

THE AGE OF SAINT MILDRED'S CHURCH,
CANTERBURY.

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IN Battely's edition of *Somner's Antiquities of Canterbury*, published in 1703, on page 68 of the Appendix, there appears a charter with the caption "The Charter of Coenulph King of Mercia, and Cuthred King of Kent, to the Abbess and Nuns of Liming". This charter is mentioned in the List of Donations in Somner's original work, on page 212, in the following words: "Anno Domini Dccciiii. Cenulfus Rex & Rex Cuthredus dederunt ecclesiae de Liminge, ubi jacet corpus beatae Eadburgae sex mansuras in civitate Doroberniae, rogatu Athelardi Archiep." and on page 325 he quotes the charter with the following preface:

"A third reason I have, (for the disappearance of pre-Norman churches) and I take it from a Deed or Charter of *Coenulf* King of Mercia, and *Cuthred* his brother, King of Kent, made to the Abbess and her Nonnes of *Liminge*, and dated *Anno Domini* 804, granting them a certaine parcell of Land in our City, appertaining (saith the Charter or *Land-boc*) to a Church situate in the West part of the same, built in honour of Saint *Mary*. Now no such Church is, or since the Conquest (that I ever found) was standing in that part of our City. Whence I inferre, that the face and condition of our City hath suffered an utter change since those dayes; and because we read that the *Danes* made Havocke both of people and place in King *Etheldreds* dayes, slaying the most part of the one, and burning and spoiling all the other (not sparing the *Cathedrall* itselfe) I thinke we may justly charge upon that all-wasting deluge the utter subversion of such Churches as then were in our City, and consequently may not imagin any of our modern Churches (except as is before excepted) so ancient as to preced, but contrariwise to succeed and follow the same. The Deed or Charter, because it may give content to some sort of Readers, and

indeed historically glance at the misery that our Countrey suffered by the frequent invasion of the *Danes*, as I conceive of it from the end for which this land was given by it to the *Nonnes*, being (Ad necessitatis refugium) I here subjoyne."

For some reason which is not very clear neither Kemble (*Cod. Dipl.*, 188) nor Birch (*Cart. Sax.*, 317) quote the original authority of Somner himself but rely upon Battely. There are however no variations of any moment in the charter as published by these authorities, but Somner's comments are important as showing that he took his copy direct from an original charter and not from a copy in some Canterbury Register. A somewhat free translation is published by Jenkins in his *Chartulary of the Monastery of Lyminge*, page 31, and he also quotes from Leland (*Collect.* II., Edn. Hearne), in his *History of the Basilical and Conventual Church of St. Mary and St. Aeadburh in Lyminge*, a strange tale which may have taken date from this charter—"Formerly, the hostile cruelty of the Pagans laid waste almost all Kent, except the place of this consecrated virgin (Mildretha), which God for the sake of his spouse preserved from all the rage of the adversary—until the clergy of the church of Liminge, having formed themselves into a body, sallied forth, offering themselves willingly to the Pagans and desiring to do manfully, as the result proved, for meeting the enemy with a strong band they slew 1,240 of them, but themselves all perished save the priest of the same place." As Jenkins remarks "This incredible story may have a limited foundation of truth" but we can hardly accept it as more than a convenient illustration of the terror which reigned in the year 804 which may have given cause for a "refugium" for the nuns in Canterbury. The charter itself may be translated as follows :

"The Lord God Almighty disposing and governing.

"I, Coenulph, King of the Mercians, and Cuthred, my brother, King of the men of Kent, in the year of Our Lord's incarnation 804, have granted to the venerable abess Seletthyth and her convent at the church of the Holy Mary ever-Virgin which is situated in the place called Lyminge

(‘Limming’), where the body of the blessed Eadburg rests, some portion of land in the city of Canterbury (‘Dorobernia’) for use as a refuge; that is, six acres pertaining to the church which stands in honour of Blessed Mary in the west part of the city whose boundaries thus are seen to encircle it: on the east the river Stour (‘Stur’), on the west and south the city wall, from the site of the church it extends about fifteen rods. If anyone shall be tempted to infringe or diminish this our gift, let him know that he must answer for it in the day of judgement, unless he have first made amendment to God and man with suitable compensation. And these are the names of the witnesses which are written below:

- I Coenulf King of the Mercians confirm this my gift with the sign of the cross of Christ.
- I Cuthred King of Kent by the sign of the cross confirm.
- I Aethelheard, by the grace of God archbishop, have consented and subscribed.
- I Aldulf, bishop, have consented and subscribed.
- I Daeneberht, bishop, have consented and subscribed.”

The list of witnesses is curiously short but it may assist us to discover something of the circumstances of the giving of this charter. Aldulf was bishop of Lichfield and Daeneberht bishop of Worcester and they would scarcely have been in attendance on the two kings except at some great Council. There is another charter (B. 316—concerning Lenham) which is attested by no bishops except these two and which is safely dated to 804, although the witness list is obviously corrupt in some particulars. The two charters no doubt passed upon the same occasion. But neither of them mentions the place at which the Council was held. Fortunately, we have a third charter, B. 313, which is also dated 804, and which tells us that the Council of that year was held at Aclea (Oakleigh in Higham). It gives a very full list of those present, including those mentioned by Somner together with Bishops Werenberht of Leicester, Eadwulf of Lindsey, Wulfheard of Hereford, and the Dukes Heahbeorht, Beornoth, Ciolward, Cynehelm (the four last attest the Lenham charter), Wigga, Wigheard, Byrnweald and Aldred. There can be little doubt that all

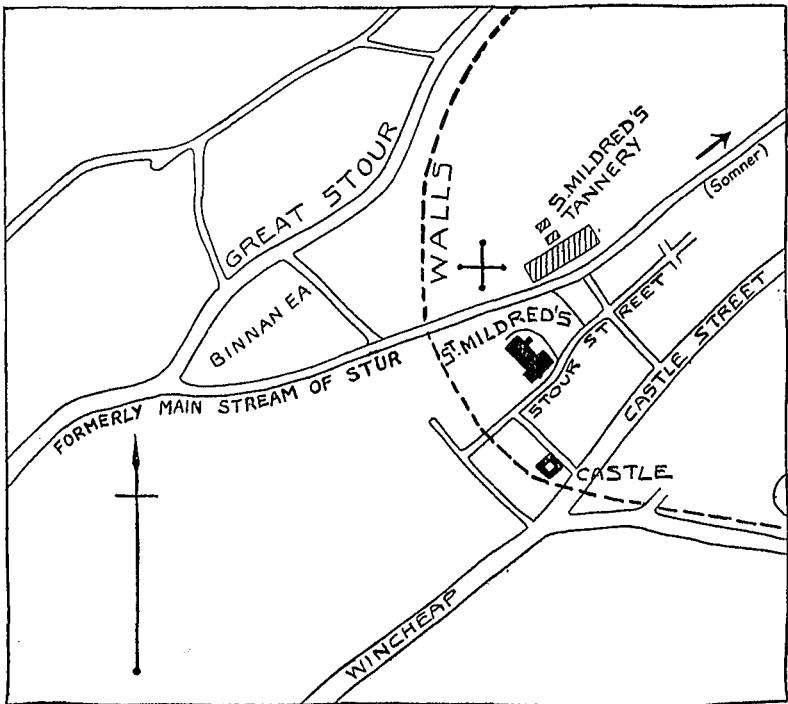
of these were present at Oakleigh when Somner's charter was brought before the Council.

It is perhaps remarkable that Mercian-Kentish Councils were rather frequent at this time. It is possible that these may have been, to no small extent, concerned with measures for meeting the threats of Danish inroads, and that this charter tells us of one of the expedients adopted. The Danes did not, in fact (so far as we have any records) come south about this time although they were busy in the North and in Ireland, but it is hardly likely that a refuge should be needed from any other danger.

Of the site of this refuge there can be no doubt. There is only one spot in the city which has the Stour on the east and the city wall on the south west. This lies across a small branch of the Stour immediately north of Saint Mildred's Church, and is shown on the attached map. It is true that a branch of the river (a branch which Somner assures us was once the main stream) intervenes between the church and the refuge and that the charter does not specify this fact but only says that the refuge extends about fifteen rods from the site of the church. It is also true that the city wall is rather west than south-west, as the charter requires, but neither of these anomalies is of a type at all unusual in Saxon charters. The site of the refuge is in no way open to doubt. It is now, apparently, part of the grounds of the St. Mildred's Tannery.

This brings us to a further point of no small interest. The charter specifies a church in the position occupied by that now dedicated to St. Mildred but says that it was a church in honour of the Blessed Mary. How shall we explain this? It is scarcely probable that Somner made any mistake in copying the charter. He was a skilled and careful historian and only introduces the full charter in order to illustrate how St. Mary's Church had, as he supposed, vanished owing to the depredations of the Danes. We may be reasonably sure that it did not totally vanish because St. Mildred's contains undoubted Saxon work. This takes the form of almost megalithic long-and-short work which experts usually date "about the tenth century" but which, since we have

scarcely any standard for comparison, may as easily be ninth century or even earlier. Indeed, one of the most valuable features of this charter is that it gives us good reason to suppose that this long-and-short work can be dated as not later than the year 804. It is not, of course, absolutely impossible that the church of St. Mary which stood here in 804 was demolished and rebuilt in honour of St. Mildred within the period 804 to the beginning of the tenth century.



But this is scarcely a period during which we should expect to find much church building activity, or one during which the complete demolition of an existing church could be expected. It might be argued that the Danes may have done this for they certainly attacked Canterbury in 839, 851, and possibly in other years about the middle of the century. But the Danes would scarcely waste time on total demolition where so little was to be gained by it.

It would be quite easy to propound various other ingenious hypotheses but the simplest reading of the facts before us seems to be that we still have part of the church of St. Mary as it stood in 804 but that the dedication has been altered. Such alterations were not unusual nor contrary to prevailing sentiment. The nunnery church of St. Mildred in Thanet was first dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul, as was that of Saint Augustine. One would expect an alteration of dedication to the name of St. Mildred to follow upon the acquisition of a church by nuns of St. Mildred in Thanet. Perhaps they also had a refuge here but history is silent about this particular instance unless we may take the actual fact of the existing dedication to imply a former ownership. It is somewhat supported by the fact that this church belonged to St. Augustine's to which all that the nuns had formerly possessed was given about 1027.

Nor does history tell us what use the convent of Lyminge made of their refuge. The threat of Danish attacks did not apparently materialize until after 855, for we have charters to Lyminge in 805/10 (B. 330), 838 (B. 419, 420), 844 (B. 446) and 855 (B. 467), and even then corporate life cannot have suffered more than a temporary discontinuance for we have also a charter of 964 (B. 1126) and it was not until the following year that Archbishop Dunstan is said to have suppressed this monastery. It is true that our records on the latter point are not as authoritative as might be wished but we may admit the possibility that the need of a refuge was never such as to call for a general flight to Canterbury which, in fact, seems to have been a more dangerous spot than Lyminge.

There is a charter of the year 810 which is in some ways a companion to that with which we have been dealing. This charter also we owe to Somner although there is an inferior précis of it at Lambeth (*MS.* 1212, p. 404). It seems almost as if Canterbury's great historian had a special affection for the land between the two streams of the Stour, variously called Binnan ea, Binnewyth and Bingley's Island. He continually refers to it. The charter of 810 (B. 344, 345) is a grant by King Coenwulf of Mercia to Archbishop Wlfred

and the land granted is described as "in loco qui dicitur binnan ea circiter xxx jugera inter duos rivos gremiales fluminis quod dicitur Stur". The word "gremiales" is unusual and I cannot translate it but the sense of the rest of the passage is clear—"in a place which is called Binnanea, about 30 acres, between two streams of the river which is called Stour". If anyone has doubted that the stream which bordered the Lyminge "refugium" on the east was properly called the Stour, here is sufficient answer. The name was evidently applicable to either branch. It is also clear, as it is from much that Somner has to say, that what is now called Bingley's Island is only a small part of the ancient Binnan ea. It cannot be more than five or six acres in extent whereas King Coenulf granted thirty acres to Christ Church, sufficient perhaps to extend half way to the main road through the city. Did this include the site of the refuge? We cannot say, but Christ Church certainly owned much of this island before the Friars had it and it may be that there are still in existence some old evidences which might suggest exactly where these thirty acres were situate.

CONCLUSION.

That there is sufficient *prima facie* evidence, in Saxon charters of 804 and 814, for the view that the church of St. Mildred in Canterbury was formerly dedicated to St. Mary and that the Saxon long-and-short work now to be seen there was erected before the year 804.*

* There are some megalithic stones (Roman) at the base of the N.E. angle of the chancel of St. Mary's in the Castle at Dover.—EDITOR.