

# WHEN ASHRIDGE WAS A MONASTERY

By "BEORCHAM"

It is surprising how many people are deceived by the highly ornamental façade of Ashridge House. The battlements and other mediæval features which give the building the appearance of an ancient castle are less than 140 years old—but that is not to say that the history of Ashridge began in the 19th century. An earlier building on the same site was almost as old as Berkhamsted Parish Church, and for the first two and a half centuries of its long life it was one of the most famous monasteries in the Home Counties.

Over 650 years have passed since Edmund, Earl of Cornwall—a nephew of Henry III—founded and endowed Ashridge monastery. It bore little resemblance to the Duke of Bridgewater's mansion which succeeded it, but in the eyes of mediæval pilgrims it must have looked imposing indeed. Through a clearing in the trees they saw the rambling buildings of the church, hall, chapter house, hospital and cloisters, enclosed in a court with a handsome gateway. A royal charter confirming Edmund's grant of the manor of "Aescrugge" to the rector and brethren of the monastery was given in 1286, and five years later the king himself paid a Christmas visit to Ashridge, holding what has been described as a parliament to hear pleas and petitions.

## The Bonhommes

A curious story is told of the foundation of Ashridge. During his travels in Saxony, Edmund was shown a golden casket which, in the words of the 16th century chronicler Holinshed, contained "a portion of the blood of our precious Saviour." He brought the relic to England, and, after bestowing a third part on Hailes Abbey, founded Ashridge in honour of the remainder. The story is not unlike that of many others concerning alleged relics of our Lord's blood and the wood of the "true Cross." As will be shown later, fakes were not unknown even in the 13th century.

The Ashridge monks were known as Bonhommes—a new religious order Edmund introduced from France to guard the relic and pray for the soul of his father "to the world's end." Amid the quiet parklands, the rector and nineteen brethren, wearing ash-grey habits, must have struck the last note of solemnity.

The Bonhommes were bound to service by strict Augustinian rules. Their day began at midnight with an hour's singing and chanting in the chapel. Then, after a few hours' sleep, they arose again at dawn to a breakfast of bread and ale, spending the rest of the morning at prayer. The afternoon would be devoted to toiling in the fields or in the stables, dairy and granary. The brethren did not forget that one of the Bonhommes' aims was the advancement of learning, and several studied medicine or

illuminated manuscripts. One artistic monk decorated the cloisters with 40 scriptural paintings which were still visible when the buildings were pulled down at the end of the 18th century.

Incidentally, the monks' table manners scarcely conformed to modern ideas of etiquette. They were directed not to spit or wipe their noses on the tablecloth!

## The "Relic" Exposed

Ashridge monastery prospered. Countless pilgrims came to view the relic of blood, paying handsomely for the privilege, and many bequeathed their bodies to be buried in the chapel of Ashridge, again to the advantage of the rector and brethren. The most famous benefactor was the Black Prince, who, while living at Berkhamsted Castle, frequently visited the monastery and augmented the endowment. In his will he bequeathed "to the high altar of our house of Asherugge . . . our great table of gold and silver, all full of precious reliques, and in its midst a cross of the sacred wood of the cross." Another royal resident of Berkhamsted Castle, Duchess Cicely of York, bequeathed in 1495 a vestment and "embrowdered" robes of crimson damask. A famous Bishop of Winchester, Cardinal Henry Beaufort, and his servant, Richard Peteworth, provided funds for rebuilding or restoring part of the monastery in 1477.

But by that time Ashridge was nearing the end of the first phase of its long history. In 1540, Henry VIII was entertained by the monks, and little did they imagine that only five years later he would suppress their foundation with all other monasteries. The king's commissioners marched into the courtyard, and the brethren, powerless to remain and guard the "precious relic," surrendered. The last rector, Thomas Waterhouse (whom Henry VIII called his "gentleman priest") afterwards lived in retirement in Castle Street, and bequeathed his vestment of crimson velvet to the Parish Church. Three years after the monastery had been dissolved, the "blood" was exhibited by Holbeach, Bishop of Rochester, during a long oration on the alleged evils of monks and monasteries. He declared the relic to be clarified honey, coloured with saffron; another verdict was that it was the dried blood of a duck.

The bell which for 250 years had called the monks to prayer was silenced. But Ashridge, unlike many other monasteries, was not left to fall into decay. It became the home of Henry VIII's three children, Edward, Mary and Elizabeth, and thus a new and even more interesting phase in the history of Ashridge was opened. The story of Elizabeth's arrest at Ashridge and the mansion's long association with the Bridgewater family must be deferred for a later article.