

THE ABBEY OF ST. MARY DE PRATIS, LEICESTER.

BY C. H. COMPTON, ESQ.

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As a preliminary to the investigation of the history of this important monastic institution, it will be well to ascertain who was its founder. That he was one Robert de Beaumont, who lived some time between the invasion of William, Duke of Normandy, until after the accession of Henry II. is clear enough; but there were, during that period, several persons of that name whom our early chroniclers have somewhat mixed up. With the aid of the valuable Paper on the "Genealogy and Armorial Ensigns of the Anglo-Norman Earls of Leicester," read by the late Mr. Planché ("Rouge Croix"), at our former Congress in this town in 1862,\* and the authorities he has referred to, we may venture on the authenticity of the following account:—

In the year A.D. 1107, according to Ordericus Vitalis, the earldom of Leicester, which had remained in the hands of the sovereign from the death of Edwin in 1071, was bestowed by King Henry I. on his chief councillor and firm adherent, Robert de Beaumont (otherwise Belmont and Bellomont), Comte de Meulan, son of Roger de Beaumont, Seigneur de Pontauderner, by Adelina, daughter of Waleran de Meudan; her brother Hugh having assumed the monastic habit, and died in the odour of sanctity without issue. Robert de Beaumont obtained from Henry, King of France, for a sum of money, the Castle of Meulan, and succeeded his uncle in the Comté. Accompanying his father Roger, "the old Sire de Beaumont," in the invading army of Duke William,† he distinguished himself by his valour

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† In the *Battle Abbey Roll*, so ably edited by the late Duchess of Cleveland, she says, speaking of Roger Beaumont, that he furnished sixty vessels to the Conqueror's fleet, and Wace places him on the Roll of the Norman Chiefs at Hastings; but both William de Pourton and Odericus state that he remained in Normandy, as President of the Council appointed by the Duke to assist the Duchess in the government, sending his young son Robert, to win his spurs at Senlac (Vol I., p. 145). And the *Dictionary of National Biography*, under the head of "Robert de Beaumont," follows the Duchess's account, and states that Roger de Beaumont remained in Normandy, and sent his sons with William; and of these, Robert fought at Senlac, though confused with his father by Wace.

<sup>a</sup> Half-Plate Prints may be obtained at Mr. Pickering's, at 1/- per copy.

at the Battle of Hastings; for which eminent service he had conferred upon him (*inter al.*) the greater part of sixteen lordships in Leicestershire, which his father, Roger de Beaumont, had previously possessed. This Robert, Earl of Leicester and Comte de Meulan, married\* "the beautiful Isabel, niece of the King of France, by whom he had twin sons, Waleran and Robert, who were born in 1104, and another son, called Hugh the Poor, with five daughters." This lady, who was daughter of Hugh the Great, Comte de Vermandois, son of Henry I., King of France, and brother of Philip, King of France, is often called Elizabeth; and Mr. Nichols, in his *History of Leicester*,† says, perhaps, Isabella might be the first wife. Mr. Planché says: "Mr. Nichols does not seem to be aware that the names Isabella and Elizabeth are identical.

We learn from Ordericus that Henry I. had kindly brought up, as if they were his own children, Waleran and Robert, the twin sons of Robert, Comte de Meulan, from the time of their father's death; for the King loved him much, because, in the beginning of his reign, he had greatly aided and encouraged him. These two young men, on arriving at the proper age, received knighthood at the King's hands; and Robert, who was known as Robert le Bossu, received the earldom of Leicester in England.

He took an active part in advancing Stephen's claim to the Crown, and is spoken of as famous for wisdom, piety, and learning. King Stephen, in A.D. 1139, made him Earl of Hereford, in addition to the earldom of Leicester; but this second title did not survive to his heirs. He married Amicia, the great-granddaughter of William Fitz-Osborne, the first Earl of Hereford after the Conquest.‡

On the accession to the throne of England of Henry II., or not long afterwards, Robert le Bossu was appointed by that King, his High Justiciary and President of the Court of Exchequer. The former of these offices was the highest in the realm, and must not be confounded with that of Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench. The holder of this office was, in fact, the *alter ego* of the King when he was absent from the kingdom. The office is the same as is mentioned in the Seventh "Constitutional" of Clarendon, providing that abbots and others who held of the King should not be put under excommunication or interdict, unless the King should have been previously resorted to for redress, or his Justice, if the King were out of the realm.§

\* Ordericus Vitalis, Bk. XI., c. 2.

† Vol. I., p. 23 (n.).

‡ Nichols's *History of Leicester*, Vol. I., p. 29.

§ Henry III.'s attempt to render this office subservient to the arbitrary and corrupt practices of the Crown was one of the grievances of the Barons, who

In the capacity of Justiciary, Robert le Bossu was present in 1162, at the final arrangements between the Church of Lincoln and the Monastery of St. Albans. And again, in 1165, when Reginald, Archbishop of Cologne, came to Westminster for the marriage of the Princess Matilda to Henry, Duke of Saxony, and the King and his Council were ready to receive him, the Earl of Leicester refused to accept his kiss of salutation, because the Archbishop stood excommunicated by Pope Alexander, whom England had recognised as lawful Pope.\* He appears to have held this office until his death. Hovenden, in recording the events of the year 1168, says: "In the same year died Robert, Earl of Leicester, Justiciary of England."†

This Robert le Bossu, Earl of Leicester and Hereford, Chief Justiciary of the Realm and President of the Court of Exchequer, was the founder of St. Mary de Pratis Abbey, at Leicester.

It came into being in the following manner: When Robert, Count de Mellent, the father of Robert Bossu, came to England, and Henry I. bestowed upon him the earldom of Leicester, he rebuilt the Church of St. Marie *infra et juxta Castellum*, which had been destroyed in the time of the Conqueror, and placed in it twelve secular canons and a dean, to whom he gave all the churches in Leicester except St. Margaret's, which was a prebend of Lincoln, and endowed them with other lands and possessions. Robert, Earl of Leicester, the father, died A.D. 1118, and Robert Bossu succeeded to the earldom of Leicester, with its revenues. In the year of grace 1143 he, with the consent of Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, founded the Monastery of the Blessed Mary de Pratis of Leicester, and gave to them the church of St. Mary *infra Castellum*, and all the church's lands and possessions of the canons secular, with many others which he transferred to regular canons. And he in the same monastery, with the consent of Amicia, his wife, was made a canon regular; and so remained, as Knighton tells us, for fifteen years, and died in the Abbey, and was buried on the south side of the choir of the Abbey Church, Anno Gratiae 1167, though some place his death in 1168 and others in 1169.

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insisted that the appointment should be by the King with the assent of the Common Council of the realm. Henry yielded, and from that time nothing more was heard of a High Justiciar of England (Nichols, *vid. sup.*, Vol. I., p. 32). Subsequently, when the King left England temporarily, he appointed a substitute under the title of Custos Regni or Custos Angliæ, *Ex. gr.* 18 Richard II. Edmund, Duke of York, was Custos Regni when the King went to Ireland; and in 7 Henry V., the patent appointing the Earl of Ormond Viceroy of Ireland for two years is tested by Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, Custos Angliæ (see Prynne's *Animadversions* for other instances: 14 Edward III. and 21 Edward III.).

\* Matth. Paris, *Hist. Maj.*, Vol. II., p. 219, Rolls Ed. (Luard),

† Vol. I., p. 212, Giles Transl.

He founded several other monasteries, among which was that of Eaton, into which Amicia, his wife, with the assent of her husband, entered as a nun for the residue of her life. As Knighton says in his Chronicle,\* "unde ipse factus est canonicus regularis, et illa sanctimonialis." From these events the convent was known as Nuneaton. The Countess Amicia died on September 1st (St. Giles's Day)—the exact year is not known—and was there buried.

Sir William Dugdale suggests a doubt as to the Earl having entered the monastery—Mr. Nichols says "very properly." "We have shown," he says, "that he was busily engaged in secular employments; and the fact is that, after having been the founder of that Abbey, his name was of course enrolled in that fraternity, as was the custom of the times, that he might have the more immediate benefit of all the devout suffrages, fastings and alms, of the members of that religious society." It is also observable that, as he was in the exercise of his active functions as High Justiciar and President of the Court of Exchequer in the years 1162-1165, and died at the latest in the year 1169, there would have been no time for him to have completed fifteen years of retirement in the cloister. To do so, he must have entered in the year 1154, the first of Henry II.'s reign, and thus we should have to ignore the whole of his official position, and the events of 1162-1165.

In the *Battle Abbey Roll*, the Duchess of Cleveland, speaking of Robert Bossu having founded the Abbey of Leicester, says: "He himself wore the habit of a Canon Regular of Leicester Abbey for fifteen years before his death in 1167; though, as he continued in secular employments and was Justiciary at the same time, the strict observance of the rule of the cloister must in his case have been dispensed with.† This seems a fair way of harmonising the conflicting statements on this question. She describes him as a powerful and crafty chief, of whom it may be affirmed that his policy was as crooked as his back. This is the only (and not a very kindly) allusion I have met with to his infirmity, which does not seem to have interfered with his physical or mental vigour. Dr. Staveley, whose "History of Leicester Abbey" Mr. Nichols has inserted *verbatim* as a preface to his history of the Abbey, gives as a motive for the foundation of the Abbey: that the Earl, having been very stubborn and undutiful to his prince, and a great stickler in some dangerous commotions,

\* No. XVII., *Ex. Chron. MS.* Hen. Knighton in *Bibl. Cotton.* Lib. II., Cap. 2.

† Vol. I., p. 148.

when growing in years, meditated the expiation of such crimes, particularly the injuries he had brought upon Leicester, by founding and endowing of this and some other religious houses. Nichols describes Robert le Bossu as famous for wisdom, piety, and learning, and I cannot find anything in opposition to this character. It may be that Dr. Staveley is confusing Robert Bossu with his son Robert Blanchmains, who succeeded his father in the earldom of Leicester, but not in that of Hereford, and who espoused the cause of Henry II.'s son against his father, and was several times taken prisoner, with his wife Petronilla, during the wars which were waged between the father and the son.

In the edition of *Camden's Britannia*, by Gough,\* it is said that, "on the transfer of the revenues of St. Mary de Castro to St. Mary de Pratis, Robert Bossu, that he might not totally seem to destroy his father's foundation, with the consent of Richard, the first Abbot,† placed eight canons in the church of St. Mary de Castro, whereof one was dean, and endowed these churches with the oblations, etc. These continued till the general dissolution, and there still remained in the vestry a chest called an 'Ark,' in which there is a convenience for hanging their several vestments."

The Abbey being thus founded and endowed, soon obtained a large accession of lands and possessions.

The charters of foundation and endowment are set forth *verbatim* in Dugdale's *Monasticon*. They are all, with one exception, without dates, and are taken from the *Cottonian* and *Bodleian MSS.* The earliest of these, after the charter of foundation, is one of King Stephen,‡ by which he granted to Robert, Earl of Leicester, to found a church of St. Mary, etc., and there to constitute an Abbey, etc. And he granted to God and the Blessed Mary, and Richard, Abbot, and the regular canons, all gifts which Robert, Earl of Leicester, gave, granted, acquired, or should acquire, or which should be given to them in frankalmoign.

Amicia, the Countess of Leicester, gave four libratas of land in Everlas.

In 1148 the Abbot and Convent obtained certain material privileges from Pope Eugenius III., which were confirmed by succeeding Pontiffs.§

\* Vol. I., p. 148.

† Vol. II., pp. 202-3 [1789].

‡ *Ex Registro Abbatie in Bibl. Bodl.* fo. 22.

§ Dugd., *Monast.*

After the death of Robert Bossu, his son Robert Blanchmains confirmed to the Abbey all that his father had given in the original charter of foundation, and in addition a stag every year on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary, and another stag on the Nativity of our Lord; and license to fish in his great fish-pond at Groby four days in the year, *scil.*: the Vigil of the festivals of the Purification, the Annunciation, and Nativity; and Henry II. confirmed the previous grants by his charter, which is shewn by an *Inspeximus* of 10 Edward III.\* This charter was granted to the canons regular and the church of St. Mary de Pratis, Leirecstriæ.

There is also a charter of confirmation by Robert, son of Petronilla (wife of Robert Blanchmains) of all gifts of his grandfather and father;† and another by the Countess Petronilla, confirming all gifts which Robert, the Earl, her son, gave to the Abbey. Nichols says‡ that this lady built a fair church to the Abbey, which was dedicated in the year 1279, and that she was buried in the choir thereof before the high altar; but in a note he says Leland notices no more than one tomb in Leicester Abbey, and seems to have been uncertain whether it were this lady's or the tomb of the founder; he says, "Other [either] Robert Bossu, Earl of Leicester, or Petronilla, a Countess of Leicester, was buried in a 'tombe ex marmore chalchedonico' in the wall of the south of the high altar of St. Marie Abbey of Leycester."§ Nichols says: "It is memorable also of this lady that, in a devotional fit, she made a long rope or plait of her own hair, to be used with a pulley to draw up the great lamp in the choir, which was afterwards kept there for a long time as a precious relic." The dubious manner in which Leland speaks of this lady's tomb, and also the doubt thrown on the date of her death, may be prudently left as they stand. Petronilla's husband, Robert de Blanchmains, died 1190; and if she built the Abbey Church, which was dedicated in A.D. 1279, and was buried there, she must have sufficiently exceeded the then average rate of mortality to have deserved a special notice from contemporary chroniclers.

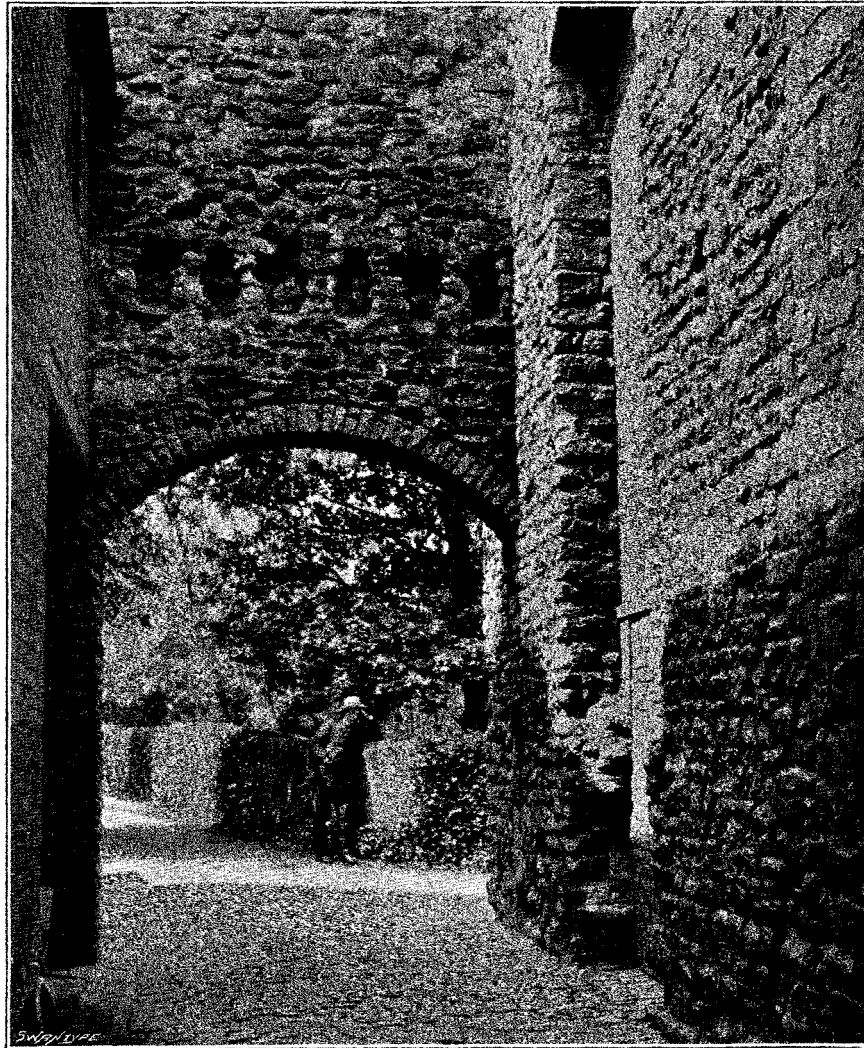
Henry II. granted and confirmed whatever Robert, Earl of Leicester, gave them, and whatever had been given or should be given; and in the sixth year of his reign King John gave the Abbey a charter of confirmation, "Dat per manum I de Well apud Wigorn XXIII die Marcii anno, etc., VI."

\* Cart. 10 Edward III., m. 2 n. 1 per *Inspex. Vid. Etiam. Cart.*  
2 Edward III. n. 10.

† *Ex. Bodl.*

‡ *History of Leicestershire*, Vol. I., Part 2, p. 254.

§ *Lel., Itin.*



LEICESTER ABBEY—THE ENTRANCE, (with Modern Arch).

From a Photo by H. Pickering.

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This Abbey, having been founded by a subject, was not held of the King in capite per baroniam, and consequently the Abbot was not legally capable to be summoned to Parliament. Notwithstanding this, there are several instances among the records of the Abbots being summoned by writ, but on petition they were discharged, and eventually, in 26 Edward III., the King, on the petition and agency of William le Chowne, an eminent Abbot of the Abbey, granted that the Abbot and his successors should for ever after be eased and discharged, of their attendance in Parliament; for which, says Staveley, the said William Chowne is celebrated as a great benefactor to his house; and after he had most commendably governed it thirty-three years, he died XI. Kal. Feb. 1377.

Other Abbots of note have been of this house, amongst whom Gilbert Folliott is very memorable; and in this (says Staveley) Bale has discovered an error of Matthew of Westminster, who says he was Abbot of Gloucester.\*

Henry de Knighton, so-called because born at Knighton, a neighbouring village, was a canon in this house in the reigns of Edward III., Richard II., and Henry IV.: Mr. Burton mistaking when he said he was Abbot there.† His Chronicles, covering the period from the earliest Saxon kings to the deposition of Richard II., now form part of the Cottonian Collection of MSS. at the British Museum.

Several kings have been here entertained and lodged in their journeys to and from the North; particularly, a great entertainment and lodging was once given to King Richard II. and his Queen, with their retinue.‡ It is also well known that in this Abbey died Cardinal Wolsey, on his way to the Tower after his fall, and that he was there buried; in the words which Shakespeare used in pronouncing his *requiescat in pace*, "then and not till then, he felt himself and found the blessedness of being little."

It may be curious, says Dugdale,§ to notice that in one of the MSS. in the British Museum, formerly Dr. Chas. Burney's No. 357, are "Versus Sygerii Lucani in sanctorum laudem monachorum," at the end of which it is said "Robert Comes Leicestriae solebat hos versus memoritur recitare." The verses and the remarks are in a hand certainly not later than the twelfth or thirteenth century.

\* Nichols' *Leicester*, Vol. I., p. 225.

† *Id.*, 256.

‡ *Monasticon*.

The first Abbot was Richard, of whom mention has been made before, and who was elected in 1144. John Bouchier occurs in 1534 on August 11th, in which year he, with certain members of his convent, subscribed to the King's supremacy. He surrendered his office in 1539. Nichols says he was one of the latest surviving Abbots, having received a general pardon from the King as late as the month of August, 1584.\*

	£	s.	d.
The revenues at the Dissolution were valued at	1062	0	4 $\frac{3}{4}$
Deduction ... ..	110	5	11
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The site of the Abbey was granted in the 4 Edward VI. to William, Marquis of Northampton;† it now belongs to the Earl of Dysart, and is let by him to a tenant, who has a modern residence within the walls near the entrance, and cultivates the ground as a fruit and flower garden. Parts of the old buildings are retained in the modern outbuildings. The outer wall of the Abbey remains in good preservation, owing to its repair from time to time which, though it will not deceive the expert's eye, may yet in some parts puzzle the less experienced observer. The courtyard through which the Abbey is entered remains surrounded by walls, and the gateway into the Abbey exists, and is pointed out as that through which Cardinal Wolsey entered on his last journey. Over this gateway there are remains of some buildings of the Tudor period. There is no trace of the Abbey Church visible, or of any of the conventual buildings except those already noticed. Should, however, excavations on a thorough and judicious plan be undertaken, we cannot doubt that very valuable and interesting discoveries would be brought to light.

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\* Nichols' *Hist.*, Vol. II., Part 2, p. 275; Dugd., *Monast.*, by Caley, etc., Vol. VI., p. 462 *et seq.*

† Dugdale, *ubi sup.*