

Æ Canterbury "Peculiar."

By M. PAIGE WOOD.

SELDOM has a place of equal prominence in its day left so little record on the written page of history as the ancient Archiepiscopal Manor of Mayfield; and few stories have been more generally forgotten than those relating to the part it played over a long period in ecclesiastical affairs. From the position of importance it occupied throughout the Middle Ages, Mayfield has declined to a present quiet obscurity shared with villages of the Sussex Weald which have no such notable past behind them. But until it was shorn by Parliament, some sixty years ago, of the last vestige of privilege accruing from its fallen state, it ranked with certain other parishes in the environing See of Chichester as a Canterbury "peculiar." Its clergy had been answerable previously to no authority save that of Canterbury, whose Archbishops continued to exercise sole prerogative and jurisdiction within its bounds as they had done from time immemorial, long after the lands over which they claimed such right had passed from their possession. The Act of 1849, which, with a few exceptions, abolished "peculiarities" and the abuses to which their anomalous independence was liable, restored Mayfield after more than a thousand years to the diocese in which it is geographically situated, the seat of whose Episcopate was transferred from Selsea to Chichester in 1075.

When Cranmer, at the Reformation, made a virtue of necessity and granted "his chief manor-house" of Mayfield to the King as a sop to Cerberus, in the hope of securing other revenues of the Church from sequestration, he was relinquishing to the exigence of his day a title vested in his predecessors since the time of the Saxon Heptarchy. Mayfield formed part of the great Manor of Mellinges, or Malling, given to Christ Church, Canterbury, by a grant confirmed at a Council held by Egbert, King of Wessex, at Kingston-on-Thames in 838. The strip of

land so bestowed extended from Lewes to the Kentish border, and included, besides Mayfield, the ancient collegiate foundation of South Malling, and the Chapels of Buxted, Glynde, Edburton, and Lindfield.

Ten miles to the south of Tunbridge Wells, and served by a single line of rail connecting it with that place and with Eastbourne, Mayfield to-day is one of the prettiest of the many hill-villages of the Weald. Coventry Patmore, who loved it with a poet's fervour, calls it "the sweetest village in England." It occupies a rounded eminence in the midst of undulating, wooded country, boasting, despite devastation wrought in the past by extensive iron-smelting in the district, remnants of the vast forest of the Andredeswald, which in earlier times covered the whole of Sussex save its chalk downs and seaboard marshes. Abounding in the picturesque, and arresting the visitor's interest by its many survivals of departed greatness, Mayfield affords material to the artist and the archæologist alike in the irregular variety of roof-line and house-front displayed along its steep, wide street, its ancient chimneys and ornate gable-ends, and the fine examples it possesses of stone and timbered dwellings preserved to hale and serviceable old age. Conspicuous on the south side of the High Street is the elaborate Elizabethan frontage of the "Middle House," bearing the date 1575, while that of the "Stone House," close by, is 1641. Opposite these the massive masonry of the parish church is hidden away behind a row of tenements, whose delightfully quaint backs abut on the churchyard and allow little more than the rather dwarfed proportions of a shingled spire to appear above their tiled and time-worn roofs.

Eadmer, the historian monk of Canterbury, in his "Life of St. Dunstan," records the building by the great Churchman, about the middle of the tenth century, of a church of wood or wattle at Magavelda for the evangelization of the wild men of the Andredeswald, together with a Bishop's house, which may have been little more than the enlargement of an existing cell from the monastic college at South Malling. From Magavelda

or Magefeud, subsequent orthography has rung the changes on Magefeld, Maghfeld, and Maighfeld, until it has evolved the pleasant English of Mayfield, with the less euphonious form of "Mefful" it takes on the broad tongue of Sussex.

Needless to say, no traces of Dunstan's primitive structure remain; but by the twelfth century more substantial buildings had replaced them, and the parish church was by that time dedicated to the Saint. A devastating fire in 1389 left little of the town or of this second church standing, although the adjacent Bishop's palace was uninjured by the flames. With the exception of its tower, of particular strength and solidity, and parts of the west end, which still show stones discoloured by the burning, the present fine church belongs to the last decade of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. Its large east window is a flamboyant type of Decorated rarely met with in parish churches in England. At the east end of the south aisle was formerly a chantry, probably that of St. Alban. The present font dates from 1666, but one of much greater age has been recently recovered from secular uses in a cottage garden. The palace, situated in the direct line of communication between Canterbury and Lewes, doubtless served at first mainly as a convenient lodging during archiepiscopal journeyings, but was added to and rebuilt by one and another of its founder's successors until it became a frequent and favourite residence of the primates of England in medieval days, where, as an old account sets forth, they kept "in those times a prodigious Ritinue and lived in great State and Splendour." The present village has grown up on the hill-side about the church and palace, which, in wood or stone, have crowned its summit for nearly a thousand years.

St. Dunstan's memory is jealously preserved at Mayfield, where the Archbishop, whose puissant figure had long dominated the Court and policy of the Kings of Wessex, sought privacy and quiet in his later days, and where he exercised upon Sussex iron his earlier skill as a craftsman. There, local tradition has it, the Evil One, with singular lack of inventiveness, appeared to him at his Mayfield forge, as he had done before on Glastonbury

Tor, in the alluring guise of a fair woman, to suffer the same penalty at the hands of the doughty Saint. The tongs with which St. Dunstan wrought, and, it may be, tweaked the Devil's nose, are still preserved at Mayfield, and may be seen of the curious; while the hot chalybeate springs ten miles away at Tunbridge Wells bear witness to the Brobdingnagian stride the Archfiend made to cool his outraged feature in their waters.

The earliest existing deed executed at Mayfield is one dated from the palace by Archbishop Boniface of Savoy in 1260, having reference to a Charter of Fairs and Markets obtained by him from Henry III. It fixed a weekly market, and a three days' fair on the vigil, feast, and morrow of St. Dunstan's Day, combining, as was customary in those days of difficult travel, the religious observance of the patronal festival with secular business and amusement.

The steep streets of the medieval town witnessed an amount of traffic with the great world beyond that would amaze the quiet village of to-day: when the Primate kept his state in the hall of the palace above, and its massive gate-house echoed the coming and going of panoplied knights and Church dignitaries, of King's equerries, as well as barefoot friars, at such times as the Archbishop exercised the hospitality enjoined on his office, or received the homage of his greater tenants. Among the latter there came in 1279, during the primacy of John Packham, Henry de Berham, a great-nephew of the fierce Fitzurse, who had taken a bloody part in the sacrilegious murder of à Becket at Canterbury nine years before. To St. Thomas à Becket is credited the introduction of the fig-tree into Sussex, where he first planted it, tradition says, at his palace of Mayfield. Certainly some venerable trees there still flourish and bear fruit, as do the lineal descendants of others said to have been planted by him where the famous fig-gardens of West Tarring now stand.

Royalty did not disdain to lie at Mayfield in those early days, and all the town may well have been agog over the presence of the King of England, and the housing of his knights and servitors on the three occasions when Edward I. visited the palace while

Robert de Winchelsea was Archbishop. Some years later, in 1332, town and palace were called upon to furnish accommodation for Bishops and clerics from all parts of Southern England, who, with their retinues, demanded suitable lodging during the Provincial Synod, known as the "Concilium Maghefeldense," convened there by Archbishop Meopham for the purpose of enforcing a more decorous observance of festivals and holidays than at the time prevailed. Ordinations were frequently held at Mayfield throughout the fourteenth century. Nor is the palace without its notable death-roll, since three Archbishops passed away within its walls—Simon Meopham, in 1332; Stratford, his successor, in 1348; and Archbishop Islip, who resided almost permanently at Mayfield, and to whom the palace owes its great Gothic Synod Hall, in 1366.

Some confusion has been made for historians by a John de Wycliffe who was Vicar of Mayfield from 1361 to 1380, and was contemporary with his better-known namesake, the herald of the Reformation and translator of the first complete English Bible. Both were Wardens of Oxford Colleges, which was a prime factor in entangling their biographies; but later research has clearly established the distinct identity of the Mayfield Wycliffe, who died at Horsted Keynes a year before the death of the famous reformer took place at Lutterworth in 1384. The records of deeds executed at Mayfield by a long succession of prelates between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, as contained in the Archiepiscopal Registers, makes varied reading. Among mandates and citations dealing with purely ecclesiastical matters, or concerned with the temporalities of probate and licence, is sandwiched the entry of a royal marriage, the imposition of a tax upon the town to subsidize the Scottish wars of Edward I., and prayers and thanksgivings for the success of English arms against the Spanish Fleet in 1350.

The secularized manor granted to the Crown by Cranmer came twenty years later into the hands of Sir Thomas Gresham, builder of the Royal Exchange and founder of Gresham College. Queen Elizabeth, during a progress through Kent and Sussex

paid her trusty councillor a visit at the palace, which imposed on her host the obligation of constructing a new staircase for Her Majesty's use in the north tower, and closed the record of Mayfield's royal guests and long familiarity with pomp and pageant—unless we add to it an unostentatious pilgrimage made to the ruins nearly three centuries afterwards by Queen Victoria as a girl of fourteen, when, with the Duchess of Kent and a party of friends, the young Princess rode out from Tunbridge Wells to a picnic in that historic spot.

The "Old Place," as it came to be locally designated, was subsequently purchased by the Baker family, owners of the "Middle House" in Mayfield, and was occupied by them until, in 1730, a Mr. Michael Baker utilized such of its materials as could conveniently be removed to build himself the "Lower House," at the west end of the village, leaving the more massive portions of towers and walls naked and roofless to the ravages of time and weather. The gate-house, its lofty arch built up with stones from the ruined palace, was let as a dwelling to humbler tenants. All that was standing when, in 1863, the Duchess of Leeds acquired the site for a Roman Catholic Convent and Novitiate, and the late Edward Pugin undertook the task of restoration, was masonry of a sort to defy alike the depredations of men and of the elements. After more than a century's neglect and vandalism, the walls and arches of the great Synod hall, the spacious fifteenth-century porch, with its ribbed vaulting and floriated central boss, lower portions of the west tower, and the private apartments communicating with a wide stone staircase in the south-east wing of the palace, remained intact.

While the palace contains work of much earlier date, the architecture of the great hall belongs to the middle of the fourteenth century—the best and purest period of Decorated Gothic. The finely proportioned windows occupying three of its four bays are beautiful examples of the particular form of tracery distinguished in the adjoining county as "Kentish." Three arches of noble span and peculiar depressed construction support the

roof; their counterpart is, it is believed, only to be found in England in the single stone arch of the smaller fourteenth-century banqueting-hall at Ightham Mote, not twenty miles distant in Kent. The weight of these immense arches and the roof timbers they were constructed to carry was in part borne by others built longitudinally between the buttresses of the outer walls. Corbels and doorways of the interior are enriched with sculptured figures and foliage of admirable design and workmanship; and some fine stone diaper-work, once forming the back of the Bishop's throne at the upper end of the hall, was found uninjured behind a covering of plaster when the restoration began, and is preserved and shown with St. Dunstan's tongs and anvil and a few other relics of Mayfield's historic past. Three arches at the lower end of the hall formerly communicated with the kitchens of the palace and the servants' lodgings above them.

Pugin's restoration of the great Council hall as the convent chapel, and the careful adaptation of other parts of the ruined palace to the uses of cloister and offices, following as closely as possible the plan of the original buildings, has crowned Mayfield again with the irregular mass of roof and turret that was once its glory. Parish church and convent chapel, though no longer in one communion, rise in picturesque proximity from the hill-top, with only the low boundary wall of a quiet God's acre between. A community of the Roman Catholic Society of the Holy Child Jesus entered into occupation of the palace in 1863, to which a large convent school is now attached. Roman Catholicism would seem to have been busy of late years establishing its educational outposts upon the wooded crests of this fair corner of Sussex, where tradition lingers round the grey stones of an historic past, for in direct line with Mayfield meadows a Xaverian college stands sentinel above the trees to northward, and, in turn, looks out across the valley to another convent school which tops the ridge at Bletchingley, a few miles distant, and owes its foundation, like that of Mayfield, to the zeal and liberality of the late Duchess of Leeds.

The stranger admitted by the portress within the great gate-house of the whilom palace, whose lofty, iron-studded doors close jealously on the village street, can scarcely fail to be conscious of an harmonious environment, linking the ancient buildings with the ordered calm of their present setting. A tranquil stillness, far removed from the restless spirit of to-day, broods over smooth-shaven lawns and paths, bordered by sweet-smelling box, which lie before the grey south front of time-worn stone and Gothic tracery ; while from the vaulted shadow of the chapel porch echoes faintly the sonorous Latin of the daily offices familiar to its founders long ago. Out of the vicissitudes of Time, in the hushed evening of their days, the venerable walls that have looked down on conclave and feasting of yore, and through the hundred winters were left gaunt and desolate to the mantling ivy and the hooting owl, are come to a fair peace, broken by no harsher sounds than children's voices and the chanting of the nuns.

