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OLD TIMES AT
OTTERBOURNE

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Charlotte M. Yonge

Old Times at Otterbourne

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Not many of us remember Otterbourne before the Railroad, the Church, or the Penny Post. It may be pleasant to some of us to try to catch a few recollections before all those who can tell us anything about those times are quite gone.

To begin with the first that is known about it, or rather that is guessed. A part of a Roman road has been traced in Otterbourne Park, and near it was found a piece of a quern, one of the old stones of a hand mill, such as was used in ancient times for grinding corn; so that the place must have been inhabited at least seventeen hundred years ago. In the last century a medallion bearing the head of a Roman Emperor was found here, sixteen feet beneath the surface. It seems to be one of the medallions that were placed below the Eagle on the Roman Standards, and it is still in the possession of the family of Fitt, of Westley.

After the Roman and British times were over, this part of the country belonged to Wessex, the kingdom of the West Saxons, of which Winchester was the capital. Lying so near the chief town, which was the Bishop's throne, this place was likely soon to be made into a parish, when Archbishop Theodore divided England in dioceses and parishes, just twelve hundred years ago, for he died 690.

The name no doubt means the village of the Otters, and even now these creatures are sometimes seen in the Itchen, so that no doubt there were once many more of them. The shapes and sizes of most of our parishes were fixed by those of the estates of the Lords who first built the Church for themselves and their households, with the churls and serfs on their manor. The first Lord of Otterbourne must have had a very long narrow property, to judge by the form of the parish, which is at least three miles long, and nowhere a mile in breadth. Most likely he wanted to secure as much of the river and meadow land as he could, with some high open heathy ground on the hill as common land where the cattle could graze, and some wood to supply timber and fuel. Probably all the slopes of the hills on each side of the valley of the Otter were covered with wood. The top of the gravelly hill to the southward was all heather and furze, as indeed it is still, and this reached all the way to Southampton and the Forest. The whole district was called Itene or Itchen, like the river. The name meant in the old English language, the Giant's Forest and the Giant's Wood.

The hill to the north was, as it still remains, chalk down. The village lay near the river and the stream that runs into it, upon the bed of clay between the chalk and the gravel. Most likely the Moathouse was then in existence, though a very different building from what it is at present, and its moat very deep and full of water, serving as a real defence. There is nothing left but broad hedge rows of the woods to the north-east, but one of these is called Dane Lane, and is said to be the road by which the Danes made their way to Winchester, being then a woodland path. It is said that whenever the yellow cow wheat grows freely the land has never been cultivated.

There was a hamlet at Boyatt, for both it and Otterbourne are mentioned in Domesday Book. This is the great census that William the Conqueror caused to be taken 1083 of all his kingdom. From it we learn that Otterbourne had a Church which belonged to Roger de Montgomery, a great Norman baron, whose father had been a friend of William I.

Well for the parish that it lay at a distance from the Giant's Wood, where the King turned out all the inhabitants for the sake of his "high deer," making it the New Forest. He and his sons could ride through down and heath all the way to their hunting. We all know how William Rufus was brought back from his last hunt, lying dead in the charcoal burner Purkis's cart, in which he was carried to his

grave in Winchester Cathedral. Part of the road between Hursley and Otterbourne, near Silkstede, is called King's Lane, because it is said to have been the way by which this strange hearse travelled.

Silkstede is a farm now—it was most likely a grange, or outlying house belonging to some monastery—and there is a remnant of the gardens and some fine trees, and a hollow called China Dell, where snowdrops and double daffodils grow. But this is in Hursley parish, as is also Merdon Castle.

The green mounds and deep trenches, and the fragments of ruinous wall, have a story reaching far back into the ages.

There is little doubt, from their outline, that once there was an entrenched camp of the Romans on this ground, but nothing is known thereof. Merantune, as our Saxon ancestors called it, first is heard of when in 755 Cynewolf, King of Wessex, was murdered there by his kinsman Cyneheard, who was in his turn killed by the Thanes of the victim. With this savage story it first appears, but no more is known of its fate except that it became the property of the Bishops of Winchester, some say by the grant of Cynegyls, the first Christian King of Wessex, others by a later gift. It was then a manor, to which Hurstleigh, the woodland, was only an appendage; and the curious old manorial rights and customs plainly go back to these ancient præ-Norman times. To go through all the thirty customs would be impossible, but it is worth noting that the tenure of the lands descended by right to the youngest son in a family instead of the eldest. Such "cradle fiefs" exist in other parts of England, and in Switzerland, on the principle that the elder ones go out into the world while their father is vigorous, but the youngest is the stay of his old age. The rents were at first paid in kind or in labour, with a heriot, namely, the most valuable animal in stock on a death, but these became latterly commuted for quit rent and fines. The trees were carefully guarded. Only one good timber tree on each holding in the life-time of a tenant might be cut by the Lord of the Manor, and the tenants themselves might only cut old rotten trees! But this is as much as you will wish to hear of these old customs, which prove that the Norman feudal system was kept out of this Episcopal manor.

It was not even mentioned in Domesday Book, near as it was to Winchester. There it lay, peacefully on its island of chalk down, shut in by the well-preserved trees, till Stephen's brother, Bishop Henry de Blois, of Winchester, bethought him of turning the old Roman Camp into a fortified castle. The three Norman kings had wisely hindered the building of castles, but these sprung up like mushrooms under the feeble rule of Stephen.

The tenants must have toiled hard, judging by the massiveness of the small remnant, all built of the only material at hand, chalk to make mortar, in which flints are imbedded.

This fragment still standing used to be considered as part of the keep, but of late years better knowledge of the architecture of castles has led to the belief that it was part of the northern gateway tower. I borrow the description of the building from one written immediately after the comments of a gentleman who had studied the subject.

Henry de Blois, King Stephen's brother, Bishop of Winchester, probably wished for a stronghold near at hand, during his brother's wars with the Empress Maud. He would have begun by having the nearly circular embankment thrown up with a parapet along the top, and in the ditch thus formed a stockade of sharp pointed stakes. Within the court, the well, 300 feet deep, was dug, and round it would have been the buildings needed by the Bishop, his household and guards, much crowded together. The entrance would have been a drawbridge, across the great ditch, which on this side was not less than 60 feet wide and perhaps 25 deep, and through a great gateway between two high square towers which must have stood where now there is a slope leading down from the inner court, into the southern one. This slope is probably formed by the ruins of the gateway and tower being pitched into the ditch.

The Castle was then very small, and did not command the country except towards the south.

The next work therefore would be to throw out an embankment to the south, with a ditch outside. The great gap whence Hursley House is seen, did not then exist, but there was an unbroken semicircle

of rampart and ditch, which would protect a large number of men. In case of an enemy forcing this place, the defenders could retreat into the Castle by the drawbridge.

The entrance was on the eastern side, and in order to protect this and the back (or northern side) of the Castle, an embankment was thrown up outside the first moat, and with an outer moat of its own. Then, as, in case of this being carried by the enemy the defenders would be cut off from the main southern gateway, a square tower was built on this outer embankment exactly opposite to the ruin which yet remains, and only divided from it by the great ditch. On either side of the tower, cutting the embankment across therefore at right angles, was a little ditch spanned by a drawbridge, which, if the defenders found it necessary to retire to the tower, could at any time be raised. The foundations of the tower and the position of the ditch can still be distinctly traced.

Supposing farther that it became impossible to hold the tower, the besieged could retreat into the main body of the Castle by another drawbridge across the great ditch. This would lead them through the arch which can still be seen in the ruin, though it is partially blocked up. The room on the east side of this passage was probably a guard room.

These are all the remains. The embankments to the south and west command a great extent of country, and on the north and northwest, we trace the precautions by the great depth of the ditch, and steepness of the earthworks, though now overgrown with trees. All this must have been done between the years 1138 and 1154, and great part of the defences were thrown down in the lifetime of the founder. Merdon was not destined to shine in sieges, in spite of its strength. Henry II came in, and forbade the multiplication of castles and Merdon seems to have been dismantled as quickly as it had been built.

The Bishops of Winchester however still seem to have resided there from time to time, though it gradually fell into decay, and was ruinous by the end of the Plantagenet period.

After the younger Oliver's death, his sisters endeavoured to obtain the Hursley property to which their father had succeeded as his son's heir. He was past eighty and the judge allowed him to wear his hat at the trial in court, an act of consideration commended by Queen Anne.

After his death, in 1708, the estate was sold to the Heathcote family. The old house, whose foundations can be traced on the lawn, and which was approached by the two avenues of walnut trees still standing, was then pulled down, and the present one erected.

Most likely the oldest thing in Otterbourne is the arch that forms the doorway of the Boys' School, and which came from the door of the Old Church. By the carving on that arch, and the form of the little clustered columns that support it, we can tell that it must have been put up about the time of King Richard I or King John, somewhere about the year 1200. There was certainly a church before this date, but most likely this was the first time that much pains had been taken about its beauty, and carved stone had been brought from a distance. It was a good spot that was chosen, lying a little above the meadows, and not far from the moated Manor House. The east wall of the nave is still standing, but it now forms the west wall of the small remnant that is still covered in. It still has three arches in it, to lead to the old chancel, and above those arches there were some paintings. They came to light when the Old Church was pulled down. First, a great deal of plaster and whitewash came off. Then appeared part of the Commandments in Old English black letter, and below that, again, were some paintings, traced out in red upon the wall. They have been defaced so much that all that could be found out was that there was a quatrefoil shape within a square. The corners were filled up apparently with the emblems of the Four Cherubim, though only the Winged Ox showed plainly. There was a sitting figure in the centre, with the hand raised, and it was thought to be a very rude representation of our Blessed Lord in Judgment. In another compartment was an outline of a man, and another in a hairy garment, so that this last may have been intended for the Baptism of our Blessed Lord. Unfortunately, being on the outside wall, there was no means of protecting these curious paintings, and, sad to say, one evening, I myself saw a party of rough boys standing in a row

throwing stones at them. There being a pathway through the churchyard, it was not possible to keep them out, and thus these curious remains have been destroyed.

We may think of the people who resorted to the little Old Church as wearing long gowns both men and women, on Sunday, spun, woven, and dyed blue at home, most likely with woad, a plant like mignonette which still grows in the lanes. The gentry were in gayer colours, but most likely none lived nearer than Winchester, and it was only when they plodded into market that the people would see the long-hanging sleeves, the pointed hoods, and the queer long-toed shoes of the young gentlemen, or the towers that the ladies put on their heads.

The name of Otterbourne does not come forward in history, but, as it lies so near Winchester, it must have had some share in what happened in the Cathedral city. The next thing we know about it is that Bishop Edyngton joined it to Hursley. William de Edyngton was Bishop of Winchester in the middle part of the reign of Edward III, from 1357 to 1366. Bishop de Pontissara founded a College at Winchester called St. Elizabeth's, and to assist in providing for the expenses, he decreed that the greater tithes of Hursley, those of the corn fields, should be paid to the Dean and Chapter, and that the rest of the tithe should go to the Vicar. Then, lest the Vicar should be too poor, Otterbourne was to be joined with Hursley, and held by the same parish priest, and this arrangement lasted for five hundred years. It was made in times when there was little heed taken to the real good of country places.

The arrangement was confirmed by his successor, Bishop Edyngton, who lies buried in the nave of Winchester Cathedral, not far from where lies the much greater man who succeeded him. William of Wykeham went on with the work Edyngton had begun, and built the pillars of the Cathedral nave as we now see them. He also founded the two Colleges of St. Mary, one at Winchester for 70 boys, one at Oxford to receive the scholars as they grew older, meaning that they should be trained up to become priests. It seems that the old name of the field where the college stands was Otterbourne meadow, and that it was bought of a Master Dummer. Bishop Wykeham's College at Oxford is still called New College, though there are now many much newer. One small estate at Otterbourne was given by him to help to endow Winchester College, to which it still belongs.

Good men had come to think that founding colleges was the very best thing they could do for the benefit of the Church, and William of Waynflete, who was made Bishop of Winchester in 1447, founded another college at Oxford in honour of St. Mary Magdalen. To this College he gave large estates for its maintenance, and in especial a very large portion of our long, narrow parish of Otterbourne. Ever since his time, two of the Fellows of Magdalen, if not the President himself, have come with the Steward, on a progress through the estates every year to hold their Court and give audit to all who hold lands of them. Till quite recently the Court was always held at the Manor House, the old Moat House, which must once have been the principal house in the parish, though now it is so much gone to decay. Old Dr. Plank, the President of Magdalen, used to come thither in Farmer Colson's time. What used to be the principal room has a short staircase leading to it, and in the wainscot over the fire-place is a curious old picture, painted, I fancy, between 1600 and 1700, showing a fight between turbaned men and European soldiers, most likely Turks and Austrians. It is a pity that it cannot tell its history. The moat goes all round the house, garden, and farmyard, and no doubt used to have a drawbridge. Forty or fifty years ago, it was clear and had fish in it, but the bridge fell in and choked the stream, and since that it has become full of reeds and a mere swamp.

It must have been a really useful protection in the evil times of the Wars of the Roses.

Most likely the Commandments were painted over the old fresco on the east wall of the nave of the old Church either in the time of Edward VI, or Elizabeth, for if they had been later, the letters would not have been Old English. The foreigners who meddled so much with our Church in the latter years of Edward VI obtained that the Holy Communion should not be celebrated in the chancels, but that the Holy Table should be spread in the body of the Church, and many Chancels were thus disused and became ruinous, as ours most certainly did at some time or other. St. Elizabeth's College was

broken up and the place where it stood given to the college of St. Mary. It is still called Elizabeth Meadow. The presentation to the Cure of our two parishes went with the estate of Hursley.

There was a very odd scene somewhere between Winchester and Southampton in the year 1554. Queen Mary Tudor was waiting at Winchester for her bridegroom, Philip of Spain. He landed at Southampton on the morning of the 20th of July, and set out in a black velvet dress, red cloak, and black velvet hat, with a splendid train of gentlemen to ride to Winchester. It was a very wet day, and the Queen sent a gentleman with a ring from her, to beg him to come no farther in the rain. But the gentleman knew no Spanish, and the King no English. So Philip thought some warning of treachery was meant, and halted in great doubt and difficulty till the messenger recollected his French, and said in that tongue, that the Queen was only afraid of his Grace's getting wet. So on went Philip, and the High Sheriff of Hampshire rode before him with a long white wand in his hand, and his hat off, the rain running in streams off his bare head. They went so slowly as not to reach Winchester till six or seven o'clock in the evening, so that the people of Otterbourne, Compton, and Twyford must have had a good view of the Spanish Prince who was so unwelcome to them all.

Thomas Sternhold, who together with Hopkins put the Psalms into metre for singing, lived in the outskirts of Hursley.

When the plunder of the Monasteries was exhausted, the Tudor Sovereigns, or perhaps their favourites, took themselves to exacting gifts and grants from the Bishops, and thus Poynt who was intended in the stead of Gardiner gave Merdon to Edward VI, who presented it to Sir Philip Hobby.

It was recovered by Bishop Gardiner, but granted back again by Queen Elizabeth. Sir Philip is believed to have first built a mansion at Hursley, and his nephew sold the place to Sir Thomas Clarke, who was apparently a hard lord of the manor. His tenants still had to labour at his crops instead of paying rent, but provisions had to be found them. About the year 1600, on the arrival of a hogshead of porridge, unsavoury and full of worms, the reapers struck, and their part was taken by Mr. Robert Coram, who then owned Cranbury, so hotly that he and Mr. Pye, Sir Thomas Clarke's steward, rode at one another through the wheat with drawn daggers. Lady Clarke yielded, and cooked two or three bacon-hogs for the reapers.

The old road from Winchester to Southampton then went along what we now call the Old Hollow, leading from Shawford Down to Oakwood. Then it seems to have gone along towards the old Church, its course being still marked by the long narrow meadows, called the Jar Mead and Hundred Acres, or, more properly, Under an Acre. Then it led down to the ford at Brambridge, for there was then no canal to be crossed. The only great personage who was likely to have come along this road in the early 17th century was King James the First's wife, Queen Anne of Denmark, who spent a winter at the old Castle of Winchester, and was dreadfully dull there, though the ladies tried to amuse her by all sorts of games, among which one was called "Rise, Pig, and Go."

James I gave us one of the best of Bishops, Lancelot Andrewes by name, who wrote a beautiful book of devotions. He lived on to the time of Charles I, and did much to get the ruins made in the bad days round Winchester Cathedral cleared and set to rights. Most likely he saw that the orders for putting the altars back into their right places were carried out, and very likely the chancel was then mended, but with no attention to architecture, for the head of the east window was built up anyhow with broken bits of tracery from a larger and handsomer one. The heir of the Clarkes sold the property at Hursley to Mr. Mayor, to whose only daughter Oliver Cromwell married his son Richard.

What happened here in the Great Rebellion we do not know. An iron ball was once dug up in the grounds at Otterbourne House, which may have come from Oliver's Battery; but it is also said to be only the knob of an old pump handle—

"When from the guarded down
Fierce Cromwell's rebel soldiery kept watch o'er Wykeham's town.
They spoiled the tombs of valiant men, warrior, and saint, and sage;

But at the tomb of Wykeham good angels quenched their rage.”

Colonel Nathanael Fiennes prevented harm from being done to the College or the monuments in the Cathedral; but there was some talk of destroying that holy place, for I have seen a petition from the citizens of Winchester that it might be spared. It is said that some loyal person took out all the stained glass in the great west window, hid it in a chest, and buried it; but when better times came, it could not be restored to what it was before, and was put in confusedly, as we now see it.

Stoneham had a brave old clergyman, who kept possession of his church and rectory all through the war, and went on with the service till he died, no man daring to meddle with him. But Otterbourne was sure to follow the fate of Hursley. The King’s Head Inn at Hursley is thought to have been so called in allusion to the death of King Charles I. A strange compliment to the Cromwells.

Richard had a large family, most of whom died young, as may be seen on their monument in Hursley Church. It was at this time that the customs of the Manor were put on record in writing. The son, Oliver, lived till 1705, and was confounded in the country people’s minds with his grandfather.

There is an odd, wild story, that Cromwell sunk all his treasure in the great well at Merdon Castle, in Hursley Park, 300 feet deep. It was further said, if it were drawn up again, that no one must speak till it was safe, otherwise it would be lost. A great chest was raised to the mouth of the well, when one of the men said, “Here it comes!” The rope broke, it fell back, and no one ever saw it more.

Most likely this is an old legend belonging to the Castle long before, and only connected with Oliver Cromwell because he was an historical person. Certain it is that when the well was cleared out about 30 or 40 years ago nothing was found but two curious old candlesticks, and a great number of pins, which had been thrown down because they caused those curious reverberations in the great depth.

Another legend is that Merdon Well is connected with the beautiful clear spring at Otterbourne called Pole Hole or Pool Hole, so that when a couple of ducks were thrown down the well, they came out at Pole Hole with all their feathers scraped off.

It was in the time of the Commonwealth, in 1653, that our first parish register begins. Some parishes have much older ones, so, perhaps, ours may have been destroyed. The first entry in this old parchment book is that Elizabeth, daughter of Edward Cox, of Otterbourne, and Anne, his wife, was born –. A large stain has made the rest of this entry illegible. There are only three births in 1653, and seven in 1654, one of these William, son of Mr. William Downe, of Otterbourne Farm, and Joane, his wife, is, however, marked with two black lines beneath the entry, as are his sisters, Elizabeth and Jane, 1656 and 1658, apparently to do honour to the principal inhabitant.

It is to be observed that all the entries here are of births, not of baptisms, departing from the general rule of Church registers, and they are all in English; but in 1663 each child is recorded as baptized, and the Latin language is used. This looks much as if a regular clergyman, a scholar, too, had, after the Restoration, become curate of the parish. He does not sign his registers, so we do not know his name. In 1653 the banns of William Downe and Jane Newman were published September 17th and the two Lord’s Days ensuing, but their wedding is not entered, and the first marriage recorded is that of Matthew Dummer and Jane Burt, in 1663. The first funeral was Emelin, wife of Robert Purser, in 1653.

Also, there was plenty of brick-making, for King Charles II had planned to build a grand palace at Winchester on the model of the great French palace of Versailles, and it is said that Dell cove was formed by the digging out of bricks for the purpose. It was to reach all over the downs, with fountains and water playing in them, and a great tower on Oliver’s Battery, with a light to guide the ships in the Channel. There is a story that Charles, who was a capital walker, sometimes walked over from Southampton to look at his buildings. One of the gentlemen who attended him let the people at Twyford know who was going that way. So they all turned out to look at him, which was what the King by no means wished. So he avoided them, and punished his indiscreet courtier by taking

a run and crossing one of the broad streams with a flying leap, then proceeding on to Winchester, leaving his attendant to follow as best he might.

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