

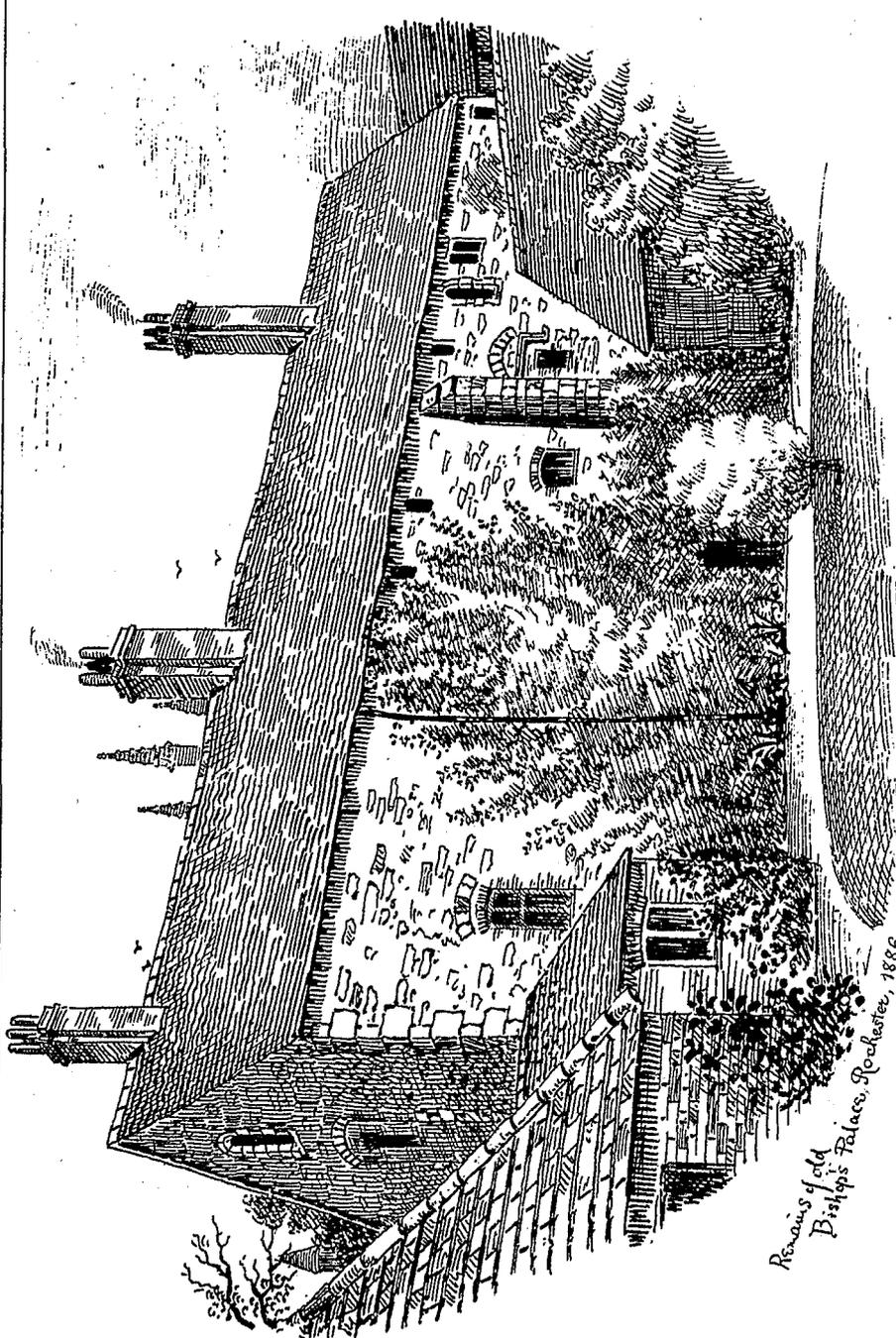
THE ANCIENT EPISCOPAL PALACE AT
ROCHESTER, AND BISHOP FISHER.

BY WILLIAM BRENCHLEY RYE.

IN the earliest *History of Rochester*, published by T. Fisher in 1772, a well-compiled work, which was one of the early productions of the Rochester press, it is stated that Bishop Fisher was the last prelate who resided much at the Palace in this city; and that, probably soon after the Reformation, the bishops of Rochester made Bromley their constant place of abode within the diocese. The writer of these remarks (most probably the Rev. Samuel Denne), after much research, came to the conclusion that this Palace was situated in the south-west corner of the Cathedral Precincts, on a spot where several houses had been erected and were then standing. The same writer informs us, in the third edition of *The Kentish Traveller's Companion* (1790), a popular and interesting guide book of that day, to which he largely contributed, that these houses were built about the middle of the previous century, and were leased by the Bishop to private tenants. They are still inhabited, and with the gardens belonging to them occupy the ground between the Prior's Gate and the street leading to Boley Hill.

I had hopes of finding some more definite account of the ancient Episcopal Palace, as it stood in Bishop Fisher's time, but an examination of the Denne Manuscripts in the British Museum,* as well as researches at the Record Office

* Add. MSS. B.M. 11819-11826. These are the collections of Archdeacon John Denne, who died in 1767, and of his son, the Rev. Samuel Denne, who continued them to about 1795. These valuable MSS. relate chiefly to Rochester, and were rescued from destruction; a large portion had already been torn up to light fires, etc., and many leaves torn in halves, when purchased by the British Museum in 1841. The letters written by the Rev. S. Denne to T. Fisher, the printer of the *History of Rochester*, relate chiefly to the publication of that work,



Remains of old
Bishop's Palace, Rochester, 1886.

Herbert Baker, del.

and Lambeth Palace, have been unattended with success. That the bishops had a residence here in very early times is clear, from documents printed in the *Registrum Roffense*, in which Bishop Gilbert de Glanville is said to have rebuilt (*circa* 1200) the Palace, which had been destroyed by fire; and Bishop Lowe, on March 27th, 1459, dates an instrument from his "New Palace at Rochester," which implies that he had again rebuilt it.

In my endeavour to ascertain the exact site of the Palace I have been greatly assisted by my friend Mr. Essell, who has kindly furnished me with most interesting information respecting it. This gentleman has from time to time, during many years, resided in each of the houses forming the present block of buildings on College Green, and he assures me that unmistakable remains of the Palace are still to be seen, in a large and imposing stone edifice, having a tiled roof some seventy feet in length. This building has been divided into two tenements, which are now occupied by General Thomas and Mrs. Wright. On its southern face, a massive buttress occurs in the centre; outlines of windows are discernible in various parts—a large one, pointed, apparently belonging to a hall; and below this the arched head of a gateway or a fine window. The walls are some three feet in thickness, and the cellars and vaulted passages—which extend even further eastward, beyond Mrs. Wright's house—are very massive. When repairs were effected a few years ago, in the western house inhabited by General Thomas, abutting upon Boley Hill, some wrought masonry was dug up, chiefly portions of capitals of columns, with beautiful foliated carving; likewise the shafts of columns, which might have formed part of the chapel attached to the Palace. In the high western wall of stone rubble, abutting upon Boley Hill, are seen projecting brackets,

and to *The Kentish Traveller's Companion*. These range from 1771 to 1784, and form the Egert. MS. 926, B.M. Denne's letters to Gough are printed in Nichols' *Illustrations of Literature*, pp. 609-793. Fisher, in 1783, advertised a new edition of the *History of Rochester*, to be published by subscription, in two volumes, with considerable additions and illustrations, but this never appeared. The edition of 1817 is little more than a reprint of that of 1772.

and also a few tiles inserted in the wall. The gable end facing Boley Hill is an interesting part of the ancient building, and presents some ecclesiastical features, particularly in its windows. It is curious that in the interior of this part of the structure there is no communication, from the lower apartment, with the chamber above. The front of these houses has been greatly altered, and exhibits no remarkable signs of antiquity.*

On the eastern side of them, and adjoining the Prior's Gate, formerly stood an ancient edifice, which was evidently a portion of the monastic buildings; this was for many years used as the King's or Cathedral Grammar School, the last occupant being the Rev. Daniel F. Warner, the Head Master. The building was demolished about forty years ago, and the stone framework of one of the ancient fire-places was built into a modern eastern wall near the Prior's Gate, where it still remains.

Mr. Denne, in *The Kentish Traveller's Companion*, above quoted, writes: "In the west quarter of the Palace Precincts were the Bishop's Court for the trial of civil causes, and a prison. No debtors have been confined in it for upwards of forty years (*i.e.*, *circa* 1750), the practice of the court not being sufficient to defray the expenses of supporting the jurisdiction. In what used to be the gaoler's garden the late Bishop Pearce in the year 1760 erected a Register Office."

Bishop Fisher was appointed to the See of Rochester in 1504, and at Rochester he appears to have mostly resided, during the thirty-one years of his episcopate, giving much attention to his duties within his diocese; engaged much in study; called upon at times to entertain ambassadors and other great dignitaries; and occasionally migrating to his manor house at Halling, where he might have more repose, and possibly purer air.

Towards the latter part of August, 1516, Erasmus was invited to visit his friend and patron at this Palace in Rochester. The learned scholar seemed pleased with his

* At the Rochester Congress, General Thomas courteously allowed our Honorary Secretary and several Members, and myself at a later date, to inspect these remains.

reception, but was not so well satisfied with the situation of the Bishop's residence. His remarks on this latter point were conveyed in a letter to Fisher, written eight years subsequent to this visit;* but due allowance ought, I think, to be made for the writer's naturally querulous disposition. He says he suspects that the Bishop's ill health is mainly attributable to the situation ("ex loco") of his Palace; the sea is near, and the shore muddy; the Bishop's library—his "paradise"†—is surrounded with glass windows ("bibliothecam undique parietibus vitreis"), which let in the air at every chink, and are very injurious to people of weak health. He adds, that if he (Erasmus) were to stay in it three hours he should be sick. A boarded and wainscoted room would be much better than bricks and mortar ("lateres et calx"), which exhale a noxious vapour.

On August 17th, 1516, Erasmus writes, from the Bishop's Palace at Rochester, a letter to his friend Andreas Ammonius, a learned Italian scholar settled in England.‡ In it he says that he had been prevailed upon by Fisher to spend ten days with him, and he would not leave before the end of the week. He hopes to wheedle his friend Urswick out of a *new horse* by sending him a *New Testament*, as the old horse died of drink in Flanders. This *Testament* was the celebrated first complete edition of the Greek Testament, which was edited

* Letter, dated "Basle, prid. non. Sept." [4th Sept.] 1524; in *Erasmii Epistolæ*, folio, Lond., 1642, p. 809. Erasmus, in another interesting letter (p. 1140), addressed to Cardinal Wolsey's physician, about 1518, censures the English style of building, and the uncleanly habits of the people—particularly condemning the use of rushes strewn on the clay floors, and the want of ventilation in the rooms—and yet in spite of this, Erasmus was very partial to England: "It is a fine country (he remarks), the natives are very patriotic, and truly not without reason. I wish I could pass my whole life among the English."

† Baily, in his *Life of the Bishop*, speaks of his library as being the "notablest library in England, two long galleries full; the books were sorted in stalls, and a register of the name of every book at the end of every stall." After his attainder, his effects were seized, and his books filled thirty-two great firs or pipes, besides those that were embezzled away, spoiled, and scattered.

‡ Ammonius was appointed Latin Secretary to Henry VIII., and succeeded Polydore Vergil as sub-collector of the Peter-pence. He died the following year (1517), from the sweating sickness, and so suddenly that he had boasted to Sir Thomas More, a few hours previously, that by moderation and good management he had rendered himself and his family safe from infection.

by Erasmus, accompanied by a Latin version, and a mass of valuable notes and paraphrases. It was dedicated to Pope Leo X. In another letter to Ammonius, written five days later, he says: "My John" ("Joannes meus") "would have received a beating if More [*i.e.*, Sir Thomas More] had not stepped in to save him;" for as soon as More heard that Erasmus was staying at Rochester, he paid him a visit, as if he never expected to see him again. He is much pleased with the handsome horse Ammonius had sent him (Epist. viii. 28; 11 kl. Septembris, 1513, a mistake for 1516). On the 26th Ammonius writes urging Erasmus to stay with him, though all are not like the Bishop of Rochester. It is a new kind of metamorphosis to transform books into horses. Sends compliments to the Bishop of Rochester (Epist. viii. 27; 7 kl. Sextil., 1513, *i.e.*, 1516). On the 31st, Erasmus writes from the Bishop's Palace ("Roffæ, in ædibus Episcopi") a long letter to Dr. Henry Bullock ("Bovillus"), congratulating him on his appointment as Public Preacher at Cambridge. He alludes to the success of his ministry, more especially as he preaches the pure doctrines of Christ without any mixture of human vanity or ostentatious learning. Among other things, he expresses his satisfaction that his New Testament had been received with favour, but he hears that one College at Cambridge had passed a decree prohibiting the introduction of the volume within their fortified walls. They absurdly condemn a book without having read it; or if they read it, it is doubtful whether they would understand it.

Soon afterwards we find the Bishop writing to his friend Erasmus from Rochester, thanking him for his New Testament; and in a subsequent letter, written about June 1517, the Bishop remarks that no one can take offence at the version made by Erasmus; but he (Fisher) finds that in the Epistles of St. Paul the printer has made many blunders and omissions in the Greek text. It must here be noted that the Bishop had learnt Greek of Erasmus, in order to the more complete study of the Holy Scriptures.

Mr. Essell remarks: "Bishop Fisher, in one of his letters to Erasmus, complains of the then dilapidated state of the Palace, for, as he wrote, the rats were coursing through the

skirting-boards of his library; and although some hundred years have passed, the rats still retain possession of the building, and are a source of great annoyance."

On the 4th of July 1527 the proud and imperious Cardinal Wolsey was lodged in the Bishop's Palace here, and he says, in a letter written the following day to King Henry VIII., "I was right lovingly and kindly by him entertained." The Cardinal and Bishop had much conversation here, mainly on the calamities of the Church, the Pope's captivity, and the matter of the divorce from the unhappy Queen, Catherine of Aragon, which Wolsey disclosed to Fisher under an oath of secrecy. Cavendish, Wolsey's gentleman-usher, says, "The Cardinal marched to Rochester, where he was lodged in the bishoppes pallace, and the rest of his traine were lodged in the citty and in Stroud on this side of the bridge." The number of noblemen and gentlemen who accompanied Wolsey in this splendid and important embassy to France was about 100: "My trayne (he says) extendeth me to the nombere of one thousand horses." It is indeed difficult to imagine how this large number of men and horses could find accommodation in the places in which they quartered for the night.

After an attempt to poison Bishop Fisher and his family at his Palace in Lambeth Marsh in 1531, for which crime the perpetrator, a cook, was *boiled to death* in Smithfield, the Bishop, "scared with these attempts to murder him, removed himself and his family to Rochester. Here his Lordship resumed his customary labours of frequent preaching, visiting the sick, and converting the seduced; and for his recreation and diversion he used to go and look on the workmen who were employed in the repairing of Rochester Bridge; the 1st and 3rd pere of which were to be maintained by the Bishop and his tenants. But as if his troubles pursued him whithersoever he went, he had not been long in his diocese, but that residing at his place of Halling, situate on the river Medway, about two or three miles from Rochester, some thieves broke into the house in the night and carried off almost all the Bishop's plate" (Lewis, *Life of Fisher*, ii., 77).

In 1533, at his Rochester Palace, Fisher had several inter-

views with, and gave ear to the utterances of, that epileptic female, "The Holy Maid of Kent," whose pretended vaticinations against Royalty brought such serious trouble upon the venerable prelate.

The poor old Bishop, broken down by illness and infirmities, wrote a piteous letter to Secretary Cromwell, begging to be excused from attending at Lambeth to take the Oath of Succession. It is dated "at Rochestre, 28 January, 1534." In it he says he is suffering from "a grevous cowighe (cough), with a fever as dyvers other heare in this countrye hathe hadde." (*Archæologia*, vol. xxv., 89.) In April he received a more peremptory summons, but before setting out he made his will, and "passing through the city of Rochester, there was a great multitude of people gathered together to take their leave of him, both citizens and countrymen, to whom he gave his blessing, riding by them bare-headed." "Some of the people cried that they should never see him any more: others denounced woes unto them who were the occasion of his troubles, others exclaimed against the wickedness of the times, and all of them lamented and bewailed the danger they were in of losing him."

The sad closing scene in the Bishop's life was, as is well known, enacted on Tower Hill, June 22nd, 1535. Shortly before his own death, Erasmus had to hear and mourn over the terrible news of the execution of two of his best friends, John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, and Sir Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, to the utter disgrace of the brutalized and remorseless monarch.

In the Charter of Foundation of the Dean and Chapter by Henry VIII., dated June 20th, 1542, after reciting certain royal property reserved by the King, "that large messuage called The Bishop's Palace was assigned to Nicolas Heath, the Bishop, and to his successors."

In 1606 King James I. accompanied his brother-in-law, Christian IV., King of Denmark, to Rochester, and was lodged at the Bishop's Palace. The house is shewn in Speed's Map of 1610, an enlarged copy of which I have the pleasure of sending to the temporary Museum.

In 1635 three military tourists from Norwich visited

Rochester, and viewed the Palace and Deanery, "though both little, yet both handsome and lively." In the former they saw "that which is not usuall in such a place—the Armory, which was taken away from a Lord [Forster] not farre remote from that city, in a little island thereby, by the L^d Bishop of this diocesse, upon a speciall commaund from our late Sovereigne [James I.], for some speciall reasons, and there kept."

In 1647 the Palace is thus described in the return made by the Commissioners appointed by the Long Parliament.

	£	s.	d.
1. The scite of the Palace, containing one great messuage called the Palace, where the Bishop's Court is held, estimated 12 pchs.....	4	0	0
2. Four rooms in the tenure of Bathe.....	1	6	8
3. A gallery divided into 2 rooms and 4 chambers.....	1	6	8
4. The ward, a prison, wash-house, kitchen, three rooms, one orchard being a rood of ground, and one garden of ten poles, John Walter, steward, with the office of bailiff and bedle to all the manors except Bromley, and the keeping of the gaol granted by patent for life	6	0	0
	£12		13 4

Pursuant to an Ordinance of the Parliament passed in the same year for the sale of Ecclesiastical Revenues, the Bishop of Rochester's Palace was sold on Sept. 27th, 1649, to Charles Bowles and Nathaniel Andrews for £556 13s. 4d. (*Hist. and Antiq. of Rochester Cathedral*, 1717, p. 120.) It is probable, therefore, that soon after this date the Palace was altered and adapted to modern requirements, and the adjoining houses were erected.

The existing modern "Palace" in St. Margaret's Street is now the property and residence of the Rev. Robert Whiston, a great benefactor to the Cathedral Grammar School, to whom it was sold by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. It has often been mistaken for the ancient Episcopal mansion of Bishop Fisher, and it was engraved as such in the *Pictorial Guide to Rochester*, 1846. This house, as Mr. Whiston has kindly informed me, was, in 1674, bequeathed

by Francis Head, Esq., to his wife, and after her death, “*in case the Church of England does continue so governed by Bishops of the True Protestant Faith*, to be settled on the Lord Bishop of Rochester and his successors, for the maintenance of hospitality near the Cathedral Church of Rochester, and for an invitation to his Lordship and his successors to *preach once in every year* in the parish church of St. Margaret’s, and one other time every year in the parish church of St. Nicholas within the City of Rochester—not so much in remembrance of me, a poor and unworthy benefactor to the See of Rochester, as for an incitement to others who are more able to be more ready to do good to the present Church of England, and to those that belong thereto.” The Bishops of Rochester, however, do not seem to have responded to the kind and considerate invitation of Mr. Head, but have been subjected to perhaps more transmigrations than any others of their brethren—“like a vagrant passed from parish to parish”—as Bishop Zachary Pearce wrote in 1770 to his friend Dr. Ducarel.* They have occupied palaces or manor houses at different times at Rochester, Trottescliffe, Halling, Lambeth Marsh (“Carlisle House”), Rochester House in Southwark, Bromley, Chiswick, Danbury in Essex, and finally Selsdon in Surrey.

The Rochester records shew that there was, for a few years, a “King’s Palace” as well as a “Bishop’s Palace” within the monastic precincts. In the Charter of Foundation (1542) divers buildings and lands were reserved to the King’s use: in this the “King’s Chamber,” and the “King’s Chapel,” with a garden adjoining, are mentioned, but these royal possessions were shortly afterwards assigned to the Dean and Chapter. In the *History of Rochester*, 1772, p. 97, it is stated that “the King’s Palace appears to have been near the south wall of the Dean’s garden; the remnants of pillars and foundations lately discovered shew that considerable buildings have formerly occupied this part of the precincts; the walls, if not the buildings of the Palace, seem to have extended into the old ruins mentioned in the leases of the

* See Nichols’ *Literary Anecdotes*, viii., 428.

houses facing the east end of Minor Canon Row." And at p. 88 it is said: "Part of what is now the Dean's garden is taken out of the King's orchard."

Among the Rawlinson MSS. in the Bodleian Library are the Pay-books of J. Nedham, Clerk and Surveyor-General of Works to Henry VIII., for mason's and carpenter's work, etc., done at the King's Manor of Rochester, from Oct. 22nd to Dec. 24th, 1542; with portions of two other similar books. It would seem probable that these payments have reference to the alterations and reconstruction of the royal, and it may be also some of the monastic, buildings, in order to suit the requirements of the new establishment, mention being made in the MS. of "Pages' chambers," "cloisters," "clerestory," etc., and it is not unlikely that portions of the King's Palace might have been used or adapted for the residence of the newly-appointed Dean, Walter Phillips.

It was in this King's Palace, doubtless, that King Henry VIII. had his first interview with Lady Anne of Cleves, his fourth wife, a Queen of six months' duration! What follows is a very circumstantial account, written by Charles Wriothesley, Windsor Herald, in his *Chronicle of England*, from 1485 to 1559 (Camden Society, 1875), and which differs materially from the commonly received narratives.*

The Moundaie following (Dec. 29th 1539-40) she (the Ladie Anne) rode to Canterburie, wheare she was honorablie receaved by the Archbishopp and other great men, and lodged at the Kinges pallace at Sainct Awstons, and there highlie feasted; on Twesdaie she came to Sittingborne; on Newe Yeares eaven the Duke of Norfolke, with other Knightes and the Barons of the Exchequer receaved her Grace on the Heath, tow miles beyond Rochester, and so brought her to the Abbay of Rochester, where she taried that night and Newe Yeares daie; and at Newe Yeares daie at afternounge the Kinges Grace, with five of his Privie Chamber, being disguysed with clookes of marble, with hoodes, that they should not be knowen, came privelie to Rochester, and so went upp into the chamber where the said Ladie Anne looked out at a wyndowe to see the bull beating [baiting] that was theat tyme in the court, and sodenlie he embraced her and kissed, and shewed her a token

* See *Visits to Rochester, etc.*, in *Archæologia Cantiana*, Vol. VI.

that the King had sent her for her Newe Yeares gift; and she being abashed, not knowing who it was, thanked him, and so he commoned with her; but she regarded him little, but alwaies looked out of the wyndow on the bull beatinge; and when the King perceived she regarded his coming so little, he departed into [an] other chamber, and put of [off] his cloke, and came in againe in a cote of purple velvett; and when the lordes and knightes did see his Grace, they did him reverence; and then she, perceiving the lordes doing their dewties, humbled her Grace lowlie to the Kinges Majestie, and his Grace saluted her againe, and so talked together lovinglie, and after tooke her by the hand and leed her into another chamber, where they solaced their graces that night and till Fridaie at afternounge; and then his Grace tooke his leave and departed thence to Gravesend, etc., etc.

Orders were issued to the Yeoman of the Wardrobe of Beds, and to his "Grome," and also a "Smythe," to repair to Dartford and Rochester, and to set up "twoo bedds of the Kingis, one at Dartford, and an other at Rochestre, and for making redy there for the Quenes grace;" for which the Yeoman was paid ijs "the dey," the "grome" xx^d, and the "smythe" xij^d. (Nicolas, *Privy Purse Expenses of Henry VIII.*)