THE EARLY HISTORY OF TEMPLE DINSLEY.

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ONCE upon a time - it must be thirty years ago - I sat in the Sheldonian Theatre at Oxford and listened to a lecture on "The Province of History" by James Bryce, afterwards Lord Bryce. Though it was a noble and eloquent discourse, it would be hard to recapture more than the spirit of it now. But I can recall the ringing words with which he brought it to a close: "Gentlemen, history is not an epic. It is not a philosophy. It is a pageant."

By an odd chance, that memorable saying rose again into my mind when I began to prepare this brief account of Temple Dinsley; and I remembered also that one of the meadows belonging to this manor bore the name Pageant Field. We all do wisely, I think, to follow the prompting of that word. Clearly, with all the wealth of printed and manuscript material at our disposal, we cannot attempt an elaborate narrative: it could not be contained within the four hundred pages of a royal octavo book. But we can stand on Preston Hill, as it were, and watch the procession of the ages, and speak with some of the more picturesque and famous figures who loom through the mists of time and stand out in bright armour or priestly habit or peasant homespun from "the fiery arras of the past".

At the head of it all rides the chieftain Dyne who, according to Professor Skeat, gave his name, Dynes Hill or Dynes Lea, to Dinsley.[1] There is a charter dated A.D. 816 that gives a clue to him. But you cannot behold his face as you peer at him over the rim of his shield. He is still as vague and insubstantial as the warrior Hicche who gave his name to Hitchin.

Following him, you should be able to discern the commissioners who presided over the court of the Half Hundred of Hitchin and heard evidence and took particulars for Domesday Book. "King William holds Deneslai. It is assessed for 7 hides (that is 840 acres). There is land for 20 ploughs. In the lords demesne are 3½ hides and 3 ploughs are on it, and 19 villeins have 8 ploughs between them, and there could be 9 more. There are 7 bordars (or small-holders) and 7 cottars and 6 serfs, and 1 Frenchman and 1 almsman (elemosinarius) of the King." The Survey goes on to describe the 2 mills, worth 16 shillings by the year, the meadow and pasture "sufficient for the live stock of the Vill ", and the woodlands whose oakmast and beechmast could support as many as 300 swine. At the foot of their report the commissioners refer to the disputes and quarrels that had arisen in Harold's day over the obligation to provide men and horses for the King's bodyguard, and for carrying his baggage, taking advantage of which Peter de Valognes, when Sheriff, appears to have seized the manor and annexed it to Hitchin " as the whole Shire-moot doth testify ".

It is the Balliols who next catch the eye, an ambitious and powerful family who were lords of Hitchin and Dinslev for two centuries till 1256. Of them much has been written in my *History of Hitchin* (1927), and by Wentworth Huyshe in *The Royal Manor of Hitchin* (1906), and much might still be written. The theme is a tempting one: high sounding names, tournaments and trappings of gold, favours and disfavours of kings, knight's fees and forfeitures, plots and counterplots, dungeons, rescues, braveries of battle, exiles and banishments—all the materials of romance are here. Oh! to be Froissart for one hour, and to write their chronicles in characters of gold! It is a temptation, nevertheless, to be sternly set aside. These Balliols belong not so much to the parish of Hitchin and to the castle of Dinsley as to this realm of England. Let us fix

our attention simply upon Bernard de Balliol, who in 1147, at a Chapter of the Templars in Paris, bestowed his lands at Preston and Dinsley, under the name of Wedelee, on the Knights of that Order :

"In the Name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity, to all his Lords and friends and to the sons of the Holy Church of God, Bernard de Balliol greeting in the Lord. I wish it to be made known to all, both future and present, that, for the love of God and for the Salvation of my Soul and of my ancestors' souls, I have given and granted to the brethren, Knights of the Temple of Solomon, fifteen librates (about 780 acres) of my land which I possess in England, in perpetuity, freely and without any custom, Wedelee by name, which is a member of Hitchin; fields rough and smooth, streams with woodland. I make this gift in the Chapter held in Paris in the Octave of Easter, the Apostolic Legate Eugenius being present, and the King of France, and the archbishops of Sens, Bordeaux, Rouen, and Trascunnie, and one hundred and thirty brethren, Knights of the Temple, arrayed in white cloaks, being present."

Of the Preceptory church that was shortly afterwards founded at Temple Dinsley not one stone now stands upon another. The very site is conjectural. But, preserved in Hitchin church, there is the battered effigy in Purbeck marble of Bernard de Balliol, which aforetime graced the chapel of his own foundation. Likewise, in the church of St. Martin at Preston there is preserved a grave-stone cover of the thirteenth century, carved with a floriated cross that once marked the resting-place of a Master or Preceptor of the Order. Some of the floor tiles of the chapel have come to light; and a valuable paper, describing and identifying the heraldic designs upon them, has been compiled by Mr. H. C. Andrews. Skeletons of some of the brethren have been dug up in the kitchen yard. One of the skulls used to stand as a memento mori on Lord Hampden's study table when he was tenant of Temple Dinsley. Found with the bodies of the Knights was a pewter chalice of early fourteenth century date, similar to those that were wont to be buried with priests. In 1887 this chalice was exhibited to the Society of Antiquaries by William Ransom. A fourteenth-century bronze jug was discovered in Mr. Douglas Vickers' day, and has recently been presented to the Hitchin Museum by Mrs. Barrington-White. In some respects parchment is more durable than brass, and we still have the agreement made in 1218 between the Knights of — Temple Dinsley and the nuns of Elstow who held the advowson of the church at Hitchin, by which the nuns undertook to provide a chaplain resident at Dinsley to celebrate mass on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays in the morning and vespers in the afternoon, receiving therefore one mark in silver by the year and four pounds of wax for the chapel lights. The Templars, on their part, undertook to pay tithe issuing out of all the lands they ploughed in Hitchin, and out of any ground newly broken up and sown. Relieved by the Nuns of matters spiritual, the brethren could engage more freely in matters temporal, and it is evident that they were highly competent, not to say exacting, in the affairs of the world. In 1252 their preceptory church was valued at 40 shillings. But their manorial rights and their sporting rights brought in forty times that figure. According to Sir Henry Chauncy, they claimed " divers large Priviledges in as ample a Manner as Kingly Power can grant to any religious house: Soc, Sac, Toll, Theame, Infangethef, Utfangthef, Hamsoken, Assize of bread and ale, and exemption from all secular services ". They required their tenants to prove their wills before the Court of the manor, and they even asserted the sole right of fishing from the river Hiz to the Ivel as far as Biggleswade.

In 1253 Henry III conferred another "large privilege" upon Brother Rocelin the Master and the brethren of the Order, to wit "free warren in all the demesne lands of Dinesle, Stagho, Preston, Chirleton, Walden, and Hiche, in so far as the same lie not within the King's Forest.[2] To men who had come back from hunting the infidel and the Turk out of the parched wilderness of the Holy Land, what a blessed relief it must have been to wake up of a morning to the singing of

birds in this little paradise of Hertfordshire in England, and after a hasty hunters mass to ride after the wild boar or the deer or with hawk upon wrist through the woods and coppices and wastes of a manor that then extended into nine parishes.[3]

Sometimes the brethren rode in chase of bigger game: those wild beasts—the outcasts of society - malefactors, murderers, sanctuary-breakers, escaped serfs, and the like whom the long arm of the law sought to bring within its power. At this stretch of time no cry comes across the centuries from those who rotted in the dungeons of the Balliols, no word from those villeins and bondsmen who raised their brown and horny hands and cursed the cruel castle of Deneslai, whose walls scowled at them from above. But now and again in the Assize Rolls you can still hear the voice of the accuser and the shrieks for mercy from those whom the Knights had hunted down. The right of gallows was always a valued privilege at Temple Dinsley, and woe betide those felons who were caught red-handed within the bounds of the manor.'[4] In 1286 Gerle de Clyf ton and Johannes de Tykkull were hanged for stealing a silver chalice and four silver spoons from the priest at Temple Dinsley, and Peter son of Adam met his just reward "for taking a certain woman and torturing her".

It is a pity that the court rolls and the capitular records of this period have perished, for without them one can but follow the religious and secular life of the community in a fitful and fragmentary way. It is clear, however, that the house was highly esteemed in the Order, for General Chapters were held here in 1219, 1254, 1265, 1292, 1301, and 1304.

Still surviving are some twenty charters granted on these great occasions, or witnessed by one or other of the masters and brethren. For the most part they concern the property of the Order in these parts : rights of way, repairs, tenurial services, the mill at Charlton, and the castle of Dinsley, which, when the Balliols were banished, was brought into ruin and rented by the Prior of Wymondley at a mere ten shillings by the year. Amongst the charters is that whereby Robert de Mara, in 1309, sells one of his own bondsmen or native Richard Godley, with all his goods (cum universes terris sues) and his wife and children (sequela sua) and his goods and chattels. The purchaser was Adam, son of William, one of the brethren here, and it is thought, though Professor Coulton, to whom I submitted it, has his doubts, that the purchase was made for the purpose of securing freedom or manumission for this slave. One observes other signs of enfranchisement in this period, for the villeins, cottars, and bordars on the manor of Temple Dinsley were allowed to commute their corporal services - their week days and boon days, sowings and reapings and thrashings - into money. By the end of the thirteenth century only the ploughing custom was retained. In addition to these obligations, levies were made upon the goodwill and generosity of those who belonged to the manor. In 1260, for example, all the tenants of the Knights Templars in England were urged to contribute of their goods and possessions for the support of the brethren in the Holy Land, "who are now in great want by reason of the Saracens and Turks now approaching those parts."

Money is said to be at the root of most evils, and evidently it played a vile part in the events that led, not long afterwards, to the suppression of the Templars. According to Nathaniel Salmon, our county historian, " their crimes, or their riches (for riches are sometimes crime enough) exposed them to be plundered." But plundering was not all. In 1308 a commission went forth to the Sheriff of Hertfordshire "to execute the things contained in a sealed order, with twenty-four men, all to be sworn likewise". When those sealed orders were opened, the men-at-arms and the Sheriff made their way to Temple Dinsley and arrested the six brethren in residence there. Two of them were taken to the Tower by John de Crumbewell, its Constable; the other four were haled off to Hertford Castle. Besides the Templars, there were six other men living as pensioners at Dinsley, one who had meals at the Master's high table, two priests acting as chaplains, and three others who boarded with the brothers. These pensioners were left at large,

as also were another man and his wife who slept in their own quarters and received their food and drink from the preceptory. A commission of inquiry into the manor in 1309 speaks of other retainers: "a resident bailiff, a carter, four ploughmen, and four other labourers, besides a cook-gardener" (Mins. Accts., bundle 866, No. 17). These hired servants were placed under the control of Geoffrey de la Lee, keeper of the Templars' lands in Hertfordshire, and made to look after the 142 horses that the King (Edward II) put out to pasture on the manor. The King's grooms, John de Reding and Walter le Ferrour, were to receive 6d a day each for themselves and 16s. 5d to spend upon the horses.

In the proceedings against the knights, which dragged on for years, Temple Dinsley was cited as the scene where some of their alleged immoralities were committed. But it is clear from the State Papers of the period that popular sympathy locally was on the side of the Templars; and at any rate all men agreed in their dislike of the money-lending Jew, Geoffrey de la Lee, to whom their lands were assigned. As some of the lands lay in Hitchin, some at Temple Dinsley, and some at Baldock, de la Lee proposed to hold a Court or View of Frankpledge at the place last named. The tenants, however, were suspicious, for they had yet to meet an Israelite in whom there was no guile. The moment the tradespeople were ordered by the new bailiff to produce their weights and measures a tumult arose. The bailiff's standard weights and measures were "forcibly carried off" and smashed to atoms. The new collector of tolls was assaulted and battered and maimed, and his goods, to the value of £10, parted amongst the tenants who then proceeded to commit other "orible and abhomynable dedis ".

If the spendthrift and dissolute King hoped, in suppressing the Order, to make himself master of the treasure they were rumoured to possess, then he was tricked and foiled at Temple Dinsley. A third commission issued in 1309 "to inquire touching concealed goods of the Templars in the county of Herts ". But their jewels and their silver and their gold were not to be found. In the following reign, Edward III granted licences to two of his subjects to dig and excavate and hunt for treasure trove at Temple Dinsley, the Crown to have a half share in the spoil. But nothing came of it, and though men and women in agonies of baffled expectation have been digging for 600 years the buried treasure still eludes them and still awaits its joyful resurrection.

According to Solomon, wisdom is more precious than rubies, but it is reported that the religious community of collegians who now inhabit this hallowed spot are seriously distracted in their studies by the lure and solicitation of untold wealth lying it may be at their very feet; indeed, one of these scholars was recently discovered in class-time wandering up to her middle in the lower pool, in the sure and certain hope that at any moment her toes might touch the bars of gold and the fabled iron casket.

Footnotes:

1 Salmon, our county historian, holds a different view : " Deneslai might be derived from the Danes Land, who were much in the Hundred of Dacorum and nearer as the Six Hills Tin Stevenage) convince me."

2 Cal.Chart. Rolls, 1226-57.p. 415. This charter was sealed at Windsor and must have given rise in the course and corruption of time to the tradition that the owner of Temple Dinsley has the right to stand on the front doorstep of Stagenhoe on Chnstmas Day and fire off a gun.

3 Hitchin, Kingswalden, Abbots Walden, St. Ippolyts, Offley, Pirton, Wymondley, Ickleford, and Astwick.

4 The criminal jurisdiction of the Templars extended as far as Baldock, for in 1277 the Master was summoned to show his warrant for hanging a man there.