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THE FLIGHT OF ST. FRIDESWIDE.

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THE FLIGHT OF ST. FRIDESWIDE.

BY REV. G. E. C. RODWELL, M.A., VICAR OF BAMPTON.



THE Black-letter Saints of the ancient Calendars make up a considerable assemblage. Among all of them there can scarcely be found one to surpass in interest St. Frideswide. The ancient descriptions of her character and life are not, as in many cases, mere theses depicting in pious language monkish imaginations and ideals. The earlier writings, at all events, describe very consistently a woman, gifted with notable graces, and using the advantages of position and wealth to bequeath to future generations the ideals that elevated her own life. The record of the life of this Saxon Saint should therefore claim the interest of English people in general, of Oxford people in particular, and, incidentally, of the inhabitants of the small town of Bampton in Oxfordshire. Her piety and learning planted in English soil a fertile seed destined in time to develop into the University of Oxford, and (as this essay is intended to prove) her preparation for so far-reaching a venture was ordered near the ancient and beautiful river in the leafy solitudes which then surrounded Bampton.

The story of her life, as far as early chronicles are concerned, is simple and consistent, with just sufficient variation in detail to assure us that we are reading independent records. No serious confusion occurs between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries, nor, in fact, until the foreign compilers of St. Frideswide's life in the *Acta Sanctorum* robbed Bampton of its proper share in

the life of the Saint. That again would be of little account, were it not that all subsequent writers—such as Baring-Gould and Father Goldie—have followed the error of the Bollandists.

Bampton, many years ago a place of some note, now for some centuries has been sinking into obscurity. A magnificent church remains the sole index of her former glories. It is but an act of charity to restore to her the honour of having been for some two or three years the refuge of St. Frideswide.

There are three twelfth-century authorities for the life of St. Frideswide—namely, William of Malmesbury, *c.* 1125, the Cottonian MS., in the British Museum, *c.* 1170, and the Laudian MS., in the Bodleian, of about the same date as the Cottonian. All have the appearance of referring to earlier records, and in all probability the original sources of information were in the archives of St. Frideswide's Monastery, destroyed by fire on St. Brice's Day, in the year 1000 A.D.

A general idea of St. Frideswide's remarkable life is common to these earliest writings. The exact dates of her birth and death are unknown, but apparently she died about the year 730 A.D. She was the only daughter of Didanus, King or Prince of Oxfordshire (*Oxfordiæ*), and of Safrida his wife. From her earliest childhood she displayed a disposition of extraordinary sweetness, self-denial and intelligence, which qualities were fostered in her by one Algiva, to whom her education was entrusted. When she desired to take the veil, Didanus gave and endowed for her a religious house near Oxford, to which her influence attracted other noble maidens. After the death of her parents, Algar, a Prince of Leicester, succeeded to the Kingdom of Didanus and sought Frideswide's hand in marriage. When she refused to break her vows he threatened her with dishonour instead of marriage, if it should be necessary to take her by force. He first sent friends to take her, but they were struck blind in answer to her prayers. Then he determined to come himself to capture her, but on the night preceding his attempt Frideswide was warned by an Angel of God, and fled into a secret place, where she remained some two or

three years in hiding. There miracles of healing are narrated as bearing witness to her sanctity, and as the cause of her hiding-place becoming known to Algar. She again escaped to the neighbourhood of Oxford, but by reason of weariness was unable to continue her flight further. She, however, was saved from Algar's fury by a miraculous blindness which fell on him for a while. Thereafter, apparently, she continued her pious work in peace, first in the neighbourhood of Binsey, and afterwards at Osney, where she founded a nunnery, soon to become famous. After her death this nunnery was replaced by a monastery, which in turn attracted learned men to itself and was practically the beginning of Oxford University as a seat of religious learning.

The above-written account is a summary, with some attempt at reconciliation of the various early "Lives" which are consistent with one another in the main, but differ in some important details. There is no discrepancy among them as to the place to which St. Frideswide fled. William of Malmesbury, whose narrative appears to be of the nature of a summary, simply says that she fled from her royal lover "into a wood," situated evidently at considerable distance from Oxford. The Cottonian MS., describing her flight, narrates that the Angel bid her go to the Thames and take her women with her. They find a little boat, and in it sitting a youth with shining angelic face. "In less than an hour they arrive at the town which is Bentonia, and entering into a certain wood, not far from the above-named town," they come to a herdsman's hut and dwell there.

The Laudian MS. refers to the flight as follows: "In about the space of one hour they are borne 10 miles and disembark near the town which is called Bentona," where, in the woods, they find an abandoned shelter made to protect hogs against the stormy weather. "In the above-named Bentona," St. Frideswide restores the sight of a blind girl.

Later writers amplify the early story, but still agree as to the place of St. Frideswide's refuge.

John Tynemouth (c. 1340) writes of her disembarkation: "*sub villa nomine Bentona.*" The Lansdowne MS.

(c. 1350): "*ad villam quæ dicitur Bantomam.*" Another Bodleian MS. (c. 1420): "undir the toun of bentonne," "the holy mayde at bentone." Balliol MS. (c. 1470): "*ad villam Bendonam.*"¹

There is no other testimony of importance except that of the antiquarians, Leland (d. 1552), Dugdale (d. 1686) and Anthony A. Wood, who all understand that St. Frideswide came to Bampton. The latter writer also quotes an interesting acrostic epitaph on St. Frideswide, ending: "*Angelo ductore Bamptoniæ navigavit.*"

Our testimony is therefore continuous, until we come to the *Acta Sanctorum* (1738 onwards), in which Leland's "Bentona" is annotated as follows: "*Bentona, legendum Bendonam ut in Balliolensi MS., vernacule Abingdon, quod reapse decem miliaribus Oxonio distat. Bentona quod modo Bensington Benton sonat, amplius dissitum est.*" *Act. Sanct.*, Tom viii, p. 566.

In reply to this, we may say:

1. Bampton is not much more than 10 or 12 miles from Oxford or Binsey, as the crow flies.
2. The rapidity of the journey does not imply that it was made down-stream. The whole flight is described in the terms of a miracle. The "one hour" of the Cotton. and Laud. MSS. become "*momento*" in the Balliol MS.
3. It is true the word Bantoma in the Lansdowne MS. is an unusual form, but it is very probably a scribe's error for Bantona: the other forms are the ordinary Latinized forms of the name.
4. Neither Bensington nor Abingdon normally appear without their characteristic "ing": Bensingtuna (Beanesingtuna) is the usual form of the one, Abingduna of the other.

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¹ In this MS. the wood near Bampton in which Frideswide lay hid is called "the wood Benseya." This may be a confusion with her later dwelling Binsey; but the latter name is generally written "Busneia" or "Busneya"; so possibly we may have here the correct name of the wood near Bampton ("a certain wood," Cotton). Benney used to be the name of a part of Bampton parish, about half-way between Rushey and Radcot. The name only survives now in the local saying: "when the cock points to Benney, we shall have rain."

There appears to be little or no collateral evidence connecting Bampton with St. Frideswide, unless we except possibly Dugdale's statement that "St. Frideswide's Monastery, before its dissolution, was possessed of the Manor of Lewe . . . and the Manor of Wealde," both in Bampton parish. But even if Dugdale is right in his facts, they are not necessarily to the point.

In view of the manner of the healing of a blind girl in Bampton by St. Frideswide, it is perhaps of some interest that, at Ham Court, in the parish we have a Holy Well (Ladywell), the water of which is still regarded as possessing curative virtues for sore eyes.

Ang. Canon
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