

PREFACE

IN the year 1125, St Bernard of Clairvaux, writing to William, Abbot of St Thierry, asks:—

“What mean those ridiculous monstrosities in the courts of cloisters; those filthy apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half-men, those spotted tigers, those fighting soldiers and horn-blowing hunters; many bodies under one head, or many heads on one body; here a serpent's tail attached to a quadruped, there a quadruped's head on a fish; here a beast presenting the foreparts of a horse, and dragging after it the rear of a goat; there a learned animal with the hind parts of a horse?”

It is a question which must have suggested itself to many, when surveying the wealth of imagery on a Norman doorway or the carvings of stalls and benches. What does it all mean? How did it get into churches of all places? And where did it come from? This is the first subject which is dealt with in this volume. To deal with it adequately would be to write a complete History of Ecclesiastical Zoology as it is set forth in the Bestiaries, the popular text-books in the Middle Ages; there is not room here for any such ambitious attempt. Yet even this brief synopsis of the contents of the Bestiaries may be of service; for the elucidation of the meaning and origin of the subjects represented on the misericords throws light on mediæval art in general; on the representations in stone on Norman doorways and fonts, on the carvings of Gothic capitals and arcading, on wall paintings, incised tiles, stained glass, and much else.

But the carvings tell us much more than what mediæval people thought about Birds, Beasts, and Fishes. They are a record of just what stately historians omit, and what it is of real interest to know; not the ways of courts and politicians, campaigns and generals, but the simple everyday life of ordinary folk; they constitute a History of Social Life in England in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries as it was lived by common folk; a history which represents things as they are without the prejudices and prepossessions which so often make written record untrustworthy. What we see is an honest