

THE glory of Bridgwater, in mediæval days, was divided between its feudal castle and its splendid parish church. William Briwere founded the former ; the latter was in existence before the time of the Norman Conquest. Before, however, these two institutions come to be dealt with in turn, it may be well to glance at the dim traces we possess of another church which once existed in the town. Amongst the many valuable and choice documents now in the possession of the Corporation of Bridgwater is one dating from the latter part of the thirteenth century, probably from the reign of Edward I. It conveys certain properties to old St. Bridget's Church. The seal of the deed is lost ; the wording is as follows.

Know present and to come that I William de Wemedone, son of Daniel de Edmestone, have given, granted, and by this my present charter confirmed to Peter de Bruges, Rector of the church of St. Bridget, all my meadow in Crow Pulle which I had of the gift of Daniel de Edmestone, my father, pertaining to my tenement of La Wytescote. Which said meadow lies between the meadow which was Walter de Cheselade's towards the east and Hugh de la Churcheye's meadow towards the west, and extends in length towards the south side and the north. To have and to hold the aforesaid meadow with all its appurtenances to the afore- said Peter and his heirs of the chief lords of the same fee freely, quietly, well, and in peace by hereditary right for ever, with free ingress and egress. Doing therefor to the same chief lords the services due and accustomed, as much as pertain to so much free meadow in the same fee. The aforesaid Peter and his heirs also rendering to me and my heirs or assigns one rose at the Feast of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist for all service and secular demand. And I the said William and my heirs or assigns will warrant, acquit and defend the aforesaid meadow with all its appurtenances to the aforesaid Peter and his heirs against all mortals for ever. And for this gift, grant and confirmation of the present charter the said Peter gave me three marks of silver in hand. In witness whereof I have set my seal to this present charter. These being witnesses : Hugh de Popham ; Robert de Burty ; Walter de Sydenham ; Hugh Godwyne ; William le Large ; Robert of the Bakehouse (dePistrino) ; William the Clerk ; and others."

The document is endorsed by the grantor, William of Wembdon.

Several of these witnesses appear also in other current documents, and some are well-known men. But of the church of St. Bridget in Bridgwater no further trace as yet has been

discovered. It has disappeared, as have so many ancient buildings, entirely from history and from sight. Crowpulle, now known as Crowpill, was and is a little stream flowing on the north side of the town eastwards into the River Parret, close by where the docks now are situate. Its vicinity is fairly well indicated by the Crowpill Inn, on the Chilton Road.

Saint Brigid, Bridget, Brigida, or Brighid was a most notable person who flourished, it is stated, in the fifth century. Her name was afterwards curtailed into St. Bride. The centre of her influence was at Kildare*, in Ireland, and it spread to England and Scotland. Many churches were dedicated to her, and so greatly was she revered that the Gaelic poets looked upon her as equal in greatness to St. Mary the Virgin.

Except Mary none was similar
As we esteem unto Brighid.
May the blessing of Brighid and of God
Be upon those join in reciting this.
By whom may I be guarded —
Mary and Saint Brighid.

It is advanced, with much probability, that the name of St. Bridget is an offspring of Druidic worship. *Brighid was not a personal name but an official title, nor is it a title of one person and age only, but of all ages and persons within the limits of that dispensation. Brighid, the favourite Gaelic name, was recognized as the Vesta of fire wherever the Gaelic traditions were kept up.* When the Druids took their departure from Anglesea they made their home in Kildare, set up their sanctuary, where burnt the miraculous fire, where was the cauldron which typified renovation, with the priestess or goddess Brighid at the head of the worship. *With the cauldron and the perpetual fire was connected the choir or sisterhood of the sacred virgins or Druidesses, the vestal keepers of the fire and the cauldron.* There is no doubt that Kildare became famous for the miracles said to be performed there by the glorious Brighid, and that Pagan customs were known to survive in that place even as late as the beginning of the thirteenth century. Henry of London, Archbishop of Dublin, in 1220 put an end to many irregularities connected with Brighid's rites, though the cult lingered here and there, in remote places, up to the time of the Reformation.

There was at Kildare, writes Mr Irvine, while Ireland was yet the Holy Island (of Druidism), a central authority of Druidism, a circular pyræum with all its mystic rites and sacred vestas, under the sway of Brighid. It seems easy enough to

perceive that Druidism in its ideal representation, Christianized, is the true explanation of St. Brigid the divine virgin, no matter at what date her sanctuary at Kildare first called itself Christian."**

However all this may be, and whatever may have been the origin of St. Bridget and her story, it is undoubted that in mediaeval times she was looked upon in Britain as a Christian saint, and was revered as such. Two other churches in Somerset are dedicated to her memory, at Brean and at Chelvey. It was said that she came to Glastonbury in 488 A.D., and that after her return thence to Ireland a chapel on the Island of Beckery (near Glastonbury, hard by the River Brue), formerly dedicated to St. Mary Magdalene, was known henceforth as St. Bridget's Chapel. The surrounding fields, known as *Brides*, suggest the truth of the tradition. Only the foundations of the chapel — or rather of two chapels, one within the other — remain. It was once believed that St. Bridget's burial place was at Glastonbury, but this honour was also claimed by Kildare, and by Abernethy in Scotland. Somerset has always had frequent communication with Ireland, from the very earliest days. It was therefore natural enough that Beckery and Bridgwater, Brean and Chelvey — all situated within easy communication with the Severn Sea — should have churches of St. Bridget. At Cannington there is St. Bride's Field, still marked on the map. It may once have formed part of the endowment of our lost Bridgwater church.

There is an interesting will of Edmund de Saint Maur, Knight dated 1421, which shows the testator's love for St. Bridget.

On the day of St. Laurence, a.d. 1421, I, Edmund de Saint Maur, Knight, Lord of St. Bridget, in Lower Gwent [a province in South Wales] and of Chelvey in the county of Somerset, make my will in this manner:

I bequeath my body to be buried in the Church of St. Bridget of Chelvey, if I chance to die in England ; and if I chance to die in Wales, I will that my body shall be buried in the Church of St. Bridget in Lower Gwent. Then Sir Edmund proceeds with his other bequests. I bequeath to the Augustinian Friars of Bristol los., to be distributed amongst them one by one, to celebrate for my soul in honour of the four evangelists. To the Friars Preachers of Bristol 6s. 8d., to be distributed amongst them one by one, to celebrate for my soul in honour of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. To the Friars Minor there, los. as above, to celebrate in honour of all the

apostles and saints of God. To the Friars Carmelites of Bristol 20s. as above, to wit, one-half in honour of all the martyrs, and the other half in honour of all the confessors of God. To the Friars Minor there, los. as above, to celebrate for my soul in honour of the blessed Michael and Gabriel, Archangels. To the Friars Carmelites, 5s. as above, to celebrate in honour of St. Mary Magdalene, and all the virgins and all the angels of God. Lastly, with divers sums bequeathed to Sir Robert Fitzjames, Rector of Backwell, and to others, he continues, I bequeath to the fabric of the Chapel of the Blessed Mary of St. Bridget in Lower Gwent 100s. This was a very large sum of money. St. Bridget had in Sir Edmund Saint Maur a faithful servant indeed.

Now at this very period, i.e. the end of the thirteenth century, there was no lack of churches in Bridgwater, which was then what we should now call quite a small town. St. Mary's Church was, and had long been, in the full vigour of active work. The Hospital of St. John in Eastover had its chapel. So also had the House of the Friars Minor in Friarn Street. There was a chapel within the walls of Bridgwater Castle. Wembdon Church lay close by, and most of the great manor houses in the neighbourhood possessed oratories or chapels of their own. It may be asked, where was the use, or need, of yet another church, Saint Bridget's, in Bridgwater? In order to answer the question we must entirely divest ourselves of modern ideas. Churches to-day are built in some sort of ratio to the number of the population of a town. In mediaeval times such a notion never entered any one's head. There could not be, it was held, too many churches. It gave the keenest joy to any knight or landowner or merchant to build, to endow, or partly endow, a church or a chantry. It was not only one of the very few outlets for the expenditure of a man's wealth, it was also reckoned to be a most pious act, which would be of much efficacy in gaining for the donor the favour of God and of the saints. Moreover, the churches were always open ; their altars were accessible to rich and poor alike, and the beautiful buildings were very largely used by the people. Not only were religious services conducted in them ; wills were proved there, bargains were ratified, courts were held, and many secular transactions gained additional security and validity by taking place within the church's walls. Thus, in a document dated July 3rd, 1480, Robert Catesby, clerk ; Nicholas Catesby, gentleman ; and Thomas Barker execute a bond to John Kendall and John

Hugyns, esquires (Bridgwater merchants), in £25 to ensure the payment of a sum of £10 to the two latter on the twentieth day after Michaelmas next ensuing. The money was to be paid in the church of St. Bridget (St. Bride) in Fleet Street, London, between the hours of seven and ten in the morning. The sacred place wherein the debt was to be paid no doubt added to the fear of failure to redeem what was due, and also strengthened the probability to the creditors that the promise would be faithfully kept. Business hours in Fleet Street have changed since 1480. Few churches now are open daily for worship, or for any other purpose, before seven o'clock in the morning, and very few heads of mercantile firms, or even their responsible representatives, are ready to settle accounts at that early hour. *Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis.*

So far as is known, even the memory of there having once been a St. Bridget's Church in Bridgwater has almost vanished. One or two old inhabitants, on being questioned, have confessed to a faint recollection of having heard its former existence mentioned long ago. It is now one of the forgotten incidents of ancient times. It was probably a small chapelry, situated on the north side of the town, in the neighbourhood of Blacklands or The Mount. Its influence can hardly have been great, or its duration long, for no mention is made of any of its chaplains or rectors after the time of Peter de Bruges. Very probably its slender endowments passed into the possession of the Augustinians of St. John's Hospital in Eastover, or became merged in those of one of the endowed chantries of St. Mary's Parish Church. Such alienations were not unusual, and sometimes a small foundation became the basis of a large and later church scheme. Schemes for church and chantry building then were indeed very numerous. It is rather the custom nowadays to attribute the zeal, so characteristic of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, to mediaeval superstition. It was not so; it was the outcome, for the most part, of religious aspirations which were intensely strong, and which found their obvious satisfaction in endowing a chantry or in building a church to the honour of God. It was an Age of Faith.

O had I lived in that great day,
How had its glory new
Fill'd earth and heaven, and caught away
My ravished spirit too!
No thoughts that to the world belong

Had stood against the wave
Of love which set so deep and strong
From Christ's then open grave.

And centuries came and ran their course,
And unspent all that time
Still, still went forth that Child's dear force,
And still was at its prime.

Thus writes Matthew Arnold in *Obermann Once More*. And a very different writer, of far earlier date, expresses in quaint and beautiful language the deep and absorbing devotion of an age which had never learned to doubt, and which was satisfied, heart and soul, with the simple belief in a Saviour of men.

Let fal downe thy ne, and lift up thy hart,
Behold thy Maker on yon cros al to torn.
Remember His wondis that for the did smart,
Gotyn without syn, and on a Virgin born.
Al His head percid with a crown of thorns,
Alas! Man, thy hart oght to brest in too.
Bewar of the devyl when he blawis his horn,
And pray thy good aungel convey the.



*See Mr. Christopher Irvine's *St Brighid and Her Times*. 37 42

** *St Brighid and Her Times*, 38

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