

THE MEISTER HOMERS, CANTERBURY.

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THIS name is the well-known title of a mediæval house, at the east end of the precincts of Christchurch, Canterbury, now the residence of one of the Canons of the Cathedral. All the writers who have described the Cathedral and its surroundings, have felt themselves compelled to meddle with the etymology of this singular name, and all have failed to trace it to even a probable source. One, noticing the "*Elms* that grew thereby," has fancied a similarity of sound between *Meister Homers* and *Ormeaux*. Another, discarding *Homers* has substituted *Honours*, believing that *Meister Honours* would be a likely name for the lodgings in which entertainment was given to the most distinguished visitors to the Priory. The riddle now appears to be solved by means of four documents, in the *Chartæ Antiquæ Cantuar.*, which, hitherto, have escaped notice.

The first (W. 186) is a receipt given by the Prior, acknowledging that he has received some title deeds for safe custody:—

"Omnibus X'pi fidelibus &c. Rogerus de Sc^o Alphago, Prior Ecclesie X'pi Cantuar. &c. salutem in Domino. Nouerit universitas vestra nos respexisse et recepisse cartam Theobaldi de Huelles, per quam infeodauit *Magistrum Omerum* de Cantuaria, cujus tenor est talis:

"Sciant presentes et futuri quod Ego Theobaldus de Helles dedi concessi et hac presenti carta confirmaui Magistro Omero de Cantuaria totam terram quam habui in parochia de Esse &c. &c. reddendo inde annuatim michi et heredibus meis ipse et heredes sui sive assignati unum par cyrotecarum precii unius denarii. Actum Anno domini MCC sexagesimo primo."

“Quam quidem cartam restituemus dicto *Magistro Omero* vel heredibus suis quancocunque voluerit eam habere et sibi viderit expedire. In cujus rei testimonium sigillum nostrum presentibus duximus apponendum. Dat. Anno D'ni MCC sexagesimo primo mense Marcii.”

From this it is clear that in the middle of the thirteenth century there was a Master (*Meister*) Omer (*Homer*) living in Canterbury; a man owning landed property, and therefore possessing influence; a man, too, of some social standing, being on friendly terms with my Lord Prior of Christ Church. In Dart's *Canterbury Cathedral* (fol. 194) there is a statement, which, although not verified by a reference to any authority, seems to contain some particle of truth. It is that Stephen de Vincenna, a foreign, and probably a non-resident Archdeacon of Canterbury, “in 1250 preferred Roger de Elham, and afterwards Master Omer, to the same place.” This statement, although its exact meaning is not quite evident, seems to imply that the non-resident Archdeacon exercised his jurisdiction by means of a resident Vice-Archdeacon, and that Master Omer once filled the office. In this case he must have been a dignified secular priest, and therefore, as was usual, designated by the title of *Magister*, a title which has invariably accompanied his name for six hundred years. Monks and the Regular clergy were distinguished by the designation “*Dom.*” (*Dominus.*)

The argument is carried on another step by an entry in one of the Monastic registers, compiled about the year 1307, by Prior Henry of Elstry.

Reg. I. (olim G. 9) fo. 449. “Certa loca ubi littere et instrumenta diversa reponuntur :

In studio superiori Prioris in dormitorio sunt hec :

¶ Hanapar cum instrumentis paucis de intronizacione Archiepiscoporum et aliis.

¶ Ligamen A cum bullis diversorum.

¶ Ligamen B cum copiis diversorum.

¶ Caphinus quadratus.

In desca Prioris in studio inferiori :—

¶ In scrinio depicto.

¶ In secretario Prioris.

¶ In sacco lineo.

Pixides in cista longa nova in *Camera Capellani*.

In desca in studio Dom. R. Prioris inferiori in dormitorio.

Pixides in desca nostra in *Camera plumbata*.

In desca Prioris in CAMERA MAGISTRI HOMERII.

Master Homer, then, lived within the Precincts of Christ Church. He had a *camera* in which the Prior kept his desk, containing valuable papers. Possibly the *camera* was only one room, in his *house*, answering to his "Office;" for it is clear that a secular person would not have rooms assigned to him in the Monastery, if he were not officially connected with the management of the business of the Prior and Chapter. The writer feels sure that he has met with a deed, in which Master Homer is represented as acting as Attorney for the Convent, and receiving, in their name, seisin of lands, but the reference has escaped him, and the deed, like an unstamped agreement in the present day, cannot be propounded as evidence.

The next document which relates to this old mansion is the will of John de Bokyngham, once Bishop of Lincoln, who was translated by the Pope to the comparatively poor See of Lichfield. Bishop Buckingham, disgusted with what he considered his degradation, retired from the world, apparently indulging himself in Monastic seclusion, without hampering himself with the Monastic habit. The foot of his will reads thus:—

W. 220. "Datum sub sigillo meo infra Prioratum Ecclesie Cantuariensis in quodam manso Wlgariter *Meister Omers* nuncupato nono die Mensis Februarii Anno Domini Millesimo ccc^{mo} nonagesimo octavo."

Here, then, is the *camera* grown into a *mansum*, in which the retired Bishop makes his will just before his death. The *mansum* was still, a hundred and forty years after its first appearance in the *Chartæ Antiquæ*, known as "Master Homer's" (sc. *Mansum Magistri Homeri*, a genitive singular, and not a plural).

The situation and extent of the premises are clearly shewn in the last of this set of documents.

Z. 169. "*Indentura inter nos et Ducem Somersetie pro quodam manso uocato Mastryr Homerys.*"

Universis X'pi fidelibus &c. Thomas permissione diuina Prior Ecclesie X'pi Cantuar. et ejusden loci Conuentus salutem in omnium Salvatore. Quia magnifice excellencie princeps Dominus Edmundus Dux Somersetie ac Constabularius Anglie Ecclesie nostre Cantuariensi et nobis immensas sue Dominacionis largiciones, tam operis quam sermonis efficacia, a diu impendit ac in dies impendere non desistit. Hinc est quod nos, de communi Capituli nostri consensu prout et assensu, concessimus et dimisimus eidem nobilissimo Domino Duci, ob complacenciam Dominacionis sue, quoddam mansum infra precinctum nostrum uocatum antiquitus *Maister Homers*, a modernis *Le Cardynallysplace* uulgariter nuncupatum. Gardino tamen Celerarii cum Columbario ad officium Celerarii ab antiquo pertinentibus, una-cum uia ducente ab orientali parte Cemeterii Ecclesie nostre per posticum et pontem uersus portam Monasterii Sci. Augustini, et per gardinum ad predictum Columbarium, cum libero ingressu et egressu nobis et successoribus nostris semper saluis exceptis et reservatis. Habendum et tenendum mansum predictum, exceptis pre-exceptionis, ipsi Domino Duci ad terminum uite sue, sine aliquo nobis inde reddendo (preter quod ipse dictus Graciosus Dux ex mera fraternitate et liberalitate sua concessit) predictum mansum sufficienter reparare, et bono statu manuteneri suis sumptibus et expensis, durante termino uite sue predicto. Etiam bene licebit nobis et successoribus nostris dictum mansum post decessum dicti Domini Ducis libere ingredi, et in pristino statu pacifice possidere, sine exclamacione seu contradiccione alicujus heredum executorum sive assignatorum Domini Ducis predicti; hac concessione sive dimissione in aliquo non obstante. In cujus rei testimonium uni parti hujus scripti indentati penes dictum Dominum Ducem remanenti sigillum nostrum commune est appensum, alteri uero parti penes nos prefatos Priorem et Capitulum remanenti sigillum predicti Domini Ducis est appensum. Dat. Cantuarie in domo nostra Capitulari quinto-decimo die Mensis Aprilis Anno Regni Regis Henrici Sexti post conquestum tricesimo primo.

Tradition has assigned the name of *The Meister Homer's* to the house now occupied by the Rev. Canon Rawlinson,

and, as usually happens with *real* tradition, the oral evidence handed down from one generation to another has testified to the truth. The house stands just as it did when the Duke put it into the "bonus status" of the lease. The Great Hall, masked however by intruded ceilings and floors, still runs almost from end to end of the building, whilst the road, leading "per posticum et pontem," toward St. Augustine's, and the piece of Cellarer's garden, are still excepted from, but contiguous to, the premises, as they were four hundred years ago.

Did Somerset ever take advantage of his bargain? If he did, what motive was strong enough to cause him to leave the ease and dignity of a grand home in the Canterbury precincts, for the purpose of getting knocked on the head at the first battle of St. Alban's?

The House is again mentioned in 1469 when, the wave of Civil War threatening the safety of the City of Canterbury, it was judged expedient to wall-up the passage through the fortifications at Queningate. This gate stood within the precincts of the Monastery, but the work was done at the cost of the citizens; the Convent, apparently, furnishing the necessary materials from their surplus store collected for the Duke of Somerset's repairs of the *Mansum*.

The record is contained in the Account Book of the "Chamberlain of Canterbury," and stands thus:—

"Pro carriagio ix magnorum lapidum a quodam loco vocato Maist. Omers usque Quenyngate—x^d ob."

More than once again Master Omer appears, *in propria personâ*, in the Archives of the Priory.

About A.D. 1250, Reginald Tercius, son of Reginald Secundus, son of Reginald de Cornhelle, by a deed of gift added to the endowment of the Shrine of St. Thomas; and to this deed Master Omer, as an official of the Convent, was a witness. (Reg. B. 276.)

On the morrow of St. Luke in A.D. 1257, the Prior sued John de Sandwich, the Rector of St. Mary Aldermary Church, for arrears of a pension due to the Convent as patron of that church. The cause was heard at Canterbury,

and a compromise was effected, the attestation of the record being as follows :—

“In cujus rei testimonium presenti scripto Mag. Walter de Acrise (*the official of the Abp.'s Court*) sigillum suum, Mag. Omerus sigillum officialitatis Archidiaconi Cantuar, et predictus Johannes (*the Defendant*) sigillum suum apposuerunt.”

From this, it is clear that Master Omer filled the office of Official of the Archdeacon, and was therefore a dignified practitioner of Civil Law. (*Reg. A. 360.*)

A rental, of the 13th century, mentions a rent due to Master Omer in All Saints' parish (*Reg. A. 448*), and also a rent for which he was responsible to Christ Church from the tenement of Daubeney the Jew. (*Reg. A. 447.*)

In each yearly account of the Treasurer of Christ Church, a paragraph is set out under the title “Partes Pensionum,” in which are entered the *good service pensions* awarded by the Chapter. The name of Master Omer first appears in the year 1249, when, apparently as junior standing counsel, he received a salary of forty shillings; and it regularly recurs, getting year by year nearer to the top of the list, until A.D. 1280, by which time Omer's stipend had been raised to a hundred shillings, equalling that of “Magister Thomas medicus noster.” Among those who accompany Master Omer in the lists, are :—

Magister Hugh de Mortuo Mari, Official, Chancellor, Vicar-General, and, in 1271, Archdeacon of Canterbury; Magister Will. de la Corner; Magister H. de Clervaus; Magister Jordanus, and Magister Philippus or Thomas, whichever was the Medicus or Phisicus of the Monastery for the time being; John de Eylwarton, Seneschal of Christ Church; Simon Paable, Citizen of Canterbury; John de Whytsand, probably the Bailiff or Toll Collector to the Counts of Boulogne; Will. de Breton; Ric. de Rowelle; and lastly, three ladies: Domina Celestina, Alicia de Ripple, and Christina de Mongeham.