

St. Frideswide and her Times

By F. M. STENTON

THE information which has survived about early English ecclesiastical antiquities is abundant and varied, but it is most unevenly distributed over the country as a whole. In Northumbria, the wish for a record of the acts and miracles of Cuthbert, the greatest of northern saints, gave an impulse towards historical writing which found consummate expression in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Bede.¹ There is little literary material for the early ecclesiastical history of Kent, but no churches in the whole of England have preserved more valuable documents than those which relate to the cathedrals of Canterbury and Rochester and the abbey of St. Augustine's at Canterbury. The early history of the church in Wessex is illustrated by the writings of Aldhelm, and much more effectively by the literary materials associated with St. Boniface and other West Saxon members of the English mission to the Germans. In the Severn valley, a number of ancient churches, of which Worcester is the chief, preserved documents which tell something about the early ecclesiastical organization of that country, and in regard to the other side of England, there is much to be learned from the life of St. Guthlac of Crowland, from the traditions which gathered around St. Æthelthryth, the foundress of Ely, and from the ancient muniments of Peterborough. But the intervening country, the geographical centre of England, produced no saint who attracted the attention of early biographers, its ancient churches have lost most of their early charters, and its history in the seventh and eighth centuries is both complicated and obscure. The parish church of Brixworth in Northamptonshire has recently been described as 'perhaps the most imposing architectural memorial of the seventh century yet surviving north of the Alps.'² But all that is known of its origins is contained in a bare statement by a twelfth-century writer to the effect that a colony of monks was placed at Brixworth by Cuthbald, the second abbot of Peterborough.³

¹ So far as is known, historical writing in the North began with the *Anonymous Life of St. Cuthbert*, dedicated to a bishop of Lindisfarne who was consecrated in 698, but used by Bede in the composition of his metrical life of the saint in, or immediately after, 705.

² Clapham, *English Romanesque Architecture before the Conquest*, p. 33.

³ Hugh Candidus, *Coenobii Burgensis Historia*, ed. Sparke, p. 9.

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In no part of this country are the origins of religious organization obscurer than in the district along the middle and upper Thames. The only piece of building in this district for which a date as early as the eighth century could reasonably be claimed is a blocked doorway in the north wall of the parish church of Somerford Keynes in north Wiltshire. There is just enough evidence to show that the original abbey of Abingdon was founded a little before the year 700, but the early charters relating to this house have been interpolated by the copyists who preserved them, and can only be used for historical purposes with many reservations. The cathedral of Dorchester, founded within thirty years of the death of St. Augustine, has no recorded history. Most of the few facts which can be collected to illustrate the early ecclesiastical history of the country along the middle and upper Thames come from the records of distant churches. A document from Canterbury cathedral shows that a monastery existed at Cookham in Berkshire before the middle of the eighth century,¹ and a ninth-century charter to a bishop of Worcester reveals an important church at Eynsham, though it tells nothing of its character.² Two seventh-century charters preserved in a register of Bath Abbey record grants of land by the Cherwell, and at a place called Slaepi, which may well be Islip, to an abbess named Berngyth for the benefit of her monastery.³ These charters deserve more attention than they have generally received, for they show that at least one woman had founded a religious house in the neighbourhood of Oxford in the generation immediately preceding the reputed lifetime of St. Frideswide. But nothing more is known of Berngyth or her monastery, and the almost accidental way in which her existence is recorded really emphasises the obscurity in which the early history of this part of England is involved.

Under these conditions, it is not surprising that St. Frideswide is little more than a name. It has been associated for more than nine hundred years with the site of Oxford, but it is unaccompanied by any genuine tradition of incident or personal relationships. The only pre-Conquest manuscript in which it is mentioned is a list of saints honoured in England, which was written early in the eleventh century, and simply states that 'St. Frideswide rests at Oxford.'⁴ No materials for her life were available to the first generation of Anglo-Norman hagiographers, and the earliest writer to sketch the outline of her legend is the historian William of Malmesbury, writing shortly before the

¹ Birch, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, No. 291.

² *Cart. Sax.*, No. 509.

³ *Cart. Sax.*, Nos. 57 and 28.

⁴ Printed in the *Liber Vitæ* of Hyde Abbey (ed. Birch for the Hampshire Record Society), pp. 87-94. In this list, St. Frideswide of Oxford (p. 94), is entered between St. Cuthburh of Wimborne and St. Cuthmann of Steyning.

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year 1125.¹ According to him, Frideswide was a king's daughter, sought in marriage by a king from whom she escaped, at first into a nameless woodland refuge, and then into the town of Oxford. Her pursuer was struck with blindness as he approached the gates of the town, but was soon restored to sight by her intercession, and she, freed from his importunities, proceeded to found a monastery in the town, where she spent the rest of her life. It is a meagre story, and the men of later generations were not satisfied with it. Before the end of the thirteenth century, Frideswide had been provided with a father named Didanus and a mother named Safrida; the king who pursued her was called Algar, and the place of her final retirement was changed from Oxford to a neighbouring wood called Thornbury, afterwards known as Binsey. There is no reason to think that these details represent any real tradition; the personal names in the story show that it cannot have been written down before the late twelfth century,² and carry no suggestion that it comes from any older source. It clearly stands for an attempt to give some appearance of substance to one of the most nebulous of English monastic legends.

This does not mean that St. Frideswide herself should be regarded as a legendary figure. The fact that she was honoured as a saint at the beginning of the eleventh century raises at least a case for her historical existence. This case would become much stronger if it were possible to accept the evidence of a remarkable charter which king Æthelred II is supposed to have granted in 1004 to the church where her body lay. According to this document, when the king and his council had decreed that all the Danes in England should be killed—a reference to the massacre of St. Brice's Day, 1002—the Danes of Oxford took refuge in St. Frideswide's minster. Their pursuers thereupon burned the church and all the ancient writings inside it, and the king therefore thought fit to make a new charter confirming the minster in the possession of its lands, and re-asserting its privileges. The boundaries of these lands are set out in Old English, and the document ends with a long list of witnesses.³ Scholars have nearly always regarded this charter as a forgery, because the text to which

¹ *Gesta Pontificum*, ed. Hamilton, pp. 315-6.

² The name Safrida, attributed to the saint's mother, seems to be due to confusion between the Old English Sæfrith and Sæthryth, which are respectively masculine and feminine names. As Old English habits of name-formation survived at Oxford far into the twelfth century, it is very unlikely that a local writer would have introduced an impossible feminine name into a story much before the year 1200.

³ *Cartulary of St. Frideswide's*, ed. Wigram (Oxford Historical Society) pp. 2-9. In this edition, the Old English portions of the charter, recorded when it was submitted to the Chancery for confirmation in the fourteenth century, are printed at length, in addition to the very inferior copy entered in the cartulary itself. Few of the charters of the reign preserved in later transcripts have been edited with such scrupulous care. It is interesting to note that the argument for the authenticity of the charter turns in great part on details of script and spelling which are only recorded by the clerks of the Chancery.

reference is usually made¹ contains formulas incompatible with the style of this period, and because the reference to the massacre of 1002 has been considered out of place in a document of this kind. It has not, apparently, been noticed that Æthelred II, alone among the later Anglo-Saxon kings, was in the habit of introducing historical or autobiographical details into his charters,² so that the reference to the events of 1002 is quite in keeping with the general practice of his clerks. Moreover, the text printed for the Oxford Historical Society in its edition of the cartulary of St. Frideswide's contains none of the other features which have thrown suspicion on the charter, and in particular the English of the boundaries is represented in a way which convinced so critical a scholar as Napier that they were derived from an Old English text. There is, indeed, one apparent incongruity in the list of witnesses. A certain Alfstan, who is styled *Fontaniensis ecclesiae episcopus*, signs between the bishops of Winchester and London. *Fontaniensis ecclesia* can only mean the church of Wells, and in all other charters of this period, the bishop of Wells is named, not Ælfstan, but Leofing. But an early chronicle which has no connexion with the church of St. Frideswide calls him 'Ælfstan who was named Lifing'³ and it seems clear that in witnessing the charter to St. Frideswide's he used, for once, the first of his two names. As any forger imitating a genuine charter of this period would certainly have introduced the bishop under the only name by which he was generally known, the signature *Alfstan Fontaniensis ecclesiae episcopus* becomes a definite piece of evidence for the authenticity of Æthelred's charter to St. Frideswide's.

It therefore seems that at the beginning of the eleventh century St. Frideswide's relics had attracted a considerable endowment to the church which bore her name. It included what may be called small manors at Cowley, Whitehill in Tackley, and Cutslow; a large estate at Winchendon in Buckinghamshire; and the king's tithe of Headington. The date at which these endowments were given is unknown, but they prove that St. Frideswide had been honoured as a saint long before the end of the tenth century. In Anglo-Saxon times, this honour was often given to persons of no outstanding merit,

¹ Kemble, *Codex Diplomaticus*, No. 709.

² The most remarkable illustration of this habit is the mass of detail inserted in his great charter of confirmation to Abingdon Abbey in 993. *Codex Diplomaticus*, No. 684: *Facsimiles of Ancient Charters in the British Museum*, III, 36: *Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, I, 358. Clerks who could indulge in history on this scale would certainly have seen nothing irrelevant in the reference to the massacre of St. Brice's Day in the charter to St. Frideswide's.

³ *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* 'D' text under 1019. Florence of Worcester, who describes the bishop as *Livingus qui et Æthelstanus* (*Chronicon*, ed. Thorpe, I, 158), probably derived his knowledge of the bishop's double name from this text of the Chronicle or from some version closely related to it. The place where the 'D' text of the Chronicle was written has not yet been identified, but there is no internal evidence to connect it with any part of the Oxford country.

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and the list of Old English saints includes names which stand for myth rather than history. But it can at least be said that no Anglo-Saxon church was ever endowed on such a scale as that of St. Frideswide unless some basis of historical fact lay behind its traditions. Moreover, St. Frideswide's name, though apparently unique, is compounded of two well-recorded Anglo-Saxon name-elements which have little meaning in combination. Frithuswith means 'peace strong,' and although modern ingenuity may read some vague significance into this compound, no such reflection could have occurred to an Englishman of the tenth or any earlier century. There is a fundamental difference between a name like Frideswide and the name of St. Sidwell of Exeter, which is a deliberate and artificial creation meaning 'full of virtue.'¹ It may be added that the very barrenness of the Frideswide legend is really evidence of her importance in the religious life of her time. The absence of any pre-Conquest record of her miracles goes far to prove that her cult was not merely a popular response to wonders associated with her tomb.

It is generally assumed that St. Frideswide founded the church in which her relics were afterwards preserved. This assumption, in the last resort, rests on the statement of William of Malmesbury that St. Frideswide founded a monastery in Oxford, and William wrote four centuries after the saint's lifetime. Nevertheless it is on the whole probable that his statement was correct. He had visited St. Frideswide's church and inspected its archives, and his observations about its history undoubtedly represent what he was told by its inmates. Where all is obscure it seems the safest course to follow this local tradition, and the general probability that the historical St. Frideswide had been the foundress of a monastic community. The nature of this community is a separate problem, and one to which no final answer can be given. William of Malmesbury regarded it as a house of nuns. But if St. Frideswide really lived in the first third of the eighth century, there is a very strong presumption that any monastery which she founded was a joint establishment of men and women. It is doubtful whether any house of women was founded in the seventh or early eighth century without the simultaneous establishment of an adjacent community of men.² Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury regarded double monasteries of this kind as an English institution, which he disliked but did not venture to condemn. Many of the most famous monasteries of this period were undoubtedly founded after this pattern. Whitby, Repton, Much Wenlock, Ely, Wimborne, Coldingham, the original monastery of Gloucester, and Barking, for which Aldhelm

¹ See *Place-Names of Devon* (English Place-Name Society, vol. ix), p. 437.

² In 1899 an opinion to this effect was expressed by Miss Mary Bateson after an exhaustive examination of the materials for the history of double monasteries in England (*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s. xiii, p. 182). No fresh evidence has appeared since that article was written.

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wrote the *De Laudibus Virginitatis*, were all joint congregations of men and women under a woman's rule. The evidence for the constitution of these and other ancient houses is fragmentary and generally incidental, but it gives a definite impression that the isolated house of women was not a normal feature of the earliest English monasticism. It may be added that if St. Frideswide's monastery contained men as well as women, it is easier to understand the process by which her church came in time to be served by a group of secular clergy. It is at least possible that the 'canons of Oxford' of whom Domesday Book speaks may represent a community of monks which had once formed part of St. Frideswide's foundation.

Unless new materials come to light, the conditions under which St. Frideswide's monastery came into being will never be known with certainty. But if the reputed date of her death is anywhere near the truth, it is at least possible to suggest certain general features of her environment. Ever since the tenth century, the Thames in the neighbourhood of Oxford has formed one of the most important administrative boundaries in England. The county boundaries which are drawn along the river to-day represent a very ancient division between two of the great systems of customary law which had governed English life before the Norman Conquest—the laws of the West Saxons and the Mercians. But in the age of St. Frideswide, the country on each side of the middle and upper Thames formed a debatable land between the kingdom of Wessex, of which the centre then lay in Hampshire, Dorset, and Somerset, and the kingdom of Mercia, centred on the upper Trent. This debatable land had originally been conquered from the Britons by members of the West Saxon royal house, and the first bishopric of the West Saxon people was established at Dorchester to the east of the river. But before the end of the seventh century, the Mercian kings had annexed the whole district along the foot of the Chilterns—in 674 one of their kings held his court at Thame¹—and more than once during the next hundred and fifty years, Berkshire and northern Wiltshire also became Mercian. In 735, the traditional date of St. Frideswide's death, the land on each side of the Thames at Oxford seems to have been under the direct rule of Æthelbald, king of the Mercians, a formidable king whose conquests did much to prepare the way for the political unity of southern England. During the next hundred years, every powerful West Saxon king asserted a claim to this territory, but the Mercian kings more than held their ground until their dynasty came to an end, and it was not until the middle of the ninth century that the debatable land was finally divided between them, Berkshire and northern Wiltshire becoming West Saxon, and the plain of central Oxfordshire remaining Mercian.

¹ *Cart. Sax.*, No. 34.

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The fact that Oxford is never mentioned in connexion with these wars suggests that as yet it was a place of little importance. It was certainly not the head of any district corresponding to the modern county. In the eighth century, the basis of local government, at least in central England, was not the shire but the tribe or folk; each tribe being responsible for the supply of a definite quantity of food for the support of the king and his ministers, and, apparently, for the provision of a definite contingent to the army. Few traces of this archaic organisation have survived in southern England, and the only primitive folks who can be identified in the country along the middle Thames are the Sunningas, whose name is preserved in Sonning and Sunninghill,¹ and the Cilternsaetan,² who lived in the plain stretching eastwards from the river into central England. The principal centres of local administration at this time were not towns, but royal villages, where the king's food-rent was paid, and where criminals were kept in custody and justice was done in cases too difficult for settlement by the ancient courts of the country. There can be little doubt that when St. Frideswide founded her church, the nearest centre of civil government was the royal village of Headington, from which her successors were receiving the tithes in the last years of the tenth century. Even at the date of Domesday Book, long after the whole of southern England had been thoroughly subdivided into shires, there remained many traces of a more ancient system in which local justice and finance had been administered from the king's villages of Benson, Headington, Kirtlington, Wootton, Shipton-under-Wychwood, Bampton, and Bloxham.³

The political vicissitudes through which the Oxford country passed between the seventh and the ninth century meant that its ecclesiastical organization was highly unstable. With few exceptions, the English bishoprics of this period were based on kingdoms, not, as abroad, on cities. The bishop depended on his king for security and for the enforcement of the rights which contemporary law allowed him, and the extent of his diocese was increased or diminished as the king who protected him was successful or unsuccessful in war. For nearly forty years after 634, when Birinus began the conversion of the West Saxons, the country around Oxford formed part of the great West Saxon diocese, of which the seat, originally established at Dorchester, was transferred to Winchester before the year 660. When the Mercian kings conquered this country,

¹ The *provincia quae appellatur Sunninges* is mentioned in a seventh-century charter granted by Frithuwald, under-king of Surrey, to the monastery of Chertsey (*Cart. Sax.*, No. 34).

² *Cart. Sax.*, No. 297.

³ The importance of these manors in the organization of local government in eleventh-century Oxfordshire has recently been illustrated by Miss H. M. Cam, 'The Hundred and the Hundredal Manor,' *English Historical Review*, XLVII, 353 ff.: see also Miss Cam's article in this journal, pp. 113ff.

between 670 and 680, it is probable that they revived the see of Dorchester for the benefit of the lands which they had won.¹ But the Mercian see of Dorchester only lasted for a few years, and towards the close of the seventh century, the whole country between the southern boundary of the diocese of Lichfield and the northern boundary of the see of Winchester seems to have been under the charge of the famous Northumbrian bishop Wilfrid, then in exile from his own country. On each subsequent reconquest of this region by the West Saxon kings of the eighth and early ninth centuries, it may be presumed to have been annexed to the see of Winchester, but there is little, if any, definite evidence that the West Saxon bishops of this period had authority in either Oxfordshire or Berkshire. During at least the closing years of St. Frideswide's life, Oxford belonged to the vast Mercian diocese of Lichfield, and two years after the traditional date of her death, it passed, with the whole valley of the middle Thames, to a new see established by Æthelbald of Mercia at Leicester. Even after the Mercian kings had become insignificant in comparison with the kings of Wessex, they long remained the lords of this country, and their bishops seated at Leicester had episcopal charge of it. In 844, nineteen years after the great West Saxon victory of Ellandun, bishop Ceolred of Leicester gave a considerable estate at Pangbourne to king Beorhtwulf of Mercia in return for a grant of liberties to a group of monasteries, of which the ancient West Saxon foundation of Abingdon was one.²

If the diocesan organization of this country was still unstable in the age of St. Frideswide, its parochial organization was even more indefinite. The parochial system of the Middle Ages was brought into being very slowly. Even at the date of the Norman conquest, there is no sign of any general idea that the villages and groups of adjacent hamlets, which formed the natural units of rural life, should each be served by a single priest, supported by the revenues of a single church. Three hundred years earlier, although many upland churches had been built by individual nobles, great stretches of country containing many villages were dependent ecclesiastically on 'minsters' founded by kings or bishops upon the larger of their estates. The word minster is derived from the Latin *monasterium*, and it is possible that many of the churches which bore this title in Anglo-Saxon times had been founded by or for communities of men bound by the vow of religion. But in the eighth and ninth centuries, and even later, any church served by a group of clergy living communally might be described as a *monasterium*, and the word minster was attached by this usage

¹ The evidence for this revival was discussed by Dr. Plummer in a note on Bede's statement that Ætla, a monk of Whitby, was consecrated to the bishopric of Dorchester (*Historia Ecclesiastica* vol. 1, p. 254, vol. II, pp. 245, 246).

² *Cart. Sax.*, No. 443: Stenton, *Early History of the Abbey of Abingdon*, pp. 25-6.

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to many ancient churches which had never been the centres of communities following a monastic rule. In Berkshire, the parish church of Lambourn is called a minster in a document of the eleventh century,¹ and the name Minster Street in Reading, which can be traced back to the thirteenth century² points very clearly to an original community of clergy grouped around the church of St. Mary in that town. It was by the building and endowment of new churches within the vast parishes of such 'old minsters' that English parochial organization was brought at last into general correspondence with the facts of agrarian life.³

The parish churches of ancient royal and episcopal manors may, in fact, be regarded as the only institutions in this part of England which connect the age of St. Frideswide with the present day. The dioceses of this country have changed both their boundaries and their seats. Neither Oxford, Salisbury, St. Albans, nor Gloucester were the seats of bishops in the eighth century. But unless the whole drift of parochial evolution has been mistaken by modern scholars, there can be no serious doubt that such churches as Aylesbury, Lambourn, St. Mary's in Reading, and Bampton represent earlier buildings which formed the original centres of ecclesiastical organization in the country threaded by the middle Thames. And among all the churches of this country, the parish church of Sonning might well be claimed as the strongest of all the links connecting modern life with the age of the Conversion of the English. In the late Old English period, it was regarded as a 'head minster' in the hierarchy of churches familiar at that time, for there is no doubt that the bishops of Wiltshire and Berkshire had one of their seats there. Under the first Norman kings it was the head church of an episcopal manor stretching from Sandhurst to the summit of the Chilterns—an estate so ancient that not even a tradition survives of the way in which it came into ecclesiastical hands. It was the parish church of many manors held by persons other than the bishop who was the lord of Sonning, and parish after parish has been carved from its territory between the reign of the Conqueror and the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁴ At Sonning, as perhaps nowhere else in this country, it is possible to realize the fundamental importance of the 'old minster' in the ecclesiastical organization of pre-Conquest England.

¹ Footman, *History of Lambourn Church*, p. 183.

² Harl. MS. 1708 f. 50b.

³ In the twelfth century, the canons of St. Frideswide's were taking tithes from Forest Hill, Horsepath, Cuddesdon, Denton, and Chippinghurst (*Cartulary of St. Frideswide's*, I, p. 11). These tithes undoubtedly represent part of the king's tithes of Headington, confirmed to St. Frideswide's by Æthelred II, and give some indication of the extent of the pre-Conquest parish of Headington.

⁴ The process began with the building of a wooden chapel at Whistley within the original parish of Sonning by abbot Athelhelm of Abingdon between 1070 and 1083 (*Chronicon Monasterii de Abingdon*, II, 18).

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In the age of St. Frideswide, the barest outlines of this organization had hardly yet been drawn. It may be added that the age was a time of constant warfare arising out of the elementary ambitions and enmities of individual kings. Paganism was by no means extinct, and early penitential literature shows that a strain of primitive barbarism lay very near the surface of contemporary life. The whole future of Christianity in England was still uncertain twelve hundred years ago. But it is equally true that this age was one of the most brilliant periods in English history. If the dates of St. Frideswide's birth and death are fixed provisionally at 680 and 735, her life coincided with the literary careers of Aldhelm and Bede, through whom the English church became for a time the greatest force in European scholarship. It saw the rise and incipient decline of a school of decorative sculpture which produced work unparalleled in the western world. Most scholars would probably agree that it was between these years that the bulk of Old English heroic poetry—another unique achievement—first took shape in writing. Above all, it was in this period that a group of English missionaries began the conversion of the heathen of Frisia and central Germany, and in so doing gave a new direction to the history of the Western church. St. Frideswide's contemporary, the West Saxon Boniface, is the greatest man of action in Anglo-Saxon history, and the one Englishman of the Dark Ages who played a part of international significance in the world of his day. St. Frideswide herself may be no more than a name, but the age to which tradition assigned her was the period in which the English church exercised the deepest influence on the learning and religion of western Europe.¹

¹ This paper represents the substance of a lecture given in the Chapter House, Christ Church, on 19th October, 1935, being the 1200th anniversary of St. Frideswide's death.