THE TRUE WITNESS

CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. I. MONTREAL, FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 1851. NO. 31.

ABBEY LIFE IN OLD ENGLAND.

England is covered all over with the trace of a religious life, that has altogether passed away from among us. We do not speak of the ancient piles of Westminster, Canterbury, Winchester, York, Durham, and such-like, which are consecrated to uses, very different from what was intended by those who erected, and originally worshipped in them. But we refer to the old abbeys, monasteries, and priories, the ruins of which are found in all parts of England, lying in green, sheltered valleys, often far retired among the clefts of the hills, or rising up amid the fertile campaign country, embosomed in majestic and venerable trees, or, perched upon gray promontories, looking out upon the sea, and still serving as landmarks, by which the pilot steers his storm-driven vessel. There is scarcely a nook or corner of the land in which you cannot find traces of those ancient religious sites—sometimes far off the beaten highways of men, difficult to reach, little frequented, and known only to a few admirers of old ruins and love scenery. For, the scenery in the neighborhood of these ruins is almost invariably fine; and you rarely by any accident discover a ruined abbey, the neighborhood of which is unpicturesque, or the land infertile.

The men by whose means, and for whose accommodation these old religious houses were reared, were the *first class* men of their time; that is, they cultivated the highest and purest tastes, they were lovers of the beautiful—aye the beautiful in the noblest sense, and dedicated all their powers to the service of Him whom they worshipped. Who are the architects of modern times, that have excelled those monks of the "dark ages?" Where is the modern pile that can compare with Westminster Abbey or York Minster? But these old monks were more than artists; they were teachers, preachers, writers of books, students of science; Friar Bacon is our Father of Chemistry! They were the only literary class of their time; through them were handed down to us the great thoughts of the ancient thinkers; they were the repositories of all art, science, and knowledge. At a time when the titled lord of a hundred manors, could neither read nor write, and was wont to sign his name, as only the rudest boor does now, with his mark, these men acted as secretaries and chancellors, as well as priests and father-confessors. By reason of their greater intelligence, they ruled the rulers, though they could not, it may be, tame down their wolf-like ferocity, nor allay their savage thirst for blood. It was the greater knowledge which prevailed among the religious men of these olden times, which sufficiently accounts for their great power in all countries in which we find them to have been planted. They represented the moral will and intelligence of society, as it then was. They were the moral lights, and the only public opinion of their time. Mailed knights, who dared to do the most fiend-like acts, trembled before these highly gifted and learned pale-faced church-men. In the midst of a savage epoch, when a rude animal will prevailed throughout society, these monks were paving the way for the reign of an universal justice. During an age of furious rapine and violence, they were pious and peacemakers. They pursued the arts of industry, and cultivated science in the midst of their religious meditations; alone representing the intelligence and moral will of those times. They were the forerunners of the civilisation of after times, when the mass at length became impenetrated with the knowledge and the religious truth, which were so faithfully and tenaciously preserved by these men through many long ages of ignorance, warfare, and bloodshed.

Power so great was, no doubt, in some cases abused—as where is power not abused?—but assuredly, we owe much to the pious monks who dwelt in the abbeys, monasteries, and priories, whose ruins we now tread over, and admire as we tread; and we would not wish to disparage the many blessings and privileges which we owe to them. In appreciating the civilisation, the freedom, and the mental stature of our own times, it is only fair to do an adequate measure of justice to the men of other times.

An exceedingly curious and interesting picture of the Abbey Life in England, some centuries ago, was recently brought to life in the "Chronicles of Jocelin of Brakelond," published by the Camden Society, and which afterwards formed the text of Carlyle's "Past and Present." There we obtained some eloquent glimpses into the ancient foretime of England, and saw how the concerns of the great abbey of Bury Saint Edmund's occupied the ambitious, the laborious and the prayers of its occupants,—how it was managed and governed,—and how it formed the centre of the social order, and religious life of a large district. That was in a comparatively rich and well-peopled district, not very distant from London; for we find the Londoners then claiming a right of entry into Edmondbury free of toll at all times. In all respects, that neighbourhood was an improved one, and comparatively civilised. But we now propose to take the reader into a more remote district of the country, and by a few glimpses into the life of the prior and monks of Bolton, as exhibited in their *Compotus*, or household book of Bolton Priory—a manuscript in the possession of the Duke of Devonshire—show something of the kind of life led by a more retired community, at the same remote period.

The Craven district, in which Bolton Priory is situated, was wild and bleak then as now. The people who dwelt in the little dales, among the rifts of the hills, must always have been a poor, and comparatively, primitive race; the ruggedness of the country, the want of roads, the morasses, wastes, and woods, which covered the low grounds, shut them out, in a great measure, from the prevailing influences of early time. The country is one of fastnesses, and the conquered Brigantes, Danes, and Saxons, after being driven from the lower and richer grounds, by the dominant parties which successively overran England, would naturally resort thither to seek shelter in the almost inaccessible retreats which they afforded. Hence the marked predominence of Celtic, Saxon, and Danish words in the dialect of West Yorkshire, and especially of Craven, to this day. The names of most of the villages, hills and rocks, are yet Saxon or Danish; the features of the people are more rough and massive, and their bodies generally are built on a larger scale than characterizes the inhabitants of the lower-lying and more accessible districts of England. Down even to a very recent period, there were no roads in West Yorkshire, save for pack-horses. There was no route for carriages or carts, save of the rudest possible description. Henry VI. took refuge in Bolton Hall, in Craven, immediately after the battle of Hexham, so fatal to the Lancastrians; and in this obscure retreat, he lay as much concealed as a fugitive at this day would be in the remotest of the Shetland Islands. Large tracts of land, which are now grassy heaths, were then covered with wood, and dense forests lay along the valleys, well stocked with deer, boars, and wild cattle. These the feudal lords, for some time after the Conquest, "preserved" by a great force of keepers; but the wild population of the district, strong in their Saxon love of game, could not be hindered of their sport; and collisions between the lord's foresters and the village deerstalkers were of frequent occurrence. Wild boars abounded in the neighborhood of Bolton; *Burden*, a little above it on the Wharfe, taking its name from this circumstance. Wolves committed great ravages among the flocks of the Bolton canons, even as late as the fourteenth century; for we find in the *Compotus* the entry of a sum paid "to a certain man who had killed a wolf." Eagles also hunted the hills and rocks of the upper districts of Craven; and hence we find *Arncliffe Erncliffe*, from a Danish word, signifying the haunt of eagles, still characterising a lofty limestone ridge, where the ancient inhabitants of the country would find a secure retreat. There is also *Arnberg Scar*, or the Eagle's Hill. But there are some other names, equally characteristic of the district, and throwing a light upon its ethnological history. For instance, there is still *Thorgill*, the stream of Thor, the great god of the old Pagans of the north; *Hetlafield*, the holy mountain; *Gastrills*, the hosts' streams; *Skrattafell*, the mountain haunted by demons,) from which the common term of "Old Scratch," may *possibly* be derived;) and many other names, of pure Teutonic derivation, which are still common all over Craven.

The priory of Bolton was founded amidst the rugged wildness of lawless times, shortly after the Norman conquerors had planted themselves in the district, and one of these built Skipton Castle, and entrenched himself and followers behind its strong keep—the old Norman towers still standing there. This Conqueror married the niece of the Earl Edwin—for ladies, in those times, were oftener won by the sword than by honied words—and thus William de Meschines secured a double hold of Craven and its Saxon population. But it is a curious illustration of that barbarous period, that shortly after, in 1138, when the daughter of de Meschines had grown up into womanhood, a Scotch army, headed by William, son of Duncan, the nephew of David, then king of Scotland, burst into Craven, ravaged the country, and carried off all its flocks and herds. Returning to Scotland, William remembered with pleasure the beautiful valleys of Craven, and at the lapse of fourteen years he assembled another foraging expedition, and started again for Yorkshire, conquered the district, took possession of Skipton Castle and its heiress, Adeliza, whom he married, and thus summarily took possession of the honor of Skipton and Craven! It was the son of Fitz Duncan and Adeliza de Romille, "the boy of Egremond," who was drowned while crossing the Strid, with a greyhound in leash, which held back while he took the leap, and dragged him into the boiling pool beneath, where he was drowned. The forester who accompanied the boy and witnessed his sad fate, returned with a sorrowful heart to his mother, but scarce dared to break the dreadful news to her. He hesitated,—but asked, "What is good for a bootless *bene!*"—in other words, what avails when prayer is useless? The mother, discerning some irreparable calamity shadowed in the face of her lost child's attendant, replied, in a shrieking voice, "Endless sorrow!"

It was in such sudden bereavements as this, that many of the religious houses of the period were founded. The mother resolved to dedicate to the memory of her lost son a monument of her love, and the priory of Bolton was reared, about a mile below the Strid, where the valley opens up sufficiently to allow a space for building. The choir, the ruins of which still stand, was erected and finished at one effort, and dedicated to St. Mary and St. Cuthbert. As the wealth of the foundation increased, and additional gifts flowed in from successive patrons, the principal of whom were the Cliffords and the Percys, many additions were made to the building. Permanent residences were erected for the monks, with ample dormitory, refectory and cloisters; and as the more luxurious tendencies of abbey life developed themselves, cellars were dug, and a kitchen was built, with its huge oven, eighteen feet in diameter—so large that a stray flock of sheep, in recent times, concealed themselves there, and were given up for lost. Nor were the state and comforts of the prior neglected; for, the fine carved timber lodgings were now reared for his use, with the adjoining prior's chapel and offices. Then the guests' great hall was reared, apart from the rest of the building, for the entertainment of visitors and travellers. The massive gateway was added, in which the priory records were kept; gardens and terraces were laid out; fish-ponds were dug; the priory mill was built; as also sundry outhouses for the accommodation of the armigeri and bowmen, velleins, garciens or slaves, and the numerous servants of the house.

Now, look at the life within the priory, and the various offices which the heads of the establishment had to perform. The chief of the house was the prior, who governed the whole establishment; and he was aided in his duties by the sub-prior, who governed in his absence, while he attended the installation of bishops at York, or visited the court of the sovereign, or the parliament at London, or travelled abroad, to wait upon the Head of the Church at Rome. The prior had his chaplain and his clerk (*generally trained* in the law), and he had his separate body of armigeri and servants. He inhabited the commodious Prior's Lodging, where he occasionally entertained noble and aristocrat, sometimes even royal guests, and dispensed to them liberally of his hospitality. The more numerous body of visitors were entertained in the large guests' hall, which was open to all comers.

The prior, who was elected by the canons, was the landlord of the house and their estate. He kept the great-seal of the priory, managed all the monies and estates of the house, dispensed the church patronage in its gifts, saw to the repairs of the property, the improvement and enlargement of the domain, the enclosing of the parks, the preservation of the game, and the defence of the priory's rights against encroachment. We find him on several occasions buying manors, negotiating for loans with the Lombard merchants for the purpose, and then proceeding to Rome for a Bull from the Pope, to enable him to hold such additional lands for the good of the house. He rebuilds farm-houses when they have been destroyed by his savage neighbors, the Scots.

Under the prior and sub-prior were many other officers; the *sacristan*, who was a kind of treasurer, taking charge also of the concentrated church plate and utensils, the repair and lighting of the church, the due performance of religious services, and receiving all fees, gifts, and donations, made at the high altar. The *cellarer*, or bursar, was styled "the second father of the convent," for he looked after the substantials. He superintended the hospitality of the house, and was purveyor and master of the refectory, kitchen, cellar, and bakehouse. The *hospitaller*, or guest-master, took charge of the guests' hall, and did the honors of the house to the visitors, saw that they had food and drink enough, and that the mats were properly spread at night,—for, in those primitive times, beds were as yet unknown. Then the *infirmarer* took charge of the sick in the infirmarium; he was usually well skilled in diseases and their treatment, and monks were the best doctors of that time. The dwellers in the priory, over whom these exercised their offices, consisted of from fifteen to eighteen *canons*, or cloister monks, besides three or four *conversi*, or lay brethren, generally artists, and who did the skilled work of the establishment, as well as gave their occasional services to the wealthy families in the neighborhood.

But the inhabitants of the priory were often rudely interrupted in their peaceful pursuits, by the wild forays of their fierce neighbors, the Scots. They broke in on them again and again; drove off their cattle; destroyed their crops; desecrated their house, and carried off their utensils,—the monks being on several occasions, entirely dispersed, and the priory deserted. At this time of day, when York is only an hour's journey from Scotland, by the iron-road, it is with difficulty we can realize to our minds a period. not so very remote, when border arrays and destructive invasions, by breechless barbarians, were of regular, often of almost annual occurrence!

The rude and barbarous times, however, have now entirely passed away; the Scots are civilised, and breeched like their neighbors; the two countries are now firmly and peacefully united as the county of York and Lancaster; and no one now fears a border foray or a Scottish raid. The old monks too, have departed; the sound of their chains no longer rises up from the priory in the valley; armigeri, villeins slaves, and bowmen, have disappeared; and only the mouldering wreck, "an osseous fragment, a broken. blackened shin-bone of the dead old ages," remains to point out that such things *have been.*

ANGLICAN LIBELS UPON THE HOLY SEE.

(From the Catholic Standard.)

A few weeks since we had occasion to expose a wanton and foul calumny in a dissenting organ, on the Catholic priest at Birkenhead. To-day it becomes our duty to notice a still more infamous slander upon the Court of Rome, by the weekly (query weakly) organ of Anglicanism. We have seen too much of the malignity of the print in question, to be surprised at its taking liberties with truth, in its puny efforts to maintain the unholy alliance of Church and State; but we had not, we own, anticipated so astounding an onslaught, not only upon veracity, but upon common sense, as the following, which professes to be an extract from the letter of a correspondent:

"On one occasion, one of the Cardinals observed to my informant, that 'he was glad to hear by the report from England, that the principles of Catholicism (Popery) were rapidly reviving and spreading in that country.' To this my friend replied that he hoped the principles of the truly Catholic Church of England were becoming more valued and better understood. The Cardinal replied that he did not mean those principles; but the doctrines and practices of his own Church—that Catholic Church of Rome in connection with the Papal See; and, he added, 'you must not wonder much at this progress of our cause in your land. We fully expect it, and have long looked for it. We have had men preaching in the pulpits of your Establishment who have received dispensations from the Pope to remain within its pale and conform to its rights; while they are the children of the Pope and in secret communion with the chair of St. Peter. And besides this, we have had for years students in your University at Oxford, whom we have permitted to take the oaths and pledges and conform to all the academical rules required by that University, and whose expenses in passing through it have been provided by the Sacred College *de propaganda fide*. This had been going on now for a long time, and the progress of Catholic principles in England is but the natural result of this sacred concern of the Holy See for the spiritual interests of your deluded countrymen, now estranged from the common mother of all the faithful.' These are merely the *ipsissima verba* of the account contained in the letter to me, and you may publish them as actual and undeniable facts."

The editor declares his credence in the report of his correspondent. Now we not only declare from internal evidence of falsity, furnished by the paragraph itself, that it is a flagitious calumny in every part, but we unhesitatingly charge the Anglican organ with either inventing the story or inserting it with full knowledge of its scandalously false and libellous character. If the story be true, let him name his correspondent, and the Cardinal referred to. If these names be withheld, after this challenge to the proof, the public will be at liberty to pronounce the tale, as undoubtedly they will pronounce it, "an ingenious device" akin to the *forged* encyclical perpetrated by Parson Todd, and published by Parson McGhee, at Exeter Hall, in 1830—which the honest Mr. G. Pinch indignantly pronounced as an iniquitous mode of sustaining what he conceived to be truth, by weapons stolen from the armory of Satan. No sane man can, of course, believe upon every line of it. If the *Propaganda* were as base as they are here represented, it is not very likely that a Cardinal would proclaim the disgraceful fact, and that too in conversation with a Protestant clergyman, who according to the writers showing, is no "Romaniser." The publication of so monstrous and incredible a story, proves