

## EARLY MERTON

**T**HE earliest history of Merton lies written not indistinctly across our maps in the names of the place with its hills and waters and those of the villages which ring it round—Merton, Wandle, Beverley, Blagdon, West Barnes, Cannon Hill, the Abbey, with Morden, Wimbledon, Beddington, Mitcham, and Tooting. We may omit, for the moment, the two ecclesiastical elements which have here intruded and follow the main current of secular history. The village, like its neighbours, is English; no British element has survived to witness to a yet earlier stage in the history of our island and parish, for the names of streams and hills which so often by their Celtic or pre-Celtic forms remind us of an earlier and conquered race, are in this case pure English—Wandle, Beverley or Beavers' Meadow, Blagdon, or Black Down. This may mean one of two things: either the English conquest was so thorough, as, indeed, in south-east Britain it

often was, that the earlier race has left no token whatsoever of its presence, or the Britons had never occupied this district at all. Probably the latter is the correct theory; for it was on the uplands with their light, easily turned soil and comparative absence of forest growth that early man first placed his habitation, leaving the heavy, wooded, river valleys for a later day; while, again, the actual records which describe what is, to all appearance, the first arrival of the English here, make no reference to the presence of the Britons, either as slaves or enemies.

Yet, again, before we leave these earliest names, our parish, the marsh-village, has received its name from its situation, and the neighbouring parishes have taken theirs with reference to it or, at least, to the Wandle valley in which it lies—Wimbledon, Morden, Malden, all villages on the hills. Nor was the name ill chosen. There runs from north to south across the middle of the parish a spit of slightly higher, sandy soil. On it stands the parish church, towards it runs from east and west the long church path, and on this little ridge between the valleys of the Wandle and the Beverley must have clustered the first rude English huts, a village on the marsh-land, for with more forest and

more rainfall both Wandle and Beverley were greater streams with wider basins, and, indeed, those are not yet past middle age who remember how the waters which should have made their way into the Beverley spread each winter across the fields by Broadwater Farm and flooded the lower road to Kingston. Hence, the name of Merton, and, linked as it is with those of the nearest villages on either side, we can see that its history is coeval with theirs.

When we turn to the chronicles and histories of our island we begin to learn what that history was. The paragraphs may seem, at first sight, to have little or no reference to the history of Merton, but when we combine them together we begin to understand their meaning. We read in the third chapter of the second book of Bede's Ecclesiastical History, in the account of the consecration by Saint Augustin of Mellitus to be Bishop of London in the year 604, 'Orientalium Saxonum . . . quorum metropolis Lundonia civitas est.' Again, in the English Chronicle, under the year 552, we have 'Egelberht \* wearth geboren . . . Eormenrices sunu . . . gothan geare his rices he underfeng

\* Notice that the same text of the Chronicle spells this name in three different ways.

fulwiht aerost cinga on Brytene'—'Egelberht was born . . . the son of Eormenric . . . in the year of his reign he received baptism, first of the kings of Britain;' and in 565 'Her feng Aethelbyrht to Cantwara rice and heold hit liii wintra. On his dagan sende se halga papa Gregorius us fulluht and tha was on tham twam and thrittigothan geare his rices'—'in this year Aethelbyrht succeeded to the Kentish kingdom and held it fifty-three winters. In his day the holy pope Gregory sent us baptism: that was in the two and thirtieth year of his reign,' and, yet again, in 568 'Her Ceawlin and Cutha Cewlines brother fuhtan with Aegelberht and hine on Cent geflymdon and II ealdormen of Wibbandune ofslogon Oslac and Cnebba'—'in this year Ceawlin and his brother Cutha fought against Aegelberht and drove him into Kent and at Wimbledon killed two aldermen, Oslac and Cnebba.' Now, to combine these extracts and show their bearing on the history of Merton.

The Jutes, from the time their three long ships pushed ashore on the coast of Thanet in 449 or 450, had gradually forced their way up the Medway valley and northward to the Thames, till the Britons 'forsook Kent and fled with much fear to London.' But further expansion was impossible: the

forest of the Andredsweald and the marshland between it and the Thames were a formidable barrier, but more formidable was the strong fortress of London, still in British hands and barring any passage up the valley of the Thames. So, for nigh a century the Jutes rested within the confines of Kent. But somewhere towards the end of that period the East Saxons entering Hertfordshire from Essex, stormed Verulamium and passed on to the conquest of London. The date of that conquest we do not know, but in 604 it was their mother city, and, no doubt, the conquest had been effected some years or even generations earlier, and it was precisely this conquest which enabled the Jutes to resume their westward march by way of the valley of the Thames. It was the youthful Aethelberht, great-grandson of Hengist the first conqueror and afterwards himself our first Christian king, who led the Jutes from Kent to the conquest of Surrey. But a foe, not of British but of English race, barred the way. The West Saxons had at length stormed and burnt Silchester and now, under Ceawlin, were moving eastward down the southern side of the Thames. Their natural course would have led them across the ford or ferry at Kingston, but evidently at least

the north bank of the Thames was held by the men of Essex, so the West Saxons, deflected slightly to the southward, continued their march to the heights of Wimbledon. There they met Aethelberht who had advanced across the valley of the Wandle to the conquest of Surrey, thence they drove him back into Kent with the loss of the two aldermen Oslac and Cnebba, and there they determined the fate of Surrey and with it of Merton. Merton was to be in Wessex, not in Kent; not in the diocese of Canterbury or even Rochester, but in that of Winchester, as, indeed, those who remember the consecration of the new churchyard and the laying of the foundation stone of the school by the famous Samuel Wilberforce, can testify that it remained within living memory. But though the West Saxons thus pushed their way eastward to Southwark they failed, probably owing to East Saxon occupation, to master the higher county towards the Thames valley. Between Wimbledon and Merton a line was drawn; the one was in Essex, the other in Wessex; one in the diocese of London, the other of Winchester; one received its Christianity from the disciples of Augustin, the other more slowly from the apostles of Wessex.

Of the preaching of Christianity in Merton

we can, perhaps, gather something. It was in 638 that Saint Birinus, having received the office of a bishop at the hands of Asterius, archbishop of Milan, landed in Hampshire with the object of preaching the Gospel in 'the furthest inland territories of the English which no teacher as yet had visited,' but finding the inhabitants of Wessex still 'most pagan' devoted himself to preaching the faith among them with such success that in the following year King Cynegils himself was baptised at Dorchester. Birinus then fixed his bishop's stool at Dorchester, and from there traversed Wessex from Surrey westward and from Buckingham southward, preaching, baptising, and building churches. That our own part of Surrey owed its conversion to his labours we do not, for certain, know, but after his death a period of retrogression began.

His successor, Agilbert, an Irishman by education and possibly also by birth, could not speak English; then came Wini for whom the diocese of Winchester was first established, but he proved unsuccessful and, some time before 666, was driven out by King Cenwalch, and it was not till after the coming of Theodore of Tarsus that Lothere, Agilbert's nephew, was consecrated to the

vacant see. Under him and his successor Heddi, missionary enterprise was resumed, so we may be fairly certain that it was to Birinus, Lothere, or Heddi that Merton owed its Christianity. And that it came from the west and arrived with the English population and while the district was receiving its place-names is also fairly clear; there is no distinctly Christian name in Merton, but close by is Malden—possibly the speech hill—and there, no doubt, with the centre of civic life, was the preaching station of the first apostle, there the church from which the villagers of Merton were served in things divine.

We now turn to two curious and somewhat uncertain episodes in the parish history, the murder of Cynewulf, King of Wessex, in 755, and the battle of Merton in 871. Both are told in sound English in the chronicles, both copied into the Latin of Matthew Paris and the *Flores Historiarum*, both were confidently ascribed by the early historians of the county to our Merton, both by modern editors are with equal confidence assigned to 'some place near Winchester.' But we must discriminate. The intrigue in which Cynewulf was engaged when he met his death must have been somewhere near his

capital rather than on the eastern borders of his kingdom, his quarrel with his murderer, Cyneheard, rose out of questions concerning the administration of Hampshire, he was carried to Winchester for burial—all evidence that the fight took place at some Hampshire Merantun. But the other case is different. The Danes had invaded Wessex by way of the Thames valley, Aethelred and his brother Alfred had beaten them there and at Ashdown, and again, fourteen days later, at Basing, then, after an interval of two months, when the English followed the retreating foe eastward, in the hopes of making the victory quite complete, the battle of Merton was fought—'here aet Maeredune and hi waeran on twam gefylcum and hi butu geflymdon and lange on daege sige ahton and thaer wearth micel waelslit on hwaethre hand and tha Daeniscan ahton wealstowe gewæld and thaer wearth Haehmund biscop ofslagan and feala godru manna and aefter thisum gefeohte com mycell sumerlida to Readingum'—that is, after stubborn fighting in which the English lost Haehmund, Bishop of Salisbury, the Danes remained in possession of the field and were able to lead a great 'summerhost' up the valley to Reading. This was surely our Merton, whither the Danes had slowly

retreated during two months and whence, after their victory, they turned once more to the invasion of Wessex by way of the Thames valley.

The presence of the Danes was, however, no more than the passage of an invading army; there was no settlement, for none of the characteristic Danish place-names have survived—'by' and 'bec' and 'fell' and 'gill,' nor is there any trace of Danish admixture in the population. Merton was, in fact, a typical English village and strictly English is the Domesday record of its condition under William the Norman. It was on the royal domain, Earl Harold had held it, King William did so now. But the English community life was in existence—it was through sworn witnesses representing the villagers that the French scribes learnt the size and value and population of the place. The arable land amounted to 20 hides and 21 carucates; there were 2 carucates in demesne and fifty-six villeins and thirteen bordars held 18 carucates. There was a church\* and two mills worth 60 shillings and 10 acres of meadow, while the woods were sufficient to

\* Gilbert, 'fundator Meretuniae' built the Priory Church, not the Parish Church.

support four score swine. The value of the Manor in the days of King Edward had been twenty-five pounds, later sixteen pounds, now it was thirty-five. Thus we have the picture of a distinctly prosperous little village community numbering probably four hundred in all, protected to no small extent by the relation in which it stood to the King. The 20 hides were the original English estimate of the size of the parish—a hide had once been the amount of land which would support a free family—but now the word had assumed a political significance, expressing the size of the parish in relation to the hundred in which it stood—Merton is in Brixton hundred—while as a real measurement the Norman carucate or ploughland, the amount with which a plough could deal during a year, was coming into use. Thus we find that the old estimate of the extent of the parish was 20 hides, the modern 21 carucates. These ploughlands were contained in, probably, three great fields,\* one lying fallow each year, one being under wheat, one under some other grain. Throughout these fields were a number of strips of land separated from each other by narrower strips of grass and each

\* The Common Fields, while the Common was the waste of the Manor.

tenant of the Manor had at least three strips, one in each field, or more if variations in the quality of the soil made further subdivision necessary. The lord of the Manor held, as we have seen, two ploughlands in demesne; that is, of the whole of the land of the manor two parts in twenty-one, scattered in strips through the three great fields, while eighteen parts out of the twenty-one were divided among the seventy-nine servile tenants. How much each held we do not know, for we do not know how many acres made a carucate, the amount varying according to the quality of the soil. Nor, again, do we know how much smaller the holding of a bordar was than that of a villein. We may, however, reckon the carucate at one hundred or one hundred and twenty acres and the share of the villein at half as much again as that of the bordar. We can then regard these servile tenants as small farmers, cultivating each his own portion in the three great fields of the village, and bound further to give certain days to work upon the strips which made up the lord's two carucates in demesne, perhaps, three days a week from a villein and two from a bordar, together with some extra days, four or six, at hay-harvest and corn-harvest. Meals,

called corrodies, were generally given at the time when extra labour was exacted. At Christmas there was often a fortnight's holiday and, of course, shorter ones on all the Church festivals. Besides the obligation to labour, the villeins had also to make a number of small payments, which are often enumerated in the Manor rolls, and were bound to have their corn ground in the lord's mill, paying a fixed percentage of the whole, one-fifteenth, one-eighteenth, or one-twentieth. Hence the fact that the two mills were worth 60 shillings. In spite, however, of these obligations the community was a prosperous one. Many manors had suffered greatly from war and famine during the progress of the Norman Conquest, but Merton, after a period of trouble, was progressing steadily and was worth ten pounds more than it had been in the reign of King Edward.

A sketch of the history of Merton in the years following the conquest would be by no means a simple matter. There are no Manor rolls, so a complete survey of the parish in any one year cannot be obtained, but from various calendars of state papers, lists of feudal aids, *inquisitiones post mortem*, pipe rolls, close rolls, patent rolls, registers papal and episcopal,

and from the annalists such as Matthew Paris, a number of items can be extracted having reference to the place. Then came the building of the Priory at the eastern end of the parish;\* and from 1117 till the dissolution the name of Merton was prominent in the history of England. Here Henry III spent what we should call his honeymoon; here he held a great council, and received ambassadors from the Emperor; from here many royal letters and writs were addressed. Here, too, Henry VIII often sojourned on his way from Greenwich to Hampton or Windsor. But the references to the place itself are in each case slight. For instance, in 1290 among the patent rolls we have a licence to William de Hamilton to alienate in mortmain one messuage and carucate of land at Merton to the prioress and nuns of Nune Eaton; on May 18, 1309, several letters in the close rolls were dated from Merton, on December 12, 1313, the King wrote from Dover to the Sheriff of Surrey that he should pay to the King's serjeant, Adam de Bray, then staying at Merton with some of the King's horses, £20 for the expenses of the horses and the wages of the grooms with them, while in Henry III's reign we perhaps find reference

\* Cannon Hill probably marks the earlier attempt to build elsewhere.

to a long-forgotten vicar in a grant by Thomas de Meretune, son of Alexander, to Sir Nicholas de Wallingford, chaplain and perpetual vicar of Meretune, of four 'daysverkas' of land adjoining those of the chaplain.

These details are trivial, but it is only by the patient accumulation of such seemingly trivial facts, together with the study of the records of the Priory,—of which, unfortunately, no satisfactory history exists—that the history of Merton as a whole can be written. Yet the history ought to be written. The story of Merton is devoid neither of incident nor of interest, and it is only upon a complete knowledge of constitutional history, as displayed in the working of local institutions, that an understanding of the history of England can be built.

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## THE OLD RECTORY HOUSE

**I**T is exceedingly difficult to write a paper on a subject concerning which very little reliable information has hitherto been procured. This is the case with the ancient building known as the Old Rectory House. How, when, and why it received this name the writer has been unable to ascertain. That it was at any time Church property is very doubtful. The one thing certain about it is its antiquity. Experts put it at about the year 1500, during the reign of Henry VII, which speaks well for the quality of the work executed by the builders of those days.

Amongst the stories and reports which have obtained credence concerning it, we may name the following for what they are worth, though they may very possibly have been confused more or less with stories relating to a larger mansion of early date which appears to have existed near the same spot, the mansion where it is said that Catherine Parr