

ST. HILDEFERTH.

LAMBARDE in his "Description and Hystorie of the Shyre of Kent," says,—“The Church at Swanscombe was much haunted in times past, for Saint Hildeferthe’s helpe (a Bishop, by conjecture of his picture yet standing in the upper window of the South Ile, although his name is not read in all the Catalogue of the Saxons) to whome such as were distracted ranne for restitution of their wits, as thicke as men were wont to saile to Anticyra for Heleborus.” Hasted, more than two centuries later, repeats the above story. “This church,” he says, “in former times was much resorted to by a company of pilgrims, who came hither for St. Hildeferth’s help, who by his picture, which was in the upper window of the south side, appears to have been a bishop, to whom such as were distracted came to be cured of their insanity.” The little window alluded to is doubtless the small Decorated window still existing at the east end of the south aisle, but without the picture. If now by chance the name of the miracle-working Bishop is mentioned in connection with Swanscombe church, he is generally described as the unknown Saxon Bishop; so steeped in mystery was he whose miraculous cures of insanity at Swanscombe have rendered his name famous and familiar to us. The fact of the collegiate church of Gourney being dedicated to St. Hildevert, induced me to place myself in communication with the authorities there, and thanks to the great kindness and courtesy of Père Melicieux, Honorary Canon of Rouen, I have been able to obtain some particulars of the life and history of St. Hildevert, or Hildeferth. He was born A.D. 617, and early embraced a religious life, and in 672, on the death of Bishop Faro, was elected to the vacant see of Meaux in France; this dignity he held but for eight years, the good man dying in 680. During the sixty-three years of his life he seems to have done much for

the welfare of his countrymen; possessing great riches he appears to have devoted his wealth to the erection of churches. It is not until three centuries had rolled by, that we hear of any miracle being wrought; the really good and beneficent work done by the Bishop during his lifetime was fast fading from the minds of the people, the churches built by him were, through the belief in the impending destruction of the world, allowed to fall into decay; and as the thousandth year rapidly approached without bringing with it the long dreaded and terrible portents of the dissolution of all things, something was needed to stir the flagging zeal of the people and prepare them for the necessary work of church restoration and building, and what in those days so natural as to endue the bones of the church-building Bishop with supernatural powers. The offerings made in grateful recognition of restoration from disease doubtless soon enabled the authorities of the church of Vigneley, wherein the body of the Bishop rested, to restore and make it worthy of its pious founder the good Bishop Hildeferth. That object effected, we find the remains removed from Vigneley to Meaux, where the same satisfactory result being attained, we next find the body carried to Beauvais,

“ His body’s resting place of old,
How oft their patron changed, they told,”

and then the good priests, custodians of so great a treasure, deemed it not right to confine its benefits to a limited neighbourhood; so selecting a number of religious and faithful men, they entrusted to them to carry throughout the length and breadth of the land, for the benefit of mankind and their Church, these healing relics. They in the course of their peregrinations arrived at Gourney, where the great man, or lord of the place, known as Hugo the First, refusing to recognize the sanctity of the remains, ruthlessly caused a great fire to be made, and to the horror of those in charge of it, the body of St. Hilderferth was by his order thrown into the midst of the flames, but to one capable of curing “the mind diseased” such treatment was as nothing, the flames refused to consume the bones, and as a matter of course that hardened and most unbelieving sinner, the Count Hugo, was converted, and from the inveterate foe

became the humble follower, and on the spot where the indignity was offered, he built and dedicated to St. Hildeferth the large and beautiful church which still bears his name, and is now the Collegiate Church of Gourney, in Normandy. Here the bones were enshrined, and when it was thought advisable to make further progress no power could move them, "the Saint remained immovable," in this instance conforming to the general rule, for we hear the same of a contemporary, St. Cuthbert. But though our Saint refused to permit his bones *en masse* to be removed from Gourney, he did not object to the abstraction of fragments, and it was to this gracious forbearance that Swanscombe became indebted for her ancient miracles. About this time the conquest of England by the Normans was effected, and as is well known, Swanscombe was included in the grants made by William to his powerful half-brother the Bishop Odo. Now would not the possession of a miracle-working relic of St. Hildeferth gratify the inhabitants, and tend to elevate the donor of so great a gift in the eyes of the people of the eleventh century? For a man like Odo, possessed of vast territory, and independent of his ecclesiastical office, the half-brother of a mighty king holding enormous church patronage, to ask was to have; therefore it is probable that, through his agency, may have been deposited in Swanscombe Church some small relic of that Norman Bishop whose fame had already been made known to the English, and if so, long ere Canterbury possessed its famous shrine, even before St. Thomas of that city was added to the calendar, pilgrimages may have been made to the shrine of "St. Hildeferth of fair memorie" here at Swanscombe; and when in later days the scene of the death of the English Bishop became in the eyes of churchmen a holy place, to die without seeing which was accounted sin, the old shrine of the maniacuring Norman Bishop at Swanscombe was not, we may be sure, forgotten. It lay near the highway; two duties could be performed, or as we now say, "two birds could be killed with one stone." The native pilgrim to the shrine of St. Thomas of Canterbury (and it cannot be doubted but that the English were most anxious to shew by their attendance at his altar their appreciation of his opposition to the Norman ruler) could conform to the usage of the period, by visiting the shrine of

the Norman healing bishop, while the alien visiting the tomb of the "Church's blissful martyr" would naturally turn his steps aside to lay his offering, small though it might be, before the casket containing the fragment of his canonized countryman's body. But not to Swanscombe alone was granted the possession of so valuable a relic, for the old rolls existing at Gourney tell us that to Hubert, Archbishop of Canterbury (*circa* 1202) was given a fragment; also that a few years later the reliquary at Gourney was again opened, for the purpose of giving a small bone of the Saint's hand to the Grand Duchess of Longueville; and again in 1373, when the head was removed and placed in a casket of pure gold, presented for that purpose by Blanche, widow of Philip de Valois, King of France; and so, though long forgotten here in England, St. Hildeferth continued to be revered in France till the Revolution of 1789 denied to him that sanctity which so many centuries had respected. The Republican authorities stripped the gold and silver from off the cases enclosing the remains, and so having obtained all that they considered of importance left the church, when, in order to save the relics from further profanation, one of the priests attached to the edifice opened the case in the presence, as we are told, of many witnesses, and removed the bones, rolls of parchment, and remnants of rich robes therein contained; all of which he enveloped in a linen cloth, and then confided the precious burden to the ground of a small cemetery reserved for the Canons of Gourney. A certain acute lawyer in the town, fearing the earth might prove as injurious to the relics as even Republicans, caused them to be exhumed, and reverently guarded them in his own house, until the end of the year 1802, "when upon the re-establishment of order" he made known his secret, and the Archbishop appointed a commission of priests, comprising the clergy of St. Hildeferth, to examine into the matter. They were able to verify that the relics so preserved were identically the same that had for so many centuries been venerated, the bones were therefore placed in a new reliquary, and on the 22nd of May, 1803, with great pomp and ceremony replaced in their original position in the church of St. Hildevert, or Hildeferth, at Gourney, where they still remain.

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