

THE JEWS AND THE JEWRY WALL, by James Thompson, Esq., Local Secretary for Leicester of the Society of Antiquaries, London.

THE Jewry Wall in this town, which will interest the visitors drawn to Leicester by the Congress of the Institute, chiefly as a relic of Roman masonry, has also its claims upon the attention of the antiquarian enquirer on other grounds. As its name implies—a name, by the way, it has always had in the memory of man, and by which it is known in ancient records—it was once the quarter in which the Israelites of former times were compelled to seclude themselves, owing to the aversion with which they were regarded by our Christian forefathers. The eminent historian of Leicestershire, Nichols, in the first part of his first volume, says truly “Whatever may have been the first destination of these (the Jewry) walls, there can be no doubt but that they were originally of Roman construction; and that the name of *Jewry* was adopted when that part of Leicester became the peculiar residence of the Jews, who, in all great towns, were customarily limited to a particular district.” The historian goes on to give examples of the usage; as in London, in connection with the places called *the Jewry*, *Poor Jewry*, and the *Old Jewry*; in Cambridge, Worcester, and elsewhere. The inference is, therefore, that in many, if not most, of the principal boroughs of this country, there were Jews’ Quarters. In Leicester, the old fragment of Roman masonry of which we are speaking—perhaps in the early medieval period surrounded by ruins of large Roman structures—was deemed a refuge which was good enough for the outcasts, and where no Christian would care to intrude.

In the earlier half of the thirteenth century a tide of persecution appears to have set in against the Jews. Thus we find that, at Derby, the burgesses paid a fine to Henry the Third for granting them a charter excluding the Jews from their borough. The same king also granted to the merchants of Newcastle that no Jew should stay or dwell in their town. Mr. Gough, in his edition of Camden’s *Britannia*,\* states that the Jews were not permitted to reside in the borough of Carnarvon.

But what I have to invite your attention to, is the treatment experienced about the time here mentioned by the Israelites of Leicester. It is so expressively indicated in a document or charter of which a free translation is here rendered, that I leave it to tell its own story. I am about to read a charter, undated, given by Simon de Montfort to his burgesses of Leicester:

“Simon de Montfort, son of Earl Simon de Montfort, Lord of Leicester, to all the faithful in Christ, by whom this present document (paginam) may be seen or heard. Let it be universally known

\* Quoted by Nichols.

that I, for the health of my soul, and the souls of my ancestors and successors, have granted, and by this my present charter confirmed, for me and my heirs in perpetuity, to my burgesses of Leicester and their heirs, that no Jew or Jewess, in my time or in the time of my heirs, to the end of the world, shall within the liberty of the town of Leicester, inhabit, remain, or obtain any residence. I also wish and command that my heirs after me shall maintain that liberty entire, and shall guarantee it to the burgesses before-named in perpetuity. And in testimony of this I have appended my seal to the present charter. These being witnesses: Sir Aumery de Mitton, Sir Walter de Aquila, Sir Roger Blund, chaplain, William Bassett, William de Miravall, and others."

Shortly after the date of this charter, it cannot be doubted all the Jews and Jewesses made their exodus from their ancient quarter in Leicester; though, after the lapse of six centuries, their former home among us still bears its ancient designation.

In this trying crisis the wretched fugitives from Leicester found a protector. It has ever been the noble mission of woman to listen to the voice of pity, and the tender promptings of mercy. To their good fortune, the exiled Jews met with a friend in a kind-hearted lady, a near relative of the pitiless earl who had been their persecutor, Amicia, sister of the last Norman earl of Leicester, in the direct line of Robert Fitzparnel. He had no issue, but he had two sisters. Of these, Amicia became the wife of Simon de Montfort—the father of the Simon de Montfort under notice; and Margaret, married Saher de Quincy, the Earl of Winchester. This latter lady lost her husband in the year 1220, and thereafter appears to have devoted her widowed life to works of benevolence. It was she, in fact, who provided an asylum on her estates for the banished Jews of Leicester.

This little glimpse of forgotten history is obtained from a letter published in one of the volumes for which the public is indebted to the Master of the Rolls. Among the letters of Robert Grossetête which have escaped oblivion, is one addressed by him to "a very illustrious and dearly-beloved lady," Margaret de Quincy, Countess of Winchester; and we may infer it was written in reply to her enquiry how she should treat the Jews, for whom she had found a place of refuge. It has great value in more ways than one—as it affords internal evidence of the goodness of heart of the person to whom it was addressed, embodies the sentiments of probably the most enlightened ecclesiastics of his age regarding the Jews, and enables the antiquary to clear up partially an obscure point in local history.

The writer designates himself "Robert, Archdeacon of Leicester." He was, indeed, then in all probability a resident, and he may have first become acquainted with the countess before her marriage with Saher de Quincy, when he was the Vicar of S.

Margaret's, and she was living with her father at the Castle of Leicester. There was undoubtedly something in the character and disposition of Robert Grossetête calculated to inspire confidence, for he was evidently highly esteemed by Margaret de Quincy and her illustrious nephew, the great reformer, who intrusted his sons to him to receive at his hands their education. The Archdeacon's letter is too extended to present entire, but portions of it will well repay transcribing. The original I need scarcely say is in Latin. Here are extracts from the letter :—

“I offer you my sincere thanks for your bountiful support, which first bestowed upon me many acts of kindness, and has since enriched me with many more and greater. Although, however, your kindnesses may not demand reward, because they are real kindnesses, gratuitously bestowed, yet he is ungrateful who, when he can, does not requite a kindness. Wishing to offer you some recompense at least, for your many and great favours, I find nothing more appropriate to return than some wholesome advice necessary to your deserving of everlasting life. Two occasions have occurred on which I might tender wholesome advice to your excellency. For it has been intimated to me that the Jews whom the Earl of Leicester has driven from his municipality so that they might no longer piteously oppress the Christians with usury, your excellency has determined to gather together again on your domain. But if you resolve that they be collected together, you should first carefully consider in what manner they ought to be collected and protected.”

The Archdeacon then points out the sin of the Jews in crucifying Jesus Christ, and the fact of their dispersion, and expresses his belief in their ultimate salvation and return from captivity; but what on the present occasion we are chiefly concerned with, is the view which the most enlightened English ecclesiastic of the thirteenth century took of the treatment which the Christians were entitled to manifest to the Jews in the period in question. The Archdeacon continues :—

“But in the meantime, when the same people, remaining in unfaithfulness, blaspheme Christ, the Saviour of the world, and laugh at his suffering, they will be kept as captives by the chiefs of the world, as a punishment for their crime. And the chief men who hold them as captives ought to defend themselves, lest they be killed; and, at the same time, ought very strictly to restrain them, lest they oppress the Christians by usury, and ought also to take care that they procure for themselves food in return for the labour they are allowed to perform. But this is the last captivity of the Jews, and it is prophesied in many places in Scripture that they ought not to be put to death.”

Here the Archdeacon proceeds to enforce his statements by numerous quotations from Scripture. Throughout his lengthy letter he maintains that the Jews ought to be compelled laboriously

to cultivate the soil "for a kind of sustenance for their unhappy life," but ought to be allowed to live as "witnesses of the Christian faith in opposition to the Pagans." The purpose of the communication was clearly to shield the poor Israelites from the savage spirit of the times, which, not content with bitterly persecuting them, demanded their extirpation.

The letter also indirectly throws light on the charter, which, as observed before, was undated. It does it in this way. The writer designates himself "Archdeacon of Leicester." He was not yet elevated to the bishopric of Lincoln. Now, he ceased to be Archdeacon of Leicester in the year 1231. As he refers to the expulsion of the Jews as an accomplished fact, and as that was consequent on the concession of the extruding charter, the latter must therefore be dated before the year 1231, but subsequently to the death of Saher de Quincy, in 1220, during the widowhood of his countess.

While Grossetête lived, his exertions may have helped to temper the severity of Simon de Montfort's prejudices against the Jews, for he had great influence over the mind of his illustrious friend; but, dying in 1253, before the barons rose against Henry, that influence may be supposed to have died away in succeeding years. It had disappeared certainly when Simon de Montfort allowed the Jews of Winchester to be killed wholesale, loading his troops with the plunder taken from them and the other inhabitants. But everywhere the Jew was deemed the fair object of cruel hatred. Four hundred of them were massacred in London on the pretext of their having formed a design to betray the barons and the citizens; and one distinguished person, John Fitz-John, slew the richest Jew in the city with his own hand, and seized upon his treasure. In this case, however, it must be stated that Simon de Montfort made the ruffian surrender his booty.

My object has been, however, to show from one small example, how valuable, incidentally, is the publication of ancient documents by the Government, in the way of illustrating local history. How large an amount of light would be reflected on the history of the *nation*, were our municipal records to be in like manner translated and made public! If they were, I believe the history of England would need writing afresh; and until the materials can be collected from all sources, it must be deemed incomplete.

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In addition to the above Papers of local interest read during the Congress of the Institute in Leicester, the editor of these pages thinks the following remarks upon local antiquities by MR. J. H. PARKER, F.S.A., and the REV. J. G. JOYCE, two of the most learned of living Archæologists, should be preserved in a more permanent form than that furnished by the newspapers of the day:—