the cliff on which the priory stood that it became in great danger of falling with it; which induced Sir William de Albrincis, then lord of Folkestone . . . to remove the monks, at their petition, to a new church, which he granted to them for that purpose. This church stood on the site of the present church of Folkestone, at a little distance eastward from the castle-bail. . . . On the south side of the new church, he built a new priory, which with the church was dedicated to St. Mary and Eanswith, and to which the body of St. Eanswith was removed from the old ruinous church where it then lay."*

As St. Eanswith had been dead five or six hundred years, we know well that the remains to be translated would consist simply of her bones and dust. These, we cannot doubt, were collected with devout reverence and placed in the small coffer, or reliquary, which has now been discovered, in the exact position of honour in the north wall of the *sacrarium* which they should occupy.

How, then, can we account for the filling up of the large arched recess which marked the place beneath which her bones rested? When was this recess built up? Possibly, when all other Norman features of this chancel were removed, and it was remodelled in the thirteenth century, this Norman arch may have been removed also; but it is quite possible that it may have remained for another century.

At the present time, the most beautiful ancient feature of Folkestone Church is a gracefully carved and canopied tomb, which stands in the same wall in which the reliquary was found, but further west. Mr. Lambert Larking believed it to be the tomb of Sir John de Segrave, who died in A.D. 1349.† The elaboration and beauty of this tomb, and its position here, testify the vast influence, wealth, and benefactions to this church, of the person whom it commemorates. If the Norman arch above the reliquary still existed, this

* Hasted, *History of Kent*, viii., 180.

† See *Archæologia Cantiana*, II., 141; X., lviii.

beautiful tomb in every sense of the word eclipsed the plain unadorned arch above St. Eanswith's relics. Whenever the rude arch was built up, the smaller arched niche, 18 inches high, was left open to mark the spot beneath which the reliquary rested, and it remained thus calling attention to the spot until the present time.

We now must notice Hasted's statement that about the middle of the seventeenth century (*i.e.* circa A.D. 1650) the stone coffin of St. Eanswith was discovered, in the north wall of the south aisle of this church. This position alone seems to shew that the coffin was not that of St. Eanswith; but the further description seems to clench our argument that this stone coffin did not contain the remains of St. Eanswith, who had been buried one thousand years, and whose bones had already been removed from her original grave.

Hasted says, "On opening the coffin the corpse was found lying in its perfect form, and by it on each side an hour-glass and several medals, the letters on which were obliterated, and several locks of her hair, which were taken away and kept by different persons for the sanctity of it."*

The reliquary, with its contents, has now been carefully returned to the place where it was found. The Rev. M. Woodward, in honour of St. Eanswith, caused the aperture in the wall to be lined with alabaster, before he replaced the reliquary within it. In front of it he has fixed a *grille*, of brass, through which the reliquary can be seen. The *grille* is covered by a solid door of brass, appropriately ornamented on the outside, marked with the initials S. E., and secured by one of Chubb's locks.

* *History of Kent*, viii., 180.